

*Saved by the GRUMP*

*Billionaire GRUMP PROTECTOR*

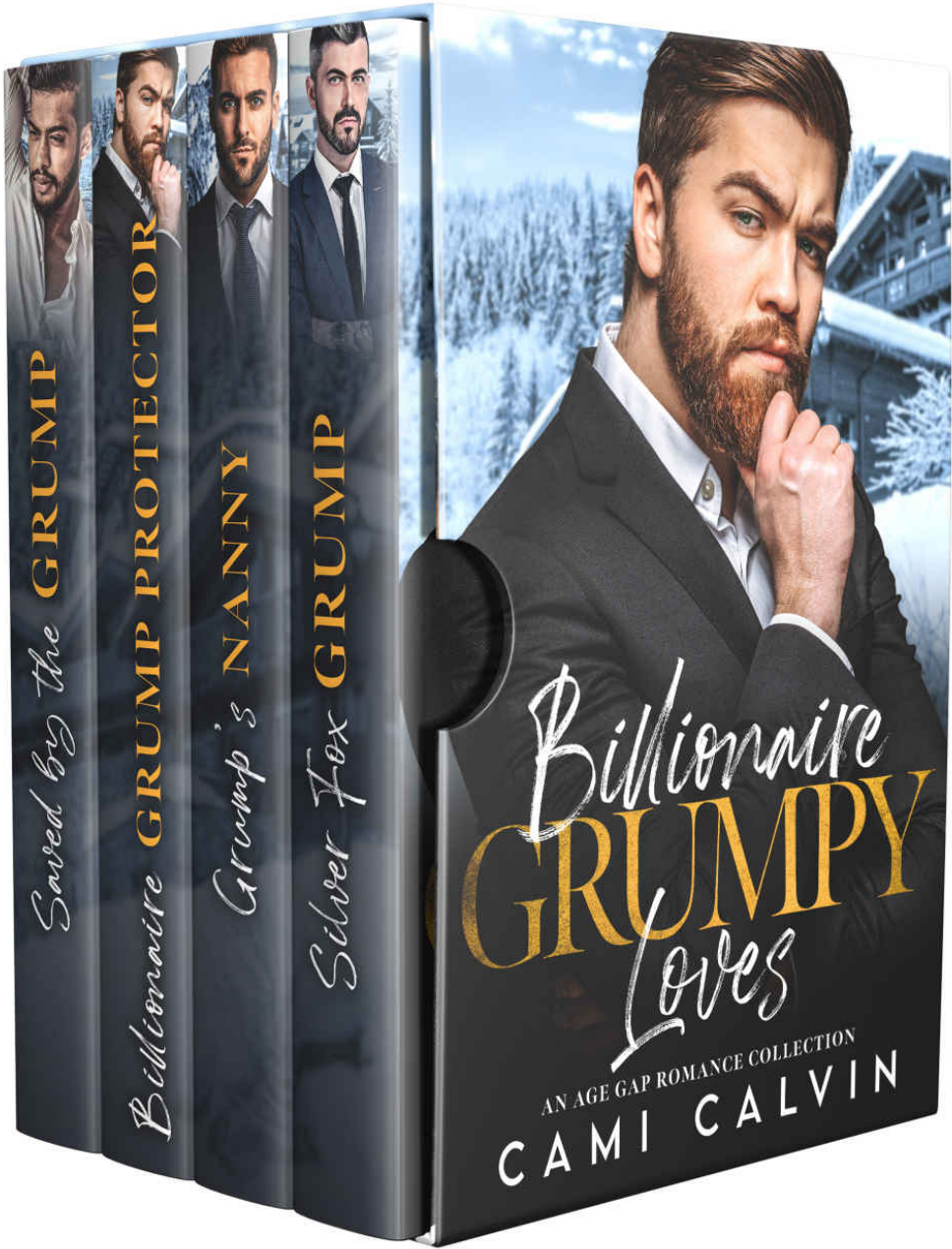
*Grump's NANNY*

*Silver Fox GRUMP*

*Billionaire*  
**GRUMPY**  
*Loves*

AN AGE GAP ROMANCE COLLECTION

CAMI CALVIN



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# *Billionaire Grumpy Loves*

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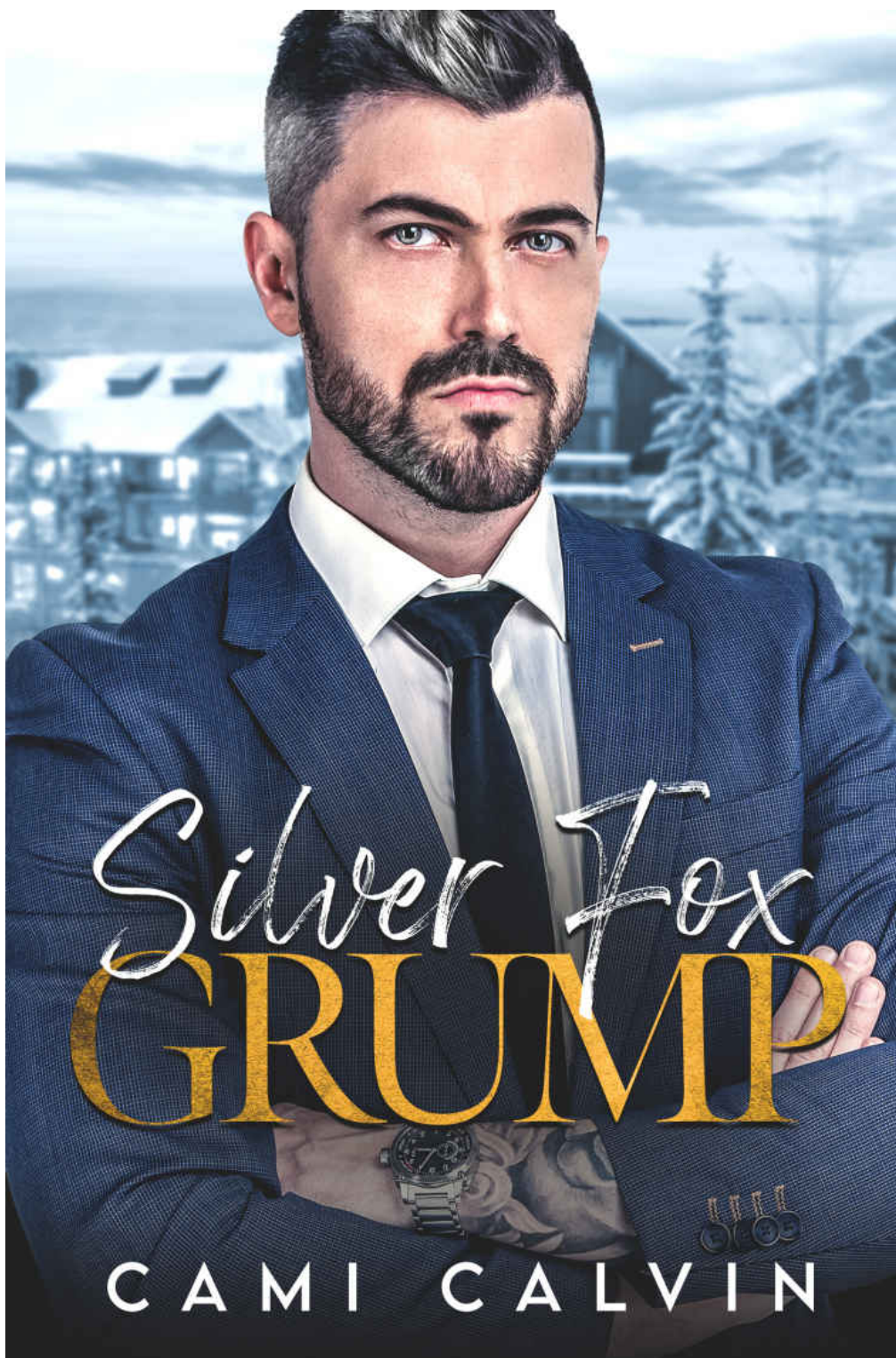


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*Silver Fox*  
**GRUMP**

CAMI CALVIN

## *Chapter One*

### **Anna**

**I** always hated flying.

Not the whole thing, just the takeoff, and the landing. I suddenly turned into this master mathematician/scientist and began calculating whether I could survive the distance to the ground if the plane broke in half. I spent the whole time repeating over and over in my head, “It’s all right; you’re going to die now; you’ve had a good life.” Clearly, since I’m still here though, it has yet to end in disaster.

“You look green,” my best friend Haley said as she looked over at me. “Are you thinking about flying or Caleb? You’re not doing that head thing again, are you?”

“What head thing?” I replied, trying to sound casual but also not taking my eyes off the runway as we began our takeoff. Caleb was the guy I’d been seeing who spent the better part of 18 months avoiding “defining the relationship.” We’d broken

up exactly twelve days ago, and I wasn't nearly as sad as I thought I'd be. "I'm fine. Just enjoying the scenery."

Haley looked past me out the window and raised a suspicious eyebrow at me.

"You're enjoying the view of LAX and the industrial warehouses beyond?"

"Yes," I said a little too quickly. "It's kind of artistic in a modern art-ish way."

Haley rolled her eyes and went back to flipping through the Sky Mall catalog. "If you say so."

"How long is this flight supposed to be, anyway?" I asked, hoping to take her attention away from my slight neurosis.

"Two hours and nineteen minutes," she said, pulling her Air Pods out of her pocket and putting them in one at a time. Apparently, the discussion was over and I needed to leave her to her overpriced merchandise.

I couldn't really blame her, though. This was her "moment." Haley was a competitive skier and we were headed to a qualifier. If she did well in this event, she'd be on her way to the Paris Olympics. And maybe if I was lucky, she'd take me with her.

I felt a jolt and the plane began to move, "taxiing" as they called it. More like a countdown to doom I said. My fingers gripped the armrests so tight that my knuckles went white, and while she didn't turn to look at me, Haley grabbed my hand to



reassure me. This was exactly why we were best friends, a supernatural level of connection.

I spent the next ten minutes breathing and telling myself this time it was going to go wrong, and when it didn't (again), I relaxed into my barely comfortable seat and pulled out a book.

It was one of those cheesy, overexaggerated Christmastime romances where the lovers act exactly the opposite of real people and that was what made them so great. Well, that and the copious bath sex scenes. I'd just gotten to the part where they accidentally kiss and then quietly have full blown intercourse amid the presents while her parents are in the next room, when Haley finally took out her Air Pods and turned to talk.

“So, who is this guy that owns the resort again? Your uncle?”

“He's my dad's best friend, so, kind of.”

Haley gave me a look as if to ask if there was any funny business and I pinched her.

“Not that kind of uncle. Honestly, I haven't even seen him since I was a kid so who knows what this guy is like now. All you need to know is that he's letting us stay for free as a favor to my dad. Like, all-inclusive.”

“We do love a freebie,” Haley said gleefully. “Wonder if there will be any hot guys there.”

I shook my head, laughing. “How very trashy romance novel of you. Two young, hot athletes meet on the slopes and

it's not just their cocoa that gets hot and steamy.”

Haley shrugged. “I don’t think you have much room to talk, miss...” She looked at the cover of my book. “*Becky’s Secret Santa*? Is that really the title?”

“Shut up,” I said, giggling bashfully. “It’s really good. Where else are you going to find perfect men besides fiction?”

Haley thought for a moment, then nodded. “Fair.”

“Are you nervous?” I asked, changing the subject to avoid telling her exactly what part of the book I was in the middle of. “This could make you an Olympian.”

Haley shook her shoulders as if she were shivering. “The prospect is both thrilling and terrifying. Getting in is hard enough. Competing with other people who want this just as badly as I do is damn near paralyzing.”

I offered her a little hug and kiss on the temple. “But you’re the best, Hales. You can kick all their butts. You have more talent in your hair than most people have in their whole body. Plus, I’m there and I will act as your personal good luck charm.”

Haley laughed as the seatbelt sign dinged, and the captain came over the loudspeaker telling us to prepare for landing.

“Ladies and gentlemen, as we make our final descent into Missoula, please stow laptop computers and similarly sized electronic devices. Small, portable electronic devices may continue to be used in airplane mode but must be secured for the remainder of the flight. Please ensure all carryon items are

completely under the seat in front of you or in an overhead bin, leaving the area around your feet clear. Please raise your seatback and tray table to the full-upright and locked position, and fasten your seatbelt. We will come by one last time to pick up cups, cans, newspapers, and any other trash. Thank you.”

Haley mimicked this speech word for word, getting me to giggle like a ten-year-old. That was another thing that was great about Haley. She never worried about looking stupid or being immature. She just had fun how she wanted to, when she wanted to. I tended to have too short a fuse for that.

As we deplaned, Haley poked me in the shoulder. “You never told me what Caleb said when he broke up with you—”

“I broke up with him, thank you. He was the worst.”

Haley and I passed the security and went for baggage claim. We would need to gather not only our bags, but Haley’s ski equipment too.

“But seriously,” Haley continued. “Tell me he at least cried.”

I shrugged. “Like I said, he was the worst. A true commitment-phobe and if that wasn’t bad enough, he’s still acting like we’re in college. Going out to play beer pong on the weekends, and playing Xbox until he got blisters. I love a good video game as much as the next person. But when you’re skipping work to play *Call of Duty*... there’s something wrong with you.”

Haley laughed and nodded. “Good riddance,” she said. “Maybe you’ll find a replacement at the event.”

“Hot skiing boyfriend? Yes, please,” I replied.

Once we retrieved our bags, Haley got us an Uber and we headed for the resort.

Brother Bears Ski Lodge was about an hour from Missoula and a gorgeous, scenic drive kept us entertained. We chatted about how I was going to help her sabotage the competition and she promised to find me a hottie.

When we pulled up to the front, I couldn’t have been more stunned at the regal nature of this place. I heard ski lodge and was picturing a log cabin with a little smokestack and a woodpile. No, this mansion made of wood was glamorous and the definition of luxury.

I’d been here before when I was little but I hadn’t remembered it looking like this.

“This is gorgeous,” Haley said, looking around and smiling. “I can’t believe we get to stay here for free. Thank you, Uncle Kevin.”

“I told you, he’s not my uncle.”

We wandered into the lobby, taking in the very modern yet homey-looking decor. It was like a Martha Stewart collection threw up on this place in the best way possible.

A familiar face caught my eye and I looked to see Kevin Young, my dad’s best friend. He looked a lot different than I had remembered in person, but a little sleuthing on the internet

told me that his previously brown hair had tiny flecks of silver in it. It also told me he was single and a workaholic, but those things seemed less important in the big picture than being able to recognize him.

I tapped Haley and nodded my head toward Kevin, gesturing to her as if to say *follow me*. I walked across the lobby just as Kevin looked up, though the way he looked at me didn't seem like he recognized me.

“You're Kevin Young, right?”

“Uh, yes. And you are?”

Well, he was definitely more... direct than Dad had let on. Dad told stories of this hilarious guy that had the ladies swooning over his charm. This guy couldn't charm an armchair.

“Anna,” I said. “Anna Knight?”

“Oh!” he said. And he opened his mouth to say something else but one of the hotel employees came up to him with an urgent matter.

“Mr. Young,” he said, pointing behind him. “The guest over there says they want to get a refund since they want to stay at another resort after reading the Powder review.”

“Damn it,” he said softly. “Okay. I'll take care of it.”

Then Kevin turned and started to walk away. No info on rooms, no greeting for the woman who was supposedly his best friend's daughter. But then he stopped and gestured to the employee. “This is Anna. Help get her to her room, okay?”

And that was it. The great fucking Kevin Young, hero of all my dad's skiing stories, was frankly kind of a jerk.

"Okay..." Haley said, opening her eyes wide and making a face as she rolled them. "Well, he was... something."

"At least the room is free," I reminded her as we followed the staff member.

"At least the room was free," she agreed.

Once we were safely to our room, not that an inch of this place looked unsafe, Haley and I playfully argued over who was going to get what bed.

"I'm the athlete, I should definitely get the bed by the window. Easier to check out the competition."

"Yes," I agreed. "But if you're by the window you might catch a cold and then be unable to compete. Obviously, I should sacrifice my lungs instead."

In the end, Haley got the bed by the window and I was happy that she was happy. This competition was going to be no joke. Any little thing that could make her feel more relaxed and less stressed was okay by me.

"You know my mom and dad used to come here before I was born," I said as I put away my clothes in the dresser drawers. "And then my dad brought me here a few times after."

"Yeah?" Haley asked, doing the same but in the closet.



I nodded and flopped backward onto the bed. Dear God, was it comfortable. I almost didn't think I'd want to leave it once I was in. "It didn't look like this when we came years ago. Kevin must have done some renovating since then."

"Ugh," Haley said, sitting next to me. "Kevin."

"Maybe he's not that bad," I suggested. "There has to be a reason why my dad is friends with him."

Haley nodded, smiling and staring off in the distance. "And your dad is a total DILF so I trust his judgment."

I grabbed a pillow from beside me and whacked her with it.

"Gross, Hales. Let's not talk about my actual father that way."

Haley shrugged and stuck out her tongue at me playfully, then patted my head and nodded toward the outside.

"Wanna go for a walk? We can see if there are any ski hotties available."

I laughed and hit her with the pillow again. "That's hardly a priority," I said. "We need to check out the competition. See what the courses are like. I mean... right?"

Haley laughed and nodded. "I suppose I could be persuaded to be a responsible competitor and check it out. I'm really glad you're here with me, Anna."

I leaned in to hug her and hummed in agreement. "I'm really glad, too. No matter what, let's make sure this trip is

about you winning, and us spending time together. We don't need hot skiing boys for that."

Haley poked me, smiling. "No, we don't *need* them, but they sure make things more fun."

And I couldn't argue her logic there.

## *Chapter Two*

### **Kevin**

“**T**his is Kevin Young,” I said into the phone after my receptionist patched someone through. I wasn’t sure who was calling, and I desperately hoped it would be good news.

It wasn’t.

“Hi, Mr. Young,” the voice on the other end said, sounding rather weak. “This is Andrew Parker.”

“Mr. Parker,” I said, leaning back in my seat. “How are you?”

Andrew Parker was one of the judges for the Olympic qualifying event I was hosting at my ski resort for downhill skiers. It was all set to start this coming week, and I had been surprised to learn how much of the organizing was left in my hands rather than in the hands of the Olympic organizers. I thought for sure I would simply be a host, offering my slopes,

lodging, and amenities to the athletes. Little did I know, I would be responsible for managing the judges who would be staying in my hotel free of charge.

“I’ve been better, Kevin,” he said, and I heard a snuffle on the other end of the line.

The bottom dropped out of my stomach in dread of what he might be about to tell me. “Oh?” I asked, trying to keep my voice neutral.

“Yeah,” he confirmed. “I’ve come down with something nasty, and I have a really high fever. My flight is supposed to leave tonight, and there is no way I’m going to be able to get on it.”

*Shit.*

“Oh, no,” I said, trying to sound as sincerely sympathetic as I could. “That’s terrible.” Damn right, it was terrible. I was going to have to find another judge who could fill in on short notice, something that might prove even harder after this morning. If I couldn’t find a replacement, the event would have to be postponed or canceled, and the money I’d already sunk into hosting it would be lost. That would be a major blow to my business—even more than the article...

“I’m so sorry,” he said before a coughing fit overtook him. “I know this isn’t ideal for you.”

“No worries,” I said, pressing my fingers to my temples in a futile attempt to rid myself of the stress. “You just get to feeling better, okay?”

“Thanks, Kevin,” he said. “I’m going to head back to bed. Sorry again.”

“Don’t worry about it,” I replied. “Rest well.”

I hung up, not interested in doing the song and dance anymore. It would be one thing if we were friends, or if I didn’t have the event to plan for on top of the huge crisis that hit my resort this morning.

I knew the latest edition of Powder Magazine was coming out, and I had been looking forward to the write up I knew we’d be getting ahead of the qualifier. The review plus the event would bring in a huge boom for business. Or so I thought.

When I opened the pages of the magazine, I was stunned to see that the resort had been listed among others which would be hosting qualifying events, but it had come as the least recommended in the Northwest United States for people looking to try out.

So naturally, I’d spent the entire morning doing damage control, seeing who, if anyone, was posting about the article on social media and offering steep discounts to influencers who would be willing to give an honest review of their own. I’d been checking in with known athletes who would be coming, as well as judges and members of the press to make sure they were still coming, and to offer incentives like comped food if they said no but were willing to reconsider.

It was a nightmare. Practically, because of the amount of work I’d had to put into it, and financially because of the

number of discounted lodgings, food, merchandise, and lessons. I'd spent my entire morning on the phone and sending emails and crossing my fingers that people either hadn't seen the article or that they would be coming anyway.

I looked around the walls of my office at the dozens of awards from local, national, even international organizations hailing Brother Bears Ski Lodge as a top desirable place to come and ski, snowboard, or even just to stay.

What the hell had happened when that reporter came? I'd been so careful to make sure their visit was top notch, getting as hands on as I could, not trusting anyone but myself to provide a perfect experience.

I walked over to a picture on the wall of me as a younger man with a dear friend from my own competitive skiing days. We were both holding trophies, his bigger than mine, which was sitting in a glass case next to the photo.

Just then, the phone rang again, and I went back to my desk to answer the call, which I was sure was going to be more bad news of some kind. Nancy, my receptionist, wouldn't have let it through unless it was important. Maybe it was another sick judge, or a top competitor for the event dropping out to go elsewhere, or maybe even someone telling me that a blizzard was coming through and we'd have to cancel completely.

"This is Kevin Young," I said, pressing the button to accept the call.

"Mr. Young," Nancy said on the other end. "I just wanted to remind you that Ms. Knight and her friend will be arriving



soon, and you'd said you wanted to be here to greet them."

Damn it. I'd forgotten that she was coming today. I looked over at the picture on the wall again of me with my friend Henry Knight, whose daughter was coming to stay for a week with her friend, who would be competing in the qualifier.

*Well, I thought, at least I know I'll have one person skiing in the event.*

"Thanks, Nancy," I said. "I'll head down in a few minutes."

I hung up the phone and put my head in my hands. Today was going to be a rough one, and I wasn't even close to done, But I knew Henry would never forgive me if I didn't at least greet his daughter when she showed up.

I stood up and brushed my hair back, looking at my face in the mirror. It wasn't exactly the same image as the old photo, where the only lines on my face were where my goggles had left marks around my eyes. Now my face also bore the lines of a man worried often about his reckless investment—the lodge. My hair was still wavy, but instead of the black hair from my early twenties, my waves were now streaked with silver—a result of running the lodge as much as from age.

I took the long walk from my office down the hall and a pair of elevators to the lobby, where I was greeted by a bustling scene.

At least it wasn't empty, like I'd feared would happen, but then again, I supposed it wasn't like everyone who was

already here or who had reservations would have gone home or canceled their nonrefundable vacations at the last minute.

I approached the front desk and leaned over to one of my concierges.

“Has Anna Knight checked in yet?” I asked.

“Uh...” She typed into the computer to check. “No. It has a note here that she’s not to be shown to her room by anyone but you, sir.”

“Oh,” I said, having completely forgotten about that and glad that I came down before she got here. It would have not been a good look to leave her sitting here, waiting for me and unable to check in. “Great. If I miss her and she ends up coming to you, wave me down.”

She nodded, and I turned to the door just in time to see an incredibly beautiful woman walk through the door, dragging a suitcase along behind her. She turned to the woman beside her, looking at her phone. It had been a long time since I’d found myself unable to look away from someone, so when she looked up at me and smiled, I wasn’t sure if I was seeing things or not.

She nudged her friend and pointed at me, and I was certain I was seeing things. That was, until she began to walk directly over to me.

As she approached, I opened my mouth to offer our standard greeting, unsure what this girl could possibly be

coming to me for. Before I could, however, she asked, “You’re Kevin Young, right?”

“Uh,” I said, caught off guard. “Yes. And you are?”

She looked slightly taken aback, but then looked briefly at her friend before returning her gaze to me. “Anna,” she said. “Anna Knight?”

Anna Knight.

Henry’s daughter.

Who I’d just been undressing with my eyes from across the lobby.

“Oh!” I said, reaching out my hand and immediately ridding myself of any impure thoughts in regards to my friend’s daughter.

But right at that moment, one of my employees came over to me with a frantic look in his eyes.

“Mr. Young,” he said, pointing behind him. “The guest over there says they want to get a refund since they want to stay at another resort after reading the Powder review.”

“Damn it,” I said under my breath, feeling my blood pressure spike. “Okay. I’ll take care of it.” I started to walk away, entirely distracted, but then remembered I was leaving Anna standing there and looking dumbfounded. “This is Anna. Help get her to her room, okay?”

I walked away without saying another word, my focus entirely on the customer, who turned out to be so belligerent

and insufferable that I happily offered them a full refund and wished them well.

By the time I finished, I turned back to the lobby to properly greet Anna, but she was already gone. With a sigh and a shake of my head, I turned to go to the elevator, hoping to go knock on her door to apologize for my behavior, when I ran into one of the judges for the qualifier, easily recognized by the badge around her neck.

“Mr. Young?” the older woman said, holding out her hand. “Eleanor Owens.”

“Yes,” I said. “How did you know?”

“One of your employees pointed you out,” she said, motioning over her shoulder to one of my workers who was running the welcome area for people judging or participating in the qualifying event, and I nodded in understanding. “I heard a rumor that one of the judges for the event has called in sick.”

“You heard correctly,” I told her, pressing my lips together in a grim expression. “I have to find someone new before the event, which, as you know, is only a few days away.”

“Of course,” she said. “Well, if you need any recommendations—”

“Yes!” I practically shouted, startling her. “I mean, yes, please. I have a list that was given to me, but if you have some names I should start with, I’d be very grateful.”

She smiled, gave a little laugh, and said, “Anything I can do to help.”

We walked together to one of the concierge desks, where I grabbed a piece of paper and a pen to take down the names and numbers she gave me.

“Thank you so much, Eleanor,” I said, smiling at her and scribbling down the last number she provided me. “You saved my ass.”

She laughed. “Glad I could help.”

She left, walking toward the stairs which led to the second floor, where Anna was staying.

Guilt at how quickly I’d abandoned my intention to be a good host to Anna overwhelmed me, and I briefly debated going up to her room to apologize, but the paper in my hand with the information for replacement judges was urgent. I’d already screwed up with Henry’s daughter. Another hour for an apology wouldn’t hurt.

## *Chapter Three*

### **Anna**

**A**pparently checking out the course and the slopes meant something much different to Haley because within fifteen minutes of leaving our room, she was already engrossed in flirting with some of the male competitors. I had to give it to her, they were gorgeous. Each one of them had a haircut straight out of a magazine with swoopy, floppy hair that you knew would tumble graceful out of their helmets when they removed them after a run down the slopes. People liked to talk about how yummy soccer players were, but I was wondering why the world was sleeping on skiers?

“Have you girls had lunch yet?” asked one of them, a short one with chestnut brown hair and a Hollywood smile. “We are starving after the flight and would love to take you both to lunch.”

His compatriots agreed with vigor. Haley looked to me with a pleading look on her face, like I was going to tell her no, she



had to focus on the competition. But I just shrugged, trying to indicate that it was up to her. From what I understood, the social aspect of adult sports was just as important as the actual competition.

Haley once told me that she spent so much time practicing with her coach (who couldn't make it this trip because he was sick,) that most days it was: wake up, go ski, go to bed, rinse, and repeat. Sounded terribly boring to me but the way Haley lit up when she talked about skiing and competing was amazing.

“Yes, please,” Haley replied to him. “We are famished as well. Have you guys been out there yet?” She indicated to the course and the conversation devolved into strictly competition talk to which I had nothing to contribute.

When we got to lunch, I was amazed at not only the vastness of the dining hall, but the volume of people it currently held. It looked like an Olive Garden on a Friday night the week of prom.

We sat at a table close to the huge wall of windows and all marveled at how beautiful the scenery was.

“See, Anna?” Haley said, “This is real scenery. Not the back side of LAX.”

I laughed and poked her in the side. “You're rude, you know that?”

She stuck out her tongue at me in response then hugged me.

I knew she was making fun of me for my response on the plane earlier, and I couldn't blame her. As far as excuses went, it was pretty weak. But a good friend helped you get through your fears. A best friend, like Haley, helped you laugh at them.

“So, you girls are from LA?” asked one of the four boys. This one had sandy blond hair with green eyes and a very boy-next-door face. I'd put money on him being from the Midwest. He just had that look about him.

“Well, not LA itself, but just outside it.” Haley explained. The blond guy nodded, seeming a little less interested than he expected to be.

“What do you do for work?” asked another brunet. This one was tall and lean, and was sitting next to the one with the boyish face.

“We work in fashion distribution,” I replied. “It sounds exciting but it's a lot of paperwork.”

Haley nudged me and whispered, “You could make it sound exciting at least.”

I shrugged with indifference. These guys were nice but pretty one-dimensional. I knew plenty of guys like this back home. Pretty, but boring. I liked my men with a hint of ambition. Which, of course, made my ex, Caleb, even more of a mystery.

For the life of me, I had no idea why I was with him so long. He wasn't my type or even a good boyfriend. Maybe it was because we were friends first and I knew if we broke up

that was going to be the end of our friendship too. It was, but I hardly felt sad about it now. In fact, the break from Caleb almost felt like a fresh start.

“Anna?”

Haley’s voice broke through and I looked to see her staring at me with anticipation, and she wasn’t the only one. A server had come to our table while I was musing about Caleb and was looking at me expectantly.

“Hi... yes... I’ll have Diet Coke please.” The server wrote it down but then looked back at me. “Oh! You want my food order, too. Um... just a minute...”

Haley snorted, chuckling. “Typical Anna.”

I gave her a look and then placed my order for a grilled chicken sandwich. Dad had said Kevin was going to comp all our food, but I didn’t want to abuse his generosity. Even if he was the grouchiest person I’d ever met.

I turned to Haley, ignoring the boys who looked like they were about to initiate more discussion.

“Why do you think Kevin was such a jerk?” I asked. “Did I do something weird when I approached him?”

Haley shook her head. “It’s a mystery. Sometimes guys like that just get more irritable when they grow too old to do the things that made them happy when they were in their prime. You know...” She jerked her head toward the group of guys. “Men who are in their prime early.”

I laughed and she grinned at me. “At least they’re pretty,” I said back.

“Well, they’re not really great conversationalists,” Haley whispered directly into my ear. “So, they had to have something going for them. Chances are they’ll get laid anyway.”

It was true. Men who were pretty like those guys rarely had substance. It was that kind of thing that kept me wary of the dating pool.

“So where are you guys from?” I asked, trying to avoid sitting there whispering with Haley all afternoon.

“Illinois,” said the one who looked like he was from the Midwest. “And Kyle here is from Indiana.” Kyle, a redhead with a smattering of freckles across his handsome face, nodded. “Charlie and Parker here are from Nevada.”

“How did you all meet?” Haley asked.

“Competitions,” Parker replied. “Evan’s dad owns a resort in Illinois so we all meet up and practice there.”

“Wow,” Haley said. “Impressive.”

Evan nodded, but we were saved from more conversation by the server bringing us drinks and food. Thank goodness. I could feel this conversation melting my brain.

As we ate, the athletes went back to talking about the courses and heats—whatever that meant. I was glad to have the opportunity to ponder this situation with Kevin, and oddly,

just as I thought of him, I saw him cross the dining hall looking frantic.

I supposed this would be a stressful event for someone who owned a ski lodge. I wasn't really sure how they chose where they hold Olympic qualifiers, but if it was anything like hosting the Olympics themselves, there would be some sort of bidding process. That meant high stakes for the resort owner.

Kevin spoke to a server, then walked back out, hands in his pockets and muttering to himself. In the bright light of the room, I could see the young man who I'd so often seen in pictures in my dad's trophy room. He was just a little less toned and a little more gray, but he was there. As a kid I always thought he was so handsome, and I'd tell my dad that I was going to marry him when I was "big."

Dad would always laugh and shake his head. "I don't know about that, Squirrely," he'd say, addressing me by a childhood nickname. "Kevin is a little old for you, don't you think?"

I'd typically shake my head no, and Dad would laugh some more, then lead me away to distract me with age-appropriate activities like Barbies. But even as I got older, I'd look at that picture, one of four young men standing next to each other in ski gear, and think about how I wanted my future husband to look like Kevin.

"Hey," Haley said, nudging me. "We're gonna go explore the grounds. Come with me."

Sure enough, as I looked around, the rest of the group had finished their food and were putting on their coats to head out

into the great, white landscape we could see from here. I followed suit, despite only having finished half of my chicken, and reminded myself I was here for Haley. Whatever she wanted to do, I was in.

As I slid into my pink wool peacoat, one of the boys rushed up behind me and assisted in me putting it on.

“Here,” he said in what he clearly thought was a very gentlemanly tone. “Let me help you with that.”

I gave Haley a look and she sucked in her lips, biting down on them to stop from laughing. “Thanks,” I said. “That’s very... helpful of you.”

If this guy thought he was going to get laid for helping me put my coat on, he had another thing coming. Haley, on the other hand...

“I think the exit is this way,” said Parker. “At least, there is an exit this way.”

“Let’s hope it’s not a fire exit and alarms go off,” Haley said, giggling. The boys seemed to think this was terribly funny and chuckled in unison as we collectively burst out into the bright, sunlit winter wonderland.

The burst of cold on my face was jarring at first. How could they actively choose to be in this kind of freezing weather? But slowly, my skin started to adjust to the chill and my eyes to the sun. Then I could really see the land before us in all its glory.

Straight across from the lodge entrance were three tall peaks of the Rockies. Dad had done most of his Olympic training here when it was under different management and he always talked about how the three peaks course was one of the most difficult courses they'd ever tackled. He even said he nearly broke his back from a really bad fall on it.

"Oh, my God," said Haley, grabbing my arm in her own and jumping up and down. "It's so gorgeous here. This snow is absolutely perfect for skiing, too."

"Maybe that's why they put a ski lodge here, Hales," I said sarcastically.

"Oh, ha ha," she replied. "I just mean that sometimes the snow can be too... you know what? Never mind." She laughed for real and tugged me along with her, following the boys. "What are the chances you're going to actually try to learn how to ski while we're here?"

I'd been avoiding this topic since I was so averse to dangerous activities like skiing. There were just so many things that could go wrong.

"Haley, you're not going to have time to teach me," I said, hoping this was a good enough answer that she'd give it up. She always wanted me to come skiing with her, but I was more of a *watch her ski while I sit by the fire with a warm drink* kind of girl.

"I know," Haley said. "But there are plenty of instructors here. And if Kevin is covering all the costs of you being here..."

“I’m not gonna abuse Kevin’s generosity just to learn how to ski,” I said, folding my arms and giving her a disapproving look.

“I mean it seems like he owes you one after that rude-ass greeting,” she replied.

I shrugged and nodded to where the boys had gotten way ahead of us. We jogged a little to catch up, not that they’d noticed we were gone. “I don’t feel good about taking advantage of my dad’s friend.” It was clear she wasn’t going to give this up until I agreed to some form of a lesson. “But if he offers, I will take *one* lesson, okay? One.”

Haley clapped her hands together loud enough that it got the boys attention, and they turned to us, grinning.

“You guys wanna run some courses?”

“Anna doesn't ski,” Haley said. “Yet.”

I rolled my eyes at her. “You guys have fun. I’m gonna explore on my own.”

I hadn’t even finished talking before they’d all hurried away toward the equipment rentals.

*Whatever Haley wants, I reminded myself with a deep breath. I’m just here to be a good friend.*

And with that, I headed back into the lodge to attempt to get warmed up. And if I was lucky, manage to avoid any ski instructors.



## *Chapter Four*

### **Kevin**

**T**he fourth phone call I made from Eleanor's list was no better than the first three, and it took me a lot longer than I planned to get that done, with several small-scale emergencies requiring my attention springing up between calls. It was nearly 5pm by the time I finished.

After dealing with another VIP guest who felt that they weren't getting the right kind of treatment, I looked up, ready to head back to my office to make even more calls, when I saw Anna and her friend walking past the window. The review wasn't going anywhere, and the event could wait another hour or so for me to do the right thing.

I rushed outside, forgetting that my coat was up in my office, and promptly wishing I'd thought better before trying to deal with this out in the cold.

"Anna," I said as I caught up to her and the people she was walking with.

She turned, looking for who had called out her name, and saw me. I watched her exchange a look with her friend, one I knew meant that my first impression hadn't exactly gone over well.

"Mr. Young," she said with a nod before turning around to walk away. I grabbed for her arm, gently taking hold above her elbow.

"I'm sorry for the way I greeted you before," I said, releasing her once her attention was back on me.

"It's fine," she said in a flippant voice I could tell meant it wasn't fine at all.

"No," I said. "It isn't. I promised your father that I'd make this stay enjoyable for you. I've had a rough morning, but I assure you, I'm going to do whatever I can to make your trip memorable, relaxing, and fun."

"Uh huh," the friend said noncommittally, looking at Anna. "Thanks."

Damn. I really must have come across as a jerk for my presence to elicit this cold of a reaction.

"Well," I said, trying to regain professional ground while also being personable, something that came easily when I didn't have a personal connection to the guest, but which was surprisingly hard when there was an additional layer of social expectations to keep up with. "I didn't really do introductions properly before. I'm Kevin."

"Kevin," Anna repeated apprehensively.

“Yes,” I said, trying to sound reassuring. The last time she and her dad had been to Brother Bears was a solid eighteen years ago. No wonder she felt weird about calling me by my first name.

“Okay,” Anna said, her hesitation slowly fading. “Well, as you know, I’m Anna, and this is Haley. She’s competing in the qualifier.”

I looked over at her friend, whose gaze was moving back and forth between me and the slopes, which were visible just past the courtyard area. “Well, hopefully, it will be a successful trip in addition to a delightful one.”

She gave me an appraising look and said, “Thanks.”

It was an awkward interaction, one I struggled to recover from, not having had a lot of experience with dealing with guests on a personal level, especially ones I’d already managed to offend within minutes of their arrival.

After a moment of silence where none of us knew what to say, I looked back at Anna. I couldn’t believe how beautiful she’d grown up to be. Her brown hair tumbled around her shoulders, and her blue eyes seemed to sparkle like snow in the sunlight. Even just the way she held herself, with confidence and grace, had me looking a little closer than I should have.

I shook my head and asked, “How’s your dad, by the way?” Hoping that directing the conversation toward my friend would help me to stop eyeballing his daughter.

“He’s good,” Anna said, offering me a small smile, which I returned, grateful there was some common ground to have a conversation about. “He said to tell you, ‘Don’t go thinking you can compete, too. Old skiers go downhill fast.’” She giggled, a lovely sound. “He thinks he’s really funny.”

“He can be,” I replied with a chuckle of my own.

“On the occasion,” she said with a cheeky grin.

Oh, this was definitely Henry’s daughter, all right. She had the same quick wit and sense of humor. It was almost unnerving, except for how very natural it came to her, which made me feel surprisingly comfortable in her presence.

“So,” I said, looking between the girls and nodding toward Haley. “You’re competing this week. What are *your* plans?” I asked Anna. “I’m sure you’ll be spectating, but there will be a lot of prep times that she’ll be busy.”

“That’s a good question,” Anna said with a slightly sardonic hint to the words. “I was hoping you could maybe help me with some activities the resort has. Anything indoors, outdoors, games, dancing, ski lessons...”

Right as she said ski lessons, I saw my nephew Max walking toward the lodge from the slopes. He had been living here for a few years now, working for me and improving his own skiing, which was downright world class at this point.

“Funny you should mention ski lessons.” I raised my hand in the air in a wave to get his attention as I said, “Max!”

He looked around and saw me, then waved back with a smile as he walked over. He was still carting all of his gear, so I didn't want to keep him long, but this introduction might help Anna and her friend to feel more at home in the accommodations I was able to provide for them.

"Hey, Uncle Kev," he said once he was close enough. "Having a great day as always?"

"Spectacular," I said, trying and failing to keep the sarcasm from my voice. "But work issues aside, I wanted to introduce you to Anna and Haley. Anna is my friend Henry's daughter, and she and Haley have come for a week while Haley competes in the qualifier."

"Wow," Max said, looking back and forth between Anna and Haley. "Pretty impressive. So, you guys like to ski?"

"Well," Anna said as both girls smiled at him. "Haley does. I've never really done it, even though my dad was really into it. There just aren't a lot of opportunities in San Francisco."

Haley gave a little wave when Anna said her name, her expression entirely changed from what it had been moments before. I felt a pang of jealousy at the way they looked at Max. At six foot one, he was my same height, but our similarities pretty much ended there. He looked a lot more like his mother than he did my brother, with thick blond hair and bright blue eyes. He was pretty much the poster boy for "attractive twenty-something male," and here I was, the old man standing around talking to a bunch of, for lack of a better word, kids.

“I was thinking,” I said, trying to regain control of the conversation since I still had a lot of work to do, “that you could give Anna some ski lessons while Haley is doing her preparations for the competition.”

“For sure,” Max said, beaming at Anna, who returned the smile. “Do you have any experience?”

“When I was a teenager,” she said, “my dad took me to a resort, but I only made it out onto the slopes twice, and I don’t think they count sliding down on your butt skiing.”

We all laughed, and Max said, “Might be a new sport to look into. But you and I can work on getting you to the bottom on two feet. If you want to, of course.”

“Definitely,” Anna said, leaning closer to Max. “I would love to see what all the fuss is about and maybe figure out how to not embarrass myself the second I strap those things to my feet.” She motioned to the skis slung over Max’s shoulder.

“Well, I’ll see what I can do,” he said.

“Don’t be so modest,” I said, giving him a light punch on the shoulder. “Max is the best instructor we have. If anyone can have you skiing within the week, it’s him.”

“Aw, thanks, Uncle Kev,” Max said, punching me back. “Well, I’m famished after spending the whole day on the slopes. I’m going to hit the caf’.”

The resort had one upscale restaurant with a bar and a dancefloor, often used for formal events, a mid-level restaurant where groups could eat at their own individual tables with a

server, and a large cafeteria. Max and the other employees had a discount card to use in the cafeteria, so that was where they usually ate.

“You know what, Max? Why don’t you take them to Three Peaks?” I asked, referencing the mid-level restaurant. I really wanted to make sure I made up for my slight earlier, so I continued. Since the girls were already getting cafeteria meals comped as per my agreement with Henry, and Max only received his discount there, I figured I could do one better. “On me tonight. For all three of you.”

“Really?” Max said, lighting up and looking at Anna and Haley. “That’s great. You guys in?”

Anna and Haley looked thrilled as they nodded.

“Is there a dress code?” Anna asked.

“Not at Three Peaks,” I said, reassuring her. “It’s still fairly casual.”

“Okay,” she said with a grin at Haley. “I didn’t want to waste my good dress on the first night.”

“Me either,” Haley said, her eyes never leaving Max’s face.

“I need to get changed,” Max said. “But I can meet you guys back down in the lobby in about an hour. Does that work?”

“Yeah,” the girls said in unison.

I led them back inside, which was a relief to my freezing arms and hands.

“Thanks for the dinner,” Anna said.

“Think nothing of it,” I told her. “It’s the least I could do to help you feel more at home.” I smiled at her, hoping the gesture would be the thing that made up for the way I acted when she first arrived.

Her expression back to me seemed to say it was, and she reached out a hand to shake mine. “I really appreciate it,” she said. “And I know Dad will, too.”

“I hope so. If you talk to him, let him know that I’m looking forward to seeing him soon.”

“He’s coming tomorrow actually and you can tell him in person,” she said, and the girls turned to walk back toward their room. I didn’t know Henry was planning on being here this week and was glad to hear that. He must have planned on surprising me.

I watched them go wistfully. Seeing the way the three of them interacted was both heartwarming and heartbreaking for me. I had been that young once. I’d been carefree and had the world at my feet.

Now, I was getting unnervingly close to fifty, and had long since given up on anything except running the lodge. Don’t get me wrong—the exorbitant amount of money I made was well worth the work. I just wasn’t always sure if the job was worth everything that was lost because of it. Henry had gotten married and had Anna, and even after his wife died in childbirth, he still had a family. I had exes, like anyone would,



but none of them had ever been the right fit for someone who ate, slept, and breathed their job.

I went up to my office, trudging along slightly in my melancholy, until I finally sank down into my chair. It was nearly dinnertime, and I dialed the phone.

Fifth try was the charm, apparently. The judge, a man named Martin Briggs, was more than willing to fill in for Mr. Morrison in exchange for the free all expenses and paid stay I'd offered him.

"Thank you," I said with genuine gratitude. "I'll get you in our system right now, and I look forward to seeing you later." He lived only an hour away and said he'd love to come as soon as possible, so I'd booked him in the room originally slated for Mr. Morrison.

"You're very welcome. I'll start packing now."

"Travel safe. Goodbye," I said as I hung up. I sighed with a modicum of relief. One crisis had been averted, and now it was time to go back to preparing for the event and for dealing with the fallout of that damn article.

Maybe *I'd* get to have dinner at some point tonight, too. Though, unlike Max, Anna, and Haley, it was likely to be alone.

Like always.

## *Chapter Five*

### **Anna**

**A**fter Haley had skied with those boys, they parted ways and Haley had found me where I was sitting in the lounge, curled up in a chair drinking hot chocolate and reading. She had banged on the window to get my attention and gestured for me to come outside. Because this trip was for her, I did as she asked and she showed me that there was a whole family of deer that lived close by. It hadn't been until we were walking back that we had the encounter with Kevin.

It was nice to meet Max, he was hot as hell. But meeting him meant that I lost my plausible deniability when it came to ski instructors. Now we knew one personally.

As we sat at dinner, Haley and I chatted about how unappealing the boys were and how much we would really like to find more quality company for the rest of the stay. Max thought this was hilarious.

“I’m afraid it’s gonna be mostly bros like that you’ll find out here. That and middle-aged men with their families.”

Haley groaned and began stabbing her salad with her fork. “I’m not sure what I expected,” she moaned. “These are the kind of guys at competitions. Pretty but dumb. I have no idea why I thought it would be different now.”

“Look on the bright side,” I said. “Now you’ll have extra time to focus on your competition. We gotta get our girl to the Olympics.”

Max made a noise of agreement and raised his glass of wine. “To getting Haley to the Olympics.”

Haley and I both toasted with him and he downed his glass before standing and smoothing the sweater he wore. “If you ladies will excuse me, I need to speak to one of my students momentarily.”

We both nodded, and he left the table to speak to a man across the room. Haley turned to me and pretended to wipe drool off her mouth. “Lord, that man is attractive,” she said, watching him walk away.

“Yeah, he’s really cute,” I agreed. “Much better than those guys earlier.”

“Well, Max can actually carry a conversation,” Haley said, rolling her eyes. “That’s way beyond those meatheads’ levels.”

I laughed and she nudged me with her elbow. “Maybe you and Max could...”

“I dunno,” I said. “It almost feels like he’s my cousin since he’s Kevin’s nephew. I think I’ll stick to enjoying the view.”

“You’re not gonna judge me if I still sleep with one of those ski boys, are you?”

I nearly spat my wine across the table. Typical Haley. Making what she wanted out of what a situation handed her.

“Of course, I’m gonna judge you,” I said. “But do it anyway. Might be fun.”

“Let’s just say the blond one’s ski pants didn’t leave much to the imagination.” She made a gesture with her hands to indicate that he was visibly well endowed and I shrugged, chuckling.

“Whatever makes you happy, dear.”

“Speaking of happiness...” Haley said, lowering her voice. “Kevin seemed almost manic trying to compensate for his initial greeting, don't you think?”

It was true. Kevin had been over-the-top nice when approaching us outside. He kept looking at me like he was asking for forgiveness nonverbally and I would be lying if I said I wasn’t happy when it was time to leave. Where was this charismatic ski legend Dad had always talked about?

“Maybe,” I replied. “I just can’t get past how different he is from the things my dad always told me. According to him, Kevin was always the fun one, the troublemaker. He wasn’t the most skilled of their friends, but was definitely the one with the most heart. This guy seems like a neurotic mess who

can't decide if he wants to be cold and businesslike or the host of the hour pulling out all the stops to make us comfortable."

"Maybe he's snorting coke in his office," Haley said, shrugging and taking another drink of her wine.

"Haley!" I said, giving her a playful smack. "Why would he be doing coke in his office? What in the world even made you think of that?"

"The only time I've ever seen someone act this neurotic was when my brother started doing coke at strip clubs."

"No, he didn't," I said, laughing, thinking of her straight-laced brother, Andrew, doing drugs with strippers. The man was a pastor at a church now. I wondered if his parishioners knew about his past.

"He did," Haley reinforced. "Then Mom and Dad sent him to rehab and he got better but boring. So yeah, maybe he's getting high in his office. How else do you explain him keeping up that kind of energy?"

I couldn't reply for laughing too hard, and by the time Max rejoined us, I was literally crying.

"Is she okay?" he asked Haley.

Haley nodded and finished her wine. "I'm just a comedy genius," she said.

"I see," Max said. "Well, the food is coming this way and I think it might be kind of hard to eat while you're laughing." He gave me a perfect, handsome smile and I reeled in the giggles fast.

The food we were served was immaculate. It looked like Gordon Ramsay himself was back there coordinating the layouts of the dishes. Haley was the first to take a bite of her salmon and she rolled her eyes and slid down in her seat, groaning.

“Oh, my God that’s delicious,” she said. “Give my compliments to the chef.”

Max chuckled watching her antics. “I will pass that on to Pietro. I’m sure he will be thrilled to know a future Olympian has given him such a high and vocal compliment.”

I suddenly felt a shift in the energy and I looked from Haley to Max and back to Haley.

Were they flirting?

I couldn’t help but feel a little jealous because she’d promised to find me a hot ski boyfriend, but once again, I repeated my mantra.

*I’m here for Haley. If she’s happy, I’m happy.*

“Hales,” I said, not trying to ruin their moment but definitely trying to avoid being a third wheel. “You said you wanted to run through your schedule with me.”

“Oh, right,” she said, reaching for her bag and pulling out a piece of paper. “I have a whole bunch of meetings and practices scheduled. Apparently, my coach is encouraging me to stay busy so I don’t have time to overthink the competition.”

I pulled the paper toward me and studied it. It really did look like her week was jam-packed with shit to do. Stuff I wouldn't be able to be involved in.

“Haley,” I said slowly. “This looks like we're not gonna have much time together.”

Haley gave me a sad look. “I know. I was really hoping it would be more. But there's so much stuff to do here, I'm sure you'll keep busy. Plus, Max is gonna teach you to ski. Right, Max?”

Max looked like he'd been put on the spot but nodded. “Yeah, of course. I'm sure I could fit you in between some of my students.”

“See?” Haley said, trying to be convincing. “You won't even notice I'm gone.”

I highly doubted that was true but it wasn't like I had much of a choice. Haley had to do the things her coach assigned her, and because he wasn't here there wasn't much wiggle room for deviations.

“There's actually a bulletin board across the hall with the schedule of available activities,” Max said. “I know most of the people who run them if you want me to tell you what's fun.”

I nodded, digging into my pasta. I could feel myself getting sulky and I didn't want to do that to Haley. She needed me to be the endlessly supportive friend, and by God, that was what I would be.

“I’ll go have a look,” I said, standing slowly. “Don’t let them take away my plate, okay? That stuff is delicious.”

Max nodded but was already looking at Haley, who was gazing back at him. I tried to be happy for her, but things were looking a little on the lonely side for me.

I could see the bulletin board outside the restaurant and approached it apprehensively. There was no doubt in my mind that joining lodge activities with bored housewives and their kids was not on my agenda.

*Snow mobile tour, 10 a.m.*

*Ice Skating, 11:30 a.m.*

*Ice climbing, 1 p.m.*

The plethora of variety was astonishing. When they created the activities for those of us who were non-skiers, they really went all in with the snow theme.

“Those are only some of the available activities,” said a voice from behind me. I turned to find Kevin looking at me with mild interest, seeming a lot more even-keeled than he was either of the other times I had encountered him.

“Why only put up some of the activities?” I asked out of curiosity.

“Well, some of our activities are reserved for VIP guests,” he replied. “But, of course, you will have access to those.”

I was considered a VIP? I thought I was just the kid of his friend, getting a freebie because they had rooms open.



“I do?” I asked.

Kevin nodded, looking like he was confused by my question. “Why wouldn’t you?”

“Well, I assumed since we were staying for free that we’d need to pay for everything else ourselves. The room you gave us has to be worth at least fourteen hundred dollars for the week.”

“Sixteen hundred, actually,” he said. Weirdly, he didn’t come off as trying to rub it in my face, or critical, just informative. “But you’re Henry’s daughter and he’s my best friend. By giving you the best that Brother Bears has to offer, I’m vicariously taking care of him, too. It’s truly my pleasure to do this. I’ll be sure to drop a VIP schedule of activities by your room personally.”

I may have been looking too deep into this, but was it possible that the odd, miserly, former ski champ-now lodge owner was actually the softie after all? I could see the cracks in his businessman façade and the warmth coming through them was genuine.

“That’s actually really nice of you. Thanks, Mr. Young.”

I could see him visibly cringe at the title and he put out his hands, shaking his head.

“Please. Kevin is fine. I’m not having Henry and Jessica’s daughter calling me *mister*.”

I laughed at the way he said mister like it was a dirty word. I could understand his pain, though. I’d recently gotten

“ma’amed” in the McDonalds drive thru and I still hadn’t recovered.

“Okay, Kevin,” I said conceding politely. “Thank you for your generosity.”

“It’s my pleasure,” he said, taking a glance at his watch. “I have to go, but it was a pleasure speaking to you and I hope I will see you around.”

He didn’t wait for a reply before he turned and headed off, leaving me a little stunned in front of the board of activities. This man had more personality changes than an A-list actor.

I walked back to the table where Max and Haley sat, and I could see their chairs visibly closer. Haley looked up from their conversation as I approached and smiled.

“Did you find something to do?” she asked.

I nodded and she gave me a thumbs-up. I didn’t feel like telling her I’d been witness to another side of my dad’s best friend, and frankly didn’t want to sit down and be the spare for the rest of dinner.

“I’m not feeling too great. I think I’ll take my food up to the room.”

Haley nodded without looking away from Max and I sighed. This was going to be a long week indeed.

## *Chapter Six*

### **Kevin**

**M**ost of the time, when you go to an event, there's a certain level of being "on" that you have to deal with. You have to act in the right manner for the crowd and for the situation.

When you're the person putting on an event like this, it's a little different. While the guests were likely finishing up getting ready, I was already sweating through the undershirt I wore beneath my sweater, rushing around and making sure that the place cards had been laid out correctly, and that the staff was ready to go when the guests arrived.

I was just showing one of the catering staff how to fold the napkins into a standing triangle when I felt someone come up behind me.

"Well, I'd say you're looking old, but we're the same age, so I'd be afraid of what that says about me."

I turned, recognizing the voice easily.

“Henry!” I said, reaching out to shake his hand, though the formal gesture didn’t last long. We both moved forward to embrace each other. “Anna said you’d be here.”

“I was hoping to surprise you,” he said with a laugh. “Made the reservation in secret and everything, But I probably should have made that clear to her before telling her.”

“I was still surprised,” I assured him. “Knowing you were coming kept me from going insane over the last couple of days. It’s been a nightmare.”

“Really?” Henry asked, looking concerned. “How so?”

I shook my head. “Sick judge. Bad review.”

“Oh, yeah,” he said. “I saw. In *Powder*. Could have been worse, though, right?”

“Yeah,” I said. “It could have gone viral. Which, surprise, it kind of did, at least in skiing forums.”

“Look,” he said, walking with me as I continued my preparations. “Brother Bear’s has a reputation already. That review isn’t going to change your loyal customer base. And those people will always recommend friends. Besides, your TripAdvisor rating is still phenomenal.”

He was right. We had a four-point-eight star rating with thousands of gushing reviews from visitors. One bad review might sway some people, but one reporter’s opinion wasn’t likely to undo all the years of hard work I’d put into making this place *the* desired destination in Montana.

“Damn,” I said with a smile. “You swoop into town, and in five minutes, you make me feel better when no one else could. I’ve missed you, man.”

“Eh,” Henry said jokingly, “You’re all right, I guess.”

I went for a jab, which he dodged with a laugh.

“Well, listen,” he said. “I need to go unpack and get ready. I just wanted to say hi before the night was underway and you were in full boss man mode.”

“Well, good timing,” I told him. “Another few minutes, and I’d have completely turned into my alter ego.”

“Boss Man sounds like he would be either the best superhero or the worst.”

“Worst,” I said, folding another napkin. Henry watched me fold a few, then did a couple himself to help me out. “Believe me, no one wants Boss Man to show up.”

“I know *I* don’t,” he said, still laughing. I glared at him, but he shrugged innocently, so I threw a napkin at him. “Okay, okay! I surrender, Boss Man.”

I couldn’t help but smile. This carefree humor was always how we were. Like brothers, which was how my lodge got its name. Henry, of course, with his quick wit and uncanny ability to bring joy to whatever space he was in, had found love and started a family. Meanwhile, I remained married to my work, barely even finding the time to ski for fun anymore.

My thoughts drifted to our competition days, and quickly turned to the current competition and the people competing.

Which, in turn, led to thoughts about Anna. Thoughts I knew weren't appropriate for me to have. She was much younger, and besides that, as I had to keep reminding myself, she was off limits no matter what as Henry's daughter.

Guilt suddenly began to creep into the corners of my mind. I was looking at Henry, but my mind began to wander to Anna nevertheless. With Henry here, I had to be on my best behavior, which meant keeping my eyeballs in their sockets and away from his daughter.

No matter how much I wanted to keep looking.

"So, are you staying for the whole competition?" I asked, tweaking the placement of a salad fork.

"No," Henry said a little glumly. "I have to get back to work. I just wanted to come watch the opening festivities and see the new blood in that talent pool."

I didn't say so, but I was truly touched that Henry would give up a whole weekend to fly out and visit me for just a couple of days. Of course, his daughter was here too, and her best friend was competing, so there was more motivation than my presence. But it still was nice to know that our friendship was still holding that strong despite the distance and time.

Henry left to go see Anna and to get unpacked as I finished helping with the table settings and final catering instructions. The staff was well rehearsed in events like this, so it was mostly going over specifics for this one. Who the VIPs would be, who would need some extra attention, et cetera.

I rushed to my suite and quickly put on my suit. It was cocktail attire, and, as the host, I needed to be immaculate.

I walked into the party and looked around. So far, everything seemed to be going well. Everyone was smiling, and the champagne servers seemed to be doing a good job of keeping everyone topped off.

Normally, I wouldn't encourage the unfettered availability of the libations, but I wanted to make certain that everyone here—champions, judges, competitors, *anyone*—had no reason to add on to the already toxic shit storm the *Powder* review had started. So, I'd priced the glasses at a discount and told the servers, who usually staggered their service when it came to the unlimited supply, to be liberal with offering refills. No empty glasses, no unhappy guests.

"Mr. Young," a voice said from behind me, and I turned to see Eleanor standing there with a tall, blond young man.

"Hello, Eleanor," I said, reaching for her hand. "Are you enjoying the party?"

"Yes, I am," she said, returning my handshake. "You've done a wonderful job—better than most I've been to."

"Well, thank you," I said with a little bow of gratitude. "That means a lot."

"I wanted to introduce you to one of the competitors," she said, motioning to the young man. He was lean and graceful—perfect for a skier. "This is Sondre. He was born in Norway but has been living here most of his life."

“Nice to meet you, Mr. Young,” he said, the barest hint of an accent peeking through the words.

“And you. How are you finding the lodgings?” I asked.

“Absolutely beautiful,” he replied. “And the slopes are perfect. I’ve already taken a few runs to shake out the pre-competition jitters.”

“Thank you,” I said, reaching out to shake his hand as well. “If you need anything at all, you can ask for Kevin at the desk.”

“Wow,” he said. “Thanks. That’s really cool of you.”

I certainly hoped so. It wasn’t often I gave such high-level service to so many people, but if it meant restoring Brother Bears’ reputation, it would be worth it.

“You’re welcome.”

“Did you happen to find a replacement judge?” Eleanor asked, and I was able to offer her a genuine smile of gratitude.

“Yes,” I said. “And thank you so much for the recommendations. Martin Briggs should be here tonight.”

“I thought I saw him,” she said with a smile. “But I wasn’t sure. I should go say hello.”

She waved at me and took a glass of champagne from a server as she left to go see Martin Briggs, and I turned to find myself staring directly at Anna through a parting of the crowd. I don’t know if she was standing under a spotlight or if she was



just naturally that radiant, but the effect was the same. She practically glowed. She—

I didn't even get to finish my thought before the crowd shifted again, and I saw Henry standing there along with Anna's friend. They were all drinking champagne, and I could see that they were running low. The slight flush in Anna's cheeks told me it had likely not been her first, and I found myself, before I even realized I'd begun to move, walking through the crowd to get to her. Before I made it there, I stopped one of my servers who had four glasses of champagne remaining on his tray and took it from him, sending him for another.

"Do we need refills?" I asked, holding out the tray to Henry, Anna, and Haley. "This round's on me."

"Oh, yes please," Haley said, putting down her empty glass and taking another. "This party is bor... tiful."

Her barely disguised insult, stopped only by a look from Henry, was easily noticed, but I tried to smile through it.

"Thanks," I said, pretending I didn't hear the word "boring" coming out of her mouth before she caught herself.

"The party's going great," Henry said, taking a glass of champagne for himself. "You did a fantastic job. I'm really proud of you, buddy."

I raised a glass of my own, the tray now empty since Anna had taken the last one, and I raised my glass, not high enough to gather attention from the rest of the room, but just for the

four of us. “To the snow, to the slopes, and to the skiers—both professional”—I tilted my glass toward Haley—“and brand new.” I pointed my glass at Anna.

“Thanks,” Anna said as she took a big swallow of champagne, which Haley repeated.

Henry opened his mouth to say something, but at that moment, I heard a tinkling of glass followed by a heated voice from across the room.

“Excuse me,” I said, holding up a finger before rushing toward the direction of the sound.

One of my servers was standing off to the side with his tray under his arm, apologizing profusely to who I recognized to be one of the former champions who had gone on to compete at the Olympics.

The champion, whose name I couldn’t remember, was pointing at the server so aggressively that his finger was pressing into the boy’s chest.

“What’s the trouble?” I asked, stepping so that I was somewhat between them, not wanting to instigate further, but not wanting to leave my employee in the hands of an irate customer.

“What do you *think* the trouble is?” the man asked loudly, motioning to his outfit. It was splashed with golden-brown liquid which seemed to be dripping from his shirt. “This idiot spilled my drink all over me.”

“As I said, sir,” the server said in a slightly shaky voice, “I am terribly sorry. This is my manager, and—”

“And who is *your* manager?” he demanded.

“No one,” I said, stepping closer between them. “I own the lodge. I think it’s clear this was an accident—”

“That doesn’t fix my suit,” he said angrily.

“No,” I said, keeping my voice as calm and *customer service* as I could. “But I would be happy to pay for both a replacement and the dry-cleaning costs.”

“Both?” he said, suddenly backing down.

“Yes, sir,” I said, gritting my teeth at the notion of having to pander to this person who was verbally abusing my employee. But if I was going to use this competition as a way to counter the bad press from the review, I needed every single guest to leave happy.

“Fine,” he said, settling back into his seat. “I’ll send it down to the desk tonight, and tomorrow I’ll bring you a receipt for a new suit.”

“Wonderful,” I said, thinking about how not wonderful it was and wondering exactly how much I was going to be spending on clothing for someone who would probably still have something negative to say no matter what. “Why don’t you bring him another...?”

“Manhattan,” he said.

“Another Manhattan,” I said. “On the house.”

I put a hand on the server's shoulder to steer him away quickly, then directed him to get the new drink before turning back to Henry and Haley and... Anna. I wanted to keep talking to them. I wanted to get to know her, even if I knew I shouldn't.

But they were gone, and so was my chance to talk to her without the inhibitions the champagne had drowned out.

## *Chapter Seven*

### **Anna**

**T**he view from the top floor balcony off the ballroom was something else. Dad and I had walked through a maze of tables covered in white cloth, and he'd jimmied open the door.

“Why don't you just ask Kevin to open it for you?” I asked as he pushed the double door open out into the cold.

“Because this is more fun,” he replied. “Just the way Kev and I used to do it when we were here as competitors.”

Dad always did have a soft spot for sentimentalism, and as I followed him onto the balcony, I could have sworn he got twenty years younger.

I joined him at the railing, brushing snow off it with my mittened hand as I did. Dad stared wistfully out at the frozen wonderland before us, sparkling in the light of the last rays of sunset. Dad put his arm around me and pulled me close. Despite a firm knowledge that he blamed me for Mom's

death—or at least associated me with losing the love of his life—I'd always been a daddy's girl.

“Did you and Mom ever come here together?” I asked cautiously. These conversations could be risky, but my curiosity got the best of me. He nodded and turned away from the vista to face me.

“This is the first place I ever kissed your mom,” he said. “And the first place I ever—”

“Dad!” I shouted, shoving him. “I do not need to know about that.”

He laughed and shook his head. “I was going to say this was the first place I ever danced with her.”

I couldn't help but giggle. What else was I supposed to think he was going to say?

“Kevin and I also had this stupid drinking game we'd play up here. There was a whole points system based on the skiers we could see. We'd drink any time someone fell, and two drinks anytime a couple kissed on the ski lift.”

“Sounds like something Haley and I would do,” I confessed, but this made me think of the possible divergence Hales and I were facing down if she made it into the Olympics. I had a job and a life in L.A. I couldn't possibly follow her around the globe to every event from here on out. It was impractical.

I shuffled my feet in the thin layer of snow and wondered what Dad and Kevin had done when life divided them. They seemed at least as close as Haley and me, if not closer. They'd

even roomed together in college. But after graduation, then a few years as competition skiers, Dad had moved to LA with Mom, and Kevin bought the lodge.

“Dad?” I asked, watching him visibly reminisce.

“Yeah, baby?”

“How did you and Kevin manage to stay friends once your lives split?”

“You’re thinking of Haley?” he asked. “Because of the qualifiers?”

I nodded and crouched in the snow to make a snowball. Something about the cold wetness on my hands felt calming. “I’m just not ready to ‘go our separate ways’ yet. If she makes it into the Olympics, she will be off to do great things and I’ll be left at my hourly job in the city.”

Dad playfully knocked my snowball away, then took one of my hands reassuringly. “True friends never go away, Anna. If you and Haley are supposed to stay friends, nothing will come between the two of you seeing each other.”

Somewhere, deep down, I knew he was right. But I also knew Haley and I were at an age where many friendships left over from college begin to fall apart. And while I wanted to be the most supportive friend, watching her interact with the other Olympic wannabes really put into perspective that there was a whole side of her life that I’d never be part of. If she went off to France and God knew where else with the national team, that would be the end of Anna and Haley. No more joint

Halloween costumes or pretending to be married at restaurants for free desserts.

“Don’t you ever miss just having breakfast with Kevin? Or going out for hangover brunches?”

“Anna, Kevin and I never went for hangover brunches,” he laughed. “Believe me, everything in life will feel like an adjustment at first, but in time, things tend to adapt. Life will go on, and that’s when a real friendship can start. That’s when you choose to put time and effort in, not just be friends of convenience.”

I would be lying if I said what he was telling me didn’t make a certain sense. Dad and Kevin chose to make time to see each other and that was far more of a friendship than sharing an apartment. It was still really overwhelming to think about being apart from my best friend, but Dad’s words helped.

“So,” I said, turning back to the snowy winterscape. “You used to come here with Mom?”

“Yep,” Dad said. “And she would hand me my ass at skiing. Your mom should have been an Olympian, but she never wanted that kind of attention.”

“Really?” I asked. “Why not?”

Dad shrugged. “Your mother was very beautiful, and I think she’d had her fill of attention long before she met me. Your grandmother used to make her do beauty pageants, you know.”



That did sound like Grandma. She loved a family achievement, no matter how big or small.

“Besides,” Dad continued, “what she really wanted was to be a mother.”

A strange, shadowy look came over his face, and I suddenly felt very exposed.

“I... I should probably get going,” I said, not wanting to make Dad unhappy. “Haley has an early day tomorrow.”

Dad nodded and reluctantly drew himself away from the balcony. “Come on, I’ll walk you down. Wouldn’t want the manager to catch you up here.”

“But isn’t the manager...”

Dad winked at me, and I nodded.

“You were joking, weren't you?”

“You do make me laugh, kiddo,” he said, guiding me back through the furniture maze. “Get some good sleep, okay?”

“I will, Dad,” I replied. “I love you.”

“I love you too, Anna Banana.”

He kissed me on the forehead, then turned to head back down the grand staircase. I, however, took a left and returned to my room.

Mercifully, Haley wasn’t there when I got in because I went straight to my bed and sobbed. I hated being the reason Dad had lost Mom, even if it wasn’t my fault. They were soul mates, and my existence had torn them apart.

Luckily for me, I fell asleep from the emotional exhaustion, and by the time I woke up, it was three in the morning. Haley had come in at some point and was sleeping soundly. But I was anxious, looking for a way to get my mind right. So, I decided to go for a walk around the lodge.

The lobby was gorgeous when it was near empty, with only the odd staff member bustling through. The three chandeliers twinkled off the giant windows, giving the room a glowing feel. I walked over to the fireplace that was as tall as I was and stared at it. Maybe I needed one of these in my apartment. It certainly seemed to soothe my mind.

“Anna?” said a voice from behind me. “What are you doing awake?”

I turned to find Kevin in some gray sweatpants and a T-shirt that showed that his age hadn’t robbed him of his athlete’s body. He was looking at me like he was confused about why I was in his lodge.

“Hey, uh... couldn’t sleep.”

He took a step toward me with a concerned expression. “Did you need something? Hot cocoa, or something else to help you sleep?”

I shook my head and looked around. The staff seemed to have disappeared in his presence. Perhaps once they saw the boss, they scattered. Kevin wasn’t exactly the most pleasant person.

“Why are you up?”

He shrugged and took another step toward me. “I guess... I couldn’t sleep either.”

“Couldn’t sleep? You look like you had a costume change and kept on working. Do you ever take off your manager hat?”

“Very rarely,” he said with a sly grin. “Only on special occasions.”

I laughed despite myself and motioned for him to join me on the couch. “My dad was telling me all about the stupid drinking game you guys used to play on the top floor balcony.”

Kevin walked over to me with a slow confidence, hands in the pockets of his sweats. “It’s only stupid until you’re good and drunk. Then it’s perfect.” He paused, smiling as he sat down beside me and spread his arms out across the back of the couch. “You’d be more than welcome to join me for a game, if you’d like.”

I wrinkled my nose and shook my head. “I don’t really drink much. I know everyone says it’s an acquired taste, but champagne and rosé are my only exceptions. I think college ruined me for any other booze. We used to play strip poker, only we had to drink *and* take off an item of clothes.”

He raised an eyebrow at me and crossed one leg over the other, his ankle resetting on his knee as he lounged back like he owned the place, which I suppose he did. “Sounds like fun. Are you any good?”

“At stripping?” I asked with uncertainty.

“Well,” he said with a low chuckle, “I meant at poker. But I’d be lying if I said I wasn’t curious about that, too...”

My heart began to pound, and I was suddenly aware of Kevin’s perfect teeth and smile. He looked like a movie star up close when he wasn’t scowling. I had to remind myself he was strictly off limits. Dad’s friend or not, it would be weird to be with someone older.

Right?

“Oh, there’s nothing interesting to see under these oversized men’s sweats,” I said, making fun of myself. “Just some love handles and a pair of boobs in desperate need of a bra.”

Now I was toying with him, and by the way he squirmed, I was guessing that it was working. I watched as he tugged the crotch of his sweats, and a warmth came over me that had nothing to do with the massive fire.

“Oh, I’m sure at your age, that’s not the case,” he said as he slid closer. He raised a hand and then looked up at me. “May I?”

My breath caught in my throat, and I couldn’t believe I was doing it, but I nodded.

Kevin’s hand went to one of my breasts and cupped it gently. He groaned and closed his eyes in pleasure. “Your tits are perfect,” he said, panting.

I looked around to be sure none of the staff had reappeared, but the lobby was totally empty. And, at the moment, so were my inhibitions.

I shifted and slung a leg over his lap so I was sitting in it while he kneaded my heavy breasts, freed of any restraints that society deemed necessary.

I could feel him hard against me, even through my thick sweatpants and his own. I looked down into his eyes and he looked up into mine...

And then we were kissing. My dad's best friend and I were kissing like we were gonna die if we didn't.

His hands slid around my waist and up under the back of my shirt so that I felt the powerful fingers against my skin. It sent shivers through me, and he said, "Fuck. Anna... I need you."

"Then take me," I panted. "Fuck anyone who sees."

I felt him lift me and carry me across the distance of the lobby, then set me down on the counter with a thud. He started kissing me again, this time with even more intensity, if that was even possible. His hands, still under my shirt, lifted it and ripped it off over my head, exposing me to the chilled air. He didn't leave my nipples to freeze, however, as he dipped his head to take one in his mouth as he toyed with the other with his thumb.

I gasped at the warmth of his mouth and could now see that he was fully erect where he stood, groaning against my skin.

"I bet it's been a while since you were with someone young and gorgeous like me," I said.

“You’re not wrong,” he moaned, his lips still pressed against my breast. “But I bet it’s been... never since you’ve had a man with some experience to give you a proper fucking.”

“Oh God,” I groaned, loving the way he took control. “Yes, Daddy. Fuck me.”

I woke up in a cold sweat and shot up in bed, the sunlight streaming across my face.

*“I bet it's been a while since you were with someone young and gorgeous like me. Jesus, Anna.”*

I was disgusted. First of all, Kevin was a dick, and not in a sexy way. Plus, he was twice my age and Dad’s best friend. In what world would that ever happen? Gross.

“You okay, peach?” Haley asked, coming out of the bathroom drying her hair with a towel around her body.

I nodded. “Just had a horrifying nightmare. Too much talk of certain lodge managers before bed.”

Haley cracked up, instantly understanding my meaning. “Gross,” she said. “Was he good at least?”

“What do you mean, ‘Was he good?’ It was a dream, Hales. And an unnerving one at that.”

Haley laughed again to herself and began to get dressed.

“You know you have a lesson with Max in twenty minutes, right?”

“Shit!” I exclaimed, jumping from my sweat-soaked bed.  
“Sorry, Max, but I don’t have time for a shower.”

I scrambled for my clothes, and Haley watched me, amused.  
“You know, maybe it wouldn’t be so bad.”

“What wouldn’t?” I gasped as I struggled to hop into my socks.

“Sleeping with Kevin.”

“Haley, stop. You’re gonna make me sick.”

“I’m just saying—”

“Well, I’m just saying I have to go. You wanted me to have these lessons, and now I’m going. No more talk about that gross sex dream. Okay?”

Haley grinned at me. “Have a good time.”

“I said stop thinking about it,” I yelled.

And with that, I dashed out of our room and down to meet Max by the ski lifts.

## *Chapter Eight*

### **Kevin**

**W**hile the party had been mostly cleaned up the previous night, the tear-down was underway the next morning. I was supervising to make sure the event room was set up in the everyday layout so that it could easily be converted for the next party, and we were nearly done when I looked out the window at the slopes.

It had been far too long since I'd given myself the time to enjoy skiing. It had been such a huge part of my life, and now I could barely find the time to take on a bunny slope, let alone to challenge myself on one of the black diamonds. I doubted I could even make it through one at this point.

I focused in on a pair of people on one of the smallest training hills and recognized Max, who, I quickly realized, was giving a lesson to Anna. She was doing well for a beginner, and I was pleased to see that she was holding her own.



She completed three runs successfully, giving Max a high-five or an excited hug after each one. The strange pang of jealousy I felt when she did left me just a little disconcerted, especially when I looked over to the higher difficulty slope out one of the other windows and saw Henry's unmistakable form, one I would know anywhere, sliding down the mountain. I couldn't keep doing this. I couldn't keep fantasizing about his daughter and pretending I wasn't thinking about her nonstop.

Henry was on his way back up to the top of the run when I saw, much to my dismay, Anna slip for the first time that day. She tumbled a few times and landed, grabbing her knee. She didn't get back up, and I saw Max ski down to her and pull off to the side. He yanked off his skis to kneel down next to her, and I watched him detach her own skis, which I knew meant she was injured. He grabbed both pairs of skis and slung them over his shoulder, wrapping an arm around her waist to support her as she hobbled along beside him.

I gave a few directions for the final touches to the workers around me and excused myself to head down to the lobby.

"Did you see where Max went?" I asked one of my workers at the reception desk.

"He had your VIP with him. They went to the break room so he could get first aid," she said.

"Thanks," I said back before rushing from the room toward the staff lounge.

I heard them talking before I even opened the door, though what they were saying was hard to make out. I could hear the

strain in Anna's voice, however, so I opened the door.

"Hey," I said as I entered. "What happened?"

Anna looked at me for a beat too long, her already flushed cheeks seeming to heat up at my arrival. Was she angry with me still, and didn't want me barging in while she was injured?

"She took a spill on the slopes," Max said after a few seconds when Anna remained silent. "Hurt her knee. I was just about to get first aid in here to patch her up."

"We can take care of it," I said to him, going over to a cabinet on the wall where we had some basic supplies. "As long as it isn't broken or sprained too badly, we can wrap it up ourselves."

"Are you sure that's a good idea?" Anna asked nervously, her voice shaking just a bit. "Shouldn't we let the professionals deal with it?"

I chuckled and brought the small red duffel over to where she sat. I perched on the coffee table in front of her and motioned for her to give me her leg.

"I think after years of bandaging myself, your dad, and plenty of other skiers up myself, and after training half my staff with my own knowledge, I can handle a simple knee wrap. I have to get a look at it though. Do..." I felt awkward asking this question, especially given how attracted to her I was. "Do you have any leggings or jeans on under your snow pants?"

This time I knew it wasn't my imagination when the flush in her cheeks deepened.

"Uh, yeah," she said quietly, almost as though she was embarrassed. "Leggings."

"Good," I said, opening the bag and taking out an ice pack, an ace bandage, and a couple pain relievers. "I'm going to need you to take off the snow pants. Do... Do you need help?"

I knew that sometimes when someone was injured, they needed a hand with their gear, but the idea of undressing her—even just removing her topmost layer—had me fighting against the twitch in my groin.

"I might," she said, her voice oddly breathless. She stared at me long enough that I wondered what she was thinking.

Slightly unnerved, I turned to Max.

"You wanna...?" I said motioning toward Anna.

"Sure," he said, not at all picking up on the odd interaction. He stepped between us and undid the zipper on her coat, which she took off while Max undid the straps of her snow pants before unzipping them down the sides.

I watched him undressing her like it was in slow motion, imagining each movement was me but forced myself to stop when I realized I was fighting against my own goal of not getting hard while patching up my friend's daughter.

Once she was in her leggings and thermal shirt, I knelt down beside her and pulled the legging up over her knee. Her

skin was so soft and flawless that I wanted to kiss her from her ankle up to...

The alarm on my watch went off, reminding me that I'd have to take Henry to the airport in two hours. I'd offered to drive him myself to give us a little more time to catch up since his trip had to be so short. I had plenty of time, but the reminder of my friend and who I was touching, who was affecting the fit of my jeans with just her presence, brought me back to earth.

"Okay," I said, shaking my head slightly to rid it of the unbidden thoughts. "Where does it hurt?"

She showed me, and I bandaged it to help with that particular kind of injury. Once she was all wrapped up, I took an ice pack and wrapped another bandage around her leg to hold it against the fabric.

"That should help with the swelling," I told her. "A little later, I'd recommend trying out the hot tubs. The heat will help to relax the muscles and make it feel better."

"Oh," Anna said, seeming surprised for some reason. "Okay. Thanks."

I gave her what I hoped was a friendly smile. "Well," I said, wiping my hands on my pants despite there being nothing on them, "I think that should do it. Try to rest that leg if you can, but it doesn't seem serious. You'll probably be okay to ski again in a day or two if you take care of yourself. I'm going to go see how your dad is doing since I'm driving him to the airport in a couple hours. Here," I said, pulling out a card from

my wallet that had my direct line on it, something very few people would have access to. “Your key should get you VIP access to anything you need, but if anyone gives you a hard time, just show them that card and tell them to call me. They should leave you alone after that.”

“Oh, wow,” she said, taking the card from me. “Uh... thanks.”

She once again seemed surprised, and I wondered if that first impression really had been as bad as I’d thought.

I clapped Max on the shoulder with a smile and waved at Anna as I left the lounge, heading up to Henry’s room. I knocked on the door to find him still in his ski gear, face red from the wind on the slopes.

“Just packing now,” he said, motioning for me to come in. “You want to sit?”

I came in and plopped down onto the armchair in the corner of his room, and as he packed, we talked for a while about the event the night before and the competitors we’d both met. The ones who seemed like they could really make it and the ones we hoped didn’t because they were just a little too cocky. We talked about the old champions, the ones who were humble despite their skill and the ones who seemed to need to be knocked down a peg or two, like the one who’d gotten his drink spilled on him.

The car ride was much the same, right up until the conversation turned to Anna.

“Has she been an okay guest so far?” Henry asked. “I didn’t get a chance to check in about that yesterday, but I wanted to make sure she and Haley aren’t causing any problems.”

Oh, she was causing problems, all right. Just not the kind Henry was thinking of.

“Yeah,” I said instead. “She’s been great, to be honest. She seems really smart.”

“She is,” Henry said proudly, then gave me a self-deprecating look. “Just like her mother.”

We both laughed, and I said, “Well, I’m really enjoying getting to know her.” *Shit*. Hopefully he didn’t see through that comment and realize how very attracted to her I was, since *I* didn’t even want to be aware of that.

“Good,” Henry said, completely missing my near slip. “It’s really good to see you again. We’ll have to do it again for longer next time.”

“Definitely,” I said as I pulled up to the airport. I got out of the car to give Henry a hug. “Don’t be away so long, okay?”

“I don’t think I will,” he said, pulling away with a smile. “It felt way too good to be back.”

“See you later, then,” I said as he turned to leave.

“Later.”

I spent the entire drive back battling with myself about the clearly inappropriate feelings I was having for Anna. It didn’t

matter if she was an adult who could consent. She was my friend's daughter. She was off limits.

But she was also incredibly hot.

When I got back to the resort, I ran into my head of maintenance, who mentioned that one of the hot tubs was out of service. I told him to make that his first priority, since now that the opening event was over and the competition would be starting soon, athletes and other guests would likely be wanting to use them a lot more.

He agreed and walked away, and I went up to my office as quickly as I could, hoping no one would stop me. I was lucky, because by the time I closed the door behind myself and locked it, I was rock hard from thoughts of Anna racing through my mind nonstop, imagining her in the hot tub...

I sat down in my chair and began to rub myself over the fabric of my jeans, weighing the issues that might result from this. Would it help settle this infatuation? Or would it make it worse?

After a moment or two, however, I couldn't take it anymore. I was throbbing with a need to release. I unbuttoned my jeans and tugged at the zipper, just as Max had done to Anna's snow pants. I imagined I was the one feeling her leg beneath my fingers as I reached down, hand still over my boxers but releasing my cock from the restrictive denim.

"Fuck..." I moaned as my mind went on with the fantasy. In my mind, I didn't stop at pulling the legging up to her thigh. This time, I pulled them down, revealing a tight bikini bottom

with ties on the sides. She moaned beneath my touch, and I ripped her shirt off over her head next, needing more.

My thumbs tucked into the waistband of my underwear and tugged at them, letting my fully erect eight inches spring forth. I gripped it tightly with one hand, beginning to rub and squeeze as my other hand reached for a bottle of hand lotion in my top drawer. I kept it there because of the cold air, but it was coming in very handy at the moment.

I squirted a generous amount into my palm and groaned much louder than I meant to when I gripped my member. Hoping my secretary didn't hear, I began to slide my hand up and down my length as I lost all sense and let the fantasy run away with me.

Anna was left only in her bikini, and my hands were on her perfect tits. I, of course, had no way of knowing if they were perfect, but in my mind, they were. In my mental version of Anna, every inch of her was as flawless as the little bit of leg I'd had my hands on earlier.

I took her outside to the hot tubs and to one of the VIP ones at the back, where there was a little more privacy. She immediately climbed into my lap, moaning as she rubbed against my hardness through our clothes. I reached down between her legs and felt the warmth and wetness that had nothing to do with the hot tub. I slipped my finger past the fabric and began to rub gently on her clit.

I sped up my movements, knowing I wouldn't last long but wanting to see more in this imagined scenario.



Anna gasped and began to writhe at my touch, and I couldn't wait anymore. I undid the ties on her bikini bottoms and let the fabric float free. I pulled out my cock, pulsing with the need to be inside of her, and pressed her back against the side of the hot tub.

"Tell me you want me," I whispered as I rubbed my tip at her entrance, teasing her as her nails dug into my back. She didn't need to say it—her body was saying it for her. But I wanted to hear it.

"I want you," she moaned. "God, I want you."

I plunged inside of her, and I couldn't hold back my climax any longer. I remained as quiet as I could, grunting softly as I spilled my seed all over the front of my sweater and down my hand. I looked down at the mess I'd made and sighed.

Good thing I always kept an emergency set of clothes in here.

I changed into the new sweater, jeans, and underwear before tucking my soiled garments into the bag. I placed it by the door to take upstairs and sat down at my desk, feeling satisfied that I'd gotten Anna out of my system. I had achieved what I meant to.

Just kidding. I knew, beyond a doubt, that imagining being with her had only made it ten times worse.

## *Chapter Nine*

### **Anna**

**F**or all the glamor and rustic chic that the lobby displayed, you'd never think the break room would look so... bland. White walls covered with posters that bore state laws about labor made this look like it was likely to be a Walmart break room rather than a luxury ski lodge.

“You should be okay in here,” Max said as he brought me fresh ice. “And my uncle is right. The hot tub will have you feeling good as new.”

I wrinkled my nose and he laughed. “Do you have something against hot tubs?”

“I swear I read a statistic about hot tubs and STDs. People are gross. Why would anyone want to get in people soup?”

Max shook his head, grinning. “As someone who has personally cleaned the hot tubs, I promise you they are reasonably sanitized.”

“If you say so,” I said. “I’m sure years of science are probably wrong.”

We didn’t get a chance to continue the conversation, though, because the doors to the break room burst open and Haley came in.

“This isn’t really what I had in mind when I said ski lessons,” she said.

“Falling and busting your knee isn't a lesson?” I asked sarcastically.

“Not the lesson I was hoping you’d learn. Nice one, Max.”

Max looked like he’d been slapped. “It’s not my fault she didn’t listen to me when I pointed out that hole.”

Haley shook her head and sat down next to me. “Well at least I know I’m not about to have some competition here. I was worried you’d be a prodigy.”

Kevin’s voice suddenly came through the double doors. “Max...”

Max made a face. “Does he sound mad to you?”

Haley and I both shook our heads no, but it was mostly to reassure him. Kevin always sounded a little mad to me.

Max winced and headed off through the swinging door. Haley watched him go, and while it was adorable how fast she’d taken to him, nothing was more annoying than a fresh couple.

“My dad talked to me about my mom last night,” I said softly. I was half hoping to draw her attention away and half dying to tell someone.

“Really...?” Haley asked, giving me her full attention.

I nodded, adjusting the ice on my knee, which really was starting to feel better. “He said that my mom was like this amazing skier and it was because of getting pregnant with me that she stopped.”

Haley was quiet. She knew about the complicated dynamic that Dad and I had.

“He also said that what she really wanted was to be a mom,” I sniffled, trying to keep my tears back. “I wonder if she would have still felt that way if she knew how that was gonna end for her.”

Haley leaned in and hugged me.

“I don’t know. But I can promise that if your mom could see you now, she would be so proud of the person you are.”

I hugged my best friend back. She always knew what to say. Another reason I didn’t want to split up the dream team.

“Look, I’ve got to get back out on the course. But I wanted to make sure my best girl wasn’t dead. Max’s text was super vague. Men, right?”

I laughed and nodded, getting to my own feet and hobbling after her. “Are we still meeting for dinner tonight?”

“Yeah,” she said, grabbing the ski gear she’d left outside the door. “I’ve invited Max too.”

“Oh good,” I said. “I can watch you two eye-fuck each other all night.”

Haley laughed. “We’re not gonna eye-fuck each other. See you at seven, okay?”

I nodded and watched her go back out into the white fluffy brightness, then turned and walked to the elevator to nap before dinner.

I showed up to dinner in a blue cocktail dress and Louboutin knock-offs. My knee was absolutely killing me but it was so nice to wear something fancy that I blasted through the dull ache. For the first time since we’d arrived, I felt like a woman again rather than some kind of weird snow rat, but I’d been sitting here for fifteen minutes now watching Haley and Max moon over each other, and I was done being the third wheel.

“So Hales,” I said, trying to interrupt their longing gazes. “Tomorrow’s the big day. Are you nervous?”

That did the trick. Haley looked over at me with the fear of God in her eyes and nodded. “I keep seeing all these other skiers and I’m left wondering how I ever thought I was good enough to compete.”

“You’re absolutely good enough to compete,” Max said, taking her hand. “I would know. I train Olympians.”

“The thing that really gets me is the idea that this could change my life, for better or worse, and I’m not sure which

outcome will lead to which. I've been skiing as long as I could stand, and not qualifying would mean some serious reevaluation of my skiing time. What would I even do if I'm not spending all my free time skiing?"

"You could get that dog you've always wanted," I suggested. "No guilt from leaving him home alone all the time because you'll be there working regular hours."

Haley gave me a bottomed-out look, and I shrugged sympathetically.

"I'm sure it will be fine," Max contributed. "You're great."

"Yeah," Haley replied. "I am. That's the problem. Not making it is only half the issue. The other half is if I do." She slumped down into her seat, her dark lime, silk cocktail dress bunching up around her thigh. "What will I be giving up for this?"

My thoughts about Haley and me parting ways from last night resurfaced, and I felt a depression settle in my gut. If Haley was thinking about it too, that made it so much more real.

"We will cross that bridge when we get there, okay?" I said, trying to be reassuring and also pulling down the hem of her dress. Haley nodded and opened her mouth to say something else, but what I'd never know because at that moment there was a massive clatter, and a voice began to shout.

"You idiot," said a young man with blond highlights, wearing a jacket that indicated he was here to compete.

“I’m sorry, sir.” said the female server, crouching to pick up the shards of the martini glass.

“Don’t you watch where you’re going?” he said cruelly.

“Yes, sir, I just didn’t expect you to turn around so fast.”

“Are you blaming *me* for your clumsiness?”

“Rita,” another voice boomed from across the room. Everyone turned, and Kevin was standing at the host stand beckoning the server. “Rita” opened her mouth to say something, but Kevin simply barked, “Now.”

Rita looked like she was about to cry and took the shards of the cocktail glass behind the bar, then headed to her manager. Kevin looked like his head was about to burst from anger, and I poked Max.

“Are you sure your uncle is okay?” I asked.

Max shook his head. “Kevin has a bad habit of making a scene as a method of management. It stems from his own anxiety about not being seen as a competent manager, but it doesn’t usually get good results from his employees. Plus, more than one review of Brother Bears mentions something about a ‘shouting manager.’”

The regular noise of the lounge resumed, and I looked back over to Kevin, who seemed to be ripping into Rita with vigor. Rita was definitely crying now, and though I couldn’t hear what was being said, the gestures she made definitely looked like she was trying to defend herself.

Haley and Max went back to talking about the heat tomorrow, but I couldn't stop watching the angry display.

It gave me a horrible flashback to the first manager I'd ever had that screamed at me in front of all the customers in my checkout lane. I'd broken a carton of eggs as I tried to bag it, and even though I offered to get new ones, Janet decided she'd rather yell at me.

Before I knew what I was doing, I was on my feet, marching toward them with fury. I didn't give a shit who Kevin thought he was; he didn't have the right to treat his employees like that, especially when the blond douchebag was at fault.

“Anna?” Haley called after me. “What are you doing?”

But I was far too steamed to answer.

My heels clicked across the wooden floor as I moved, and I got more than a few stares as I approached them. Kevin looked up and almost smiled, but then his face fell as he saw my rage.

“What do you think you're doing?” I asked with fury. “Imagine calling yourself a world class manager and treating your employees with such little respect. You disgust me.”

Both Kevin and Rita looked extremely caught off guard by this explosion, and Rita actually took a step back and then raised her hands.

“It-it's okay. It was my fault.”

I gave her a saddened look, then glared at Kevin. “Your employees are so scared to make mistakes around you that



she's literally ready to take the blame for something she didn't do rather than be further humiliated."

Kevin's mouth dropped open and he looked at Rita.

"Rita, I'm sorry. Go ahead and go home early as my apology, you'll still be paid for the whole shift."

Rita didn't even try to protest as she bolted from the room, leaving Kevin and me staring at each other.

"Come with me," Kevin said, grabbing my wrist. "I want to talk."

I thought about protesting, but honestly, I wanted to hear him explain himself.

"This better be good," I spat.

But Kevin didn't respond; he just pulled me into his office and rounded on me.

"Let me explain myself."

## *Chapter Ten*

### **Kevin**

I couldn't believe that Anna would take the time and effort to follow me through the restaurant, leaving behind her own meal, to save the server I'd gone off on. I'd known it was unprofessional at the time, but I was just so agitated that my fantasy about Anna earlier had done nothing for helping me to get her out of my mind.

I led Anna into my office, unsure what I was going to say. Was I going to tell her off for scolding me where guests and employees could see? Would I threaten to call her father and have her sent home?

No.

"Let me explain," I said, putting my hands together in a pleading gesture.

I waited for Anna to give some kind of approval to let me know she was consenting to hear me out, but she said nothing.

Eventually, she waved her hand in a “get on with it” kind of motion. Of course, I had no idea how I was supposed to explain to my friend’s daughter that the reason I’d yelled at an employee for a mistake anyone could make was that that same friend’s daughter was haunting my every thought. It was like the harder I tried to not think about her, the harder my brain locked on to her. On to the idea of touching her. Of...

“I’m waiting,” she said calmly, her eyes locked on to mine so that I couldn’t escape.

“I...” I started to say but came up empty. There was no good excuse—not one I could give and keep my balls if my friend ever found out. So instead, I deflected. “Why did you come after me to tell me off?” The question wasn’t harsh or critical, merely curious.

“Because,” she said with no less fire than she’d spoken to me in the restaurant, “that wasn’t even her fault. The guest backed into her. It was an accident that could have happened to anyone.”

I paused for a moment, then frowned. There was something about the way she said that that made me believe there was more to it than that. I motioned toward the chair across from mine at the desk and went to sit on my own.

She stood for a moment, eyeing me warily, but eventually, she joined me.

In the moment of silence that followed, my eyes looked around the room like I could find something in here to help me decide what to say to her, but the only thing I saw was the

bottle of lotion I'd left out earlier. I felt my face heat up as I debated putting it away, but thought it might be more conspicuous to do that than to leave it be. Of course, that lotion was the only true explanation for my behavior, and I wasn't about to say that.

"Why did you embarrass her like that?" Anna insisted.

"Because..." I started, deciding to bite the bullet. "Because I had a bad day." It wasn't entirely true, but it was close enough to work. "We've had some bad press lately after a professional reviewer trashed us in a high-profile ski magazine."

"Oh," Anna said, frowning.

"Yeah. So, when I saw a VIP having a bad experience, I kind of freaked out. It wasn't right or okay. I know that. I just..." I looked around. "I love this place. It's my home. I don't want to lose it because one bad review in the age of the Internet destroyed us."

"I don't think you're going to get canceled over one bad review," Anna said, looking at me like I was being ridiculous.

"Canceled?" I asked, unfamiliar with the context.

"Yeah," she said. "It means that no one wants to use your stuff anymore or hear about you."

"That sounds horrible."

"That's life in the age of the Internet."

Suddenly my worry was slightly less focused on the way my eyes kept drifting to Anna's tits and more focused on whether the *Powder* review was enough to get me "canceled."

"Well, anyway..." I said, bringing the conversation back to the issue at hand. "I guess I've just been really in my head about everything that could go wrong to the point that I'm seeing disasters where it's only small, normal issues."

"Well, you owe that girl an apology," Anna said, crossing her arms. "A real one. It was good of you to pay her and give her the rest of the night off, but people's feelings can't just be bought."

The words could have been angry, but I could tell they weren't. She was just being direct in the same way her father would have been, one of the qualities I admired most about him. Now I was seeing it embodied in one of the most beautiful women I'd ever seen.

So much for forgetting this little crush.

"Okay," I said, agreeing to her suggestion. "You're right. I shouldn't have been so tough on her."

"From what I hear," she said, giving me a concerned look, "you do this a lot."

I looked away in shame. It was true. I had made a habit of taking out my frustrations on my employees, and it happened all too often. Working twenty-four seven was a lonely kind of life, especially without anyone to share it with. Sometimes the pressure built up too much, and, without the release another

person could bring, emotionally or physically, it was easy to give in to a harsher mindset.

“I guess so,” I admitted, hating to do it in front of her and wishing it was anyone else—or better, no one else. “No one ever really pointed it out to me before. Except for Max, but I thought he was just giving me a hard time.”

“Maybe he was,” Anna said with a shrug, “but everyone has the opportunity to grow. When we know better, we do better. So, if you know you’re being problematic with your employees, maybe it’s time to look into how you can improve that.”

I gave her an appraising look. I’d been taken with her when I saw her because of her looks, but now, I was even more interested given her intelligence and empathy for others.

“I suppose I could try,” I said with a smile to let her know I wasn’t deflecting.

“Good,” she said with a very businesslike smile back at me. “Because I know what it’s like to have a manager talk to you like that when you don’t deserve it. And you may not lose those people right away, but you’ll slowly lose their motivation to work for you if they’re wrong even when they’re right.”

I nodded. “Another good point.” I looked at the clock. “You should probably head back down to dinner. I’m sure you’ll be getting dessert soon.” Anna made a face that almost made me laugh for how comical it was. “What?”

“I think I’m good to skip the rest,” she said. “I... didn’t like it much. No offense!” she said quickly, though it was unnecessary. I could tell her response to me wasn’t entirely truthful, but I didn’t press the issue.

“So will you be heading off to bed, or do you want to try something a little more low-key?” I asked. I knew I probably should have gone back to supervise dinner, but I figured the staff might be grateful to have a break from me after the way I’d reacted to Rita’s accident, so I figured I’d try to do something nice while giving my employees a reprieve.

“What do you mean?” Anna asked a bit warily.

“Come with me,” I said again, though this time, I said it with a smile.

She gave me an appraising look but stood to follow me. I had to fight the urge to grab her hand to lead her. The conscious effort I made to not touch her was exhausting, given how intimate this moment felt.

I walked us down to the lobby where the fire was roaring beneath the mantle. It was late enough that there was almost no one around. I took Anna to the couch closest to the fire and sat down, motioning to the chair next to mine.

“Sit,” I said, and watched as she did, looking at me like she couldn’t figure out what my motivation was. I had servers who occasionally patrolled the lobby area to offer drinks and snacks, and when the one on duty saw me, she came right over.

“Mr. Young,” she said, pulling out a pad to take an order. “Did you want anything?”

“Yeah,” I said, looking at Anna. “Do you prefer cocoa or tea?”

“Uh, cocoa?” Anna said unsurely.

“Cocoa it is,” I said. “A pot and two cups. Oh, and a bottle of Woodford.”

The server nodded and rushed off toward the bar and kitchen.

“Woodford, huh?” Anna said, raising an eyebrow at me.

“It pairs well with the chocolate,” I said with a shrug. It was only about a minute later that the server came back with the pot of cocoa, as requested, and the bottle of bourbon. I poured the cups, then held up the bottle. “Would you like to try it?”

She gave me a smile like I’d surprised her and nodded. “Sure. Why the hell not?”

I put a dash of the liquor into her cup and another into mine, then raised it in a toast. “To knowing better and doing better.”

She laughed softly, and my mind revisited my fantasy from earlier. It was hard to not think about what it would be like to put my hands on her, especially as we sat by a fire drinking alcohol.

“So,” I said to break the tension, “tell me about what you meant when you said you knew what it was like to be blamed for something.”



“Well...” she said, looking ashamed, “the one that came to mind earlier was my first job. I was working at a grocery store, and, in my nerves, I dropped some eggs. It was an accident, but my boss made such a spectacle out of me, being really shitty about me to the customer and calling me lazy and careless to anyone who would listen. It was horrible, and seeing you do the same thing to that poor girl just... I don’t know. It just triggered me really hard.”

“Wow,” I said, frowning. “I... never had something like that happen to me. I guess I didn’t think about how it might affect someone else.” I poured myself a second cup of hot chocolate and bourbon, feeling just a bit heady after the first. Apparently, my pour had been more generous than I’d thought.

“Well,” Anna said, and I could hear the slight slur to her own words, “now you will.”

“Now I will,” I agreed, then I reached out and put a hand on her knee. “Thank you, Anna, for the new perspective.”

Oh, no. What had I done? I could take the hand away, but that would confirm that it had been an inappropriate touch, but if I left it there, it could make her uncomfortable, and she might say something to Henry. I froze, unsure of what to do.

She glanced down at my hand but didn’t move it. In fact, if I wasn’t mistaken, it looked like she was leaning in toward me. But that had to be the bourbon rather than reality.

Right?

After a few moments where the tension seemed to peak, it slowly subsided as neither of us did anything about it. Once it had dispersed, we sank into silence, watching the fire and drinking our cocoa.

Though, for me, I was done with the bourbon and the lack of sense it brought with it. I couldn't be doing this. I couldn't be flirting with Anna, couldn't be subtly seducing her like this.

But I thought in the dark corners of my mind, it might be worth it. And the only way to know would be to try.

## *Chapter Eleven*

### **Anna**

**W**hen I woke up in the morning, Haley was already gone. I suspected she had probably been up before sunrise to talk to her coach over FaceTime, then get ready for her heat. As far as I knew, Haley was in one of the earlier races, so she'd probably warmed up with the sunrise.

I swung my legs over the bed, yawning and stretching, feeling amazing after the long talk with Kevin. He really wasn't so bad if you could get through that hard exterior. Kind of like a turtle, or a coconut.

My brain flashed back to the sex dream I'd had, and I tried to convince myself I was horrified thinking about it. But honestly, I could now see the appeal of it. He was handsome, and soft-spoken, kind and reflective at least some of the time. There were less impressive qualities in a man.

I dressed for the windchill which was apparently going to be terrible today. What kind of luck was that? It had been

beautiful every day, but the one day I have to spend standing around outside was going to be miserable.

I had packed a practical winter outfit, and a cute winter outfit. Since I wasn't planning on being in the icy slush myself, I went for cute. Wool-lined leggings and a corduroy skirt with a cream-colored sweater that I'd gotten on discount at the Gap. I looked the perfect image of a snow bunny. Maybe I'd finally catch that vacation boyfriend we'd joked about.

As I walked through the lobby, I saw Kevin talking to some man wearing a jacket that read *judge*. I suppose it was pretty self-explanatory, but I found myself lingering on him.

Kevin, not the judge.

Outside. the sun was covered with gray clouds, and hundreds of people were gathered to watch the event. I wondered if I'd be able to see it at all considering how short I was. But lucky for me, Max spotted me and pulled me to the side.

"I have the best place to watch from," he said. "One of the lift stands. Come on. She's just about to compete."

I followed Max away from the crowd and over to one of the stands that operated the ski lift. It was a bit of a treacherous climb up the icy metal ladder, but I was happy to find that the inside of the tower was heated. Not only that, but it had an incredible view of the course.

"Whoa," I said, looking out across the slope. "This is a great view. I bet you can see some pretty amazing sunsets from up

here.”

“Haley seemed to think so,” Max said, grinning.

I pointed a finger at him and gave him a stern, best friend look. “Don’t you dare knock up my girl. She’s going places, and I don’t mean the maternity ward.”

Max laughed and gave me a playful push, then startled. “Oh! There she is.” He pointed to the top of the hill where Haley was stepping up to the start. She looked hilarious but super professional in her full gear, and there were at least a dozen people giving her instructions. I couldn’t imagine that would be very good for your concentration.

A little horn went off, and Haley pushed away from the start. Even though we knew she wouldn’t hear us, Max and I cheered excitedly watching as she zoomed past.

It wasn’t long, though, before she was out of sight.

“What now?” I asked Max with disappointment. But he swiveled and hit a few buttons, turning on a TV that was giving live coverage of Haley’s run.

I had never really considered how dangerous this could be before I saw the little speedometer on the screen that said she was going 114 km/h. A crash at that speed would be damn near deadly. Each curve she took, each time she’d hit one of the little orange flags, my breath would catch in my throat.

“How the fuck do you guys do this?” I asked Max, totally petrified with fear for my best friend.

“Adrenaline junkies, you know?” he said with a grin. “We won't stop until we're dead.”

I frowned, continuing to watch as she went over a particularly intense hill and caught what had to be at least fifty feet of air. I wanted to close my eyes out of nerves, but I also wanted to be able to talk intelligently about this with her when it was over. That would require me actually seeing it.

“She's going too fast,” Max said suddenly, a hint of fear in his voice.

“What?” I said, rounding on him with terror.

“She should be able to slow herself down, but right now, her speed is too fast to take most of those curves.”

I could feel myself actually begin to sweat with nerves, and a very morbid part of my brain wondered if I'd be asked to identify her body should she be unrecognizably mangled. My stomach lurched at the thought, and I grabbed Max's arm for support.

Like something out of a nightmare, I saw Haley's right ski catch on the snow, and it looked like she was about to tumble forward.

“No!” I shouted, as if crying out would make the situation better. Max grabbed for my hand, and we both held our breath, hoping Hales would right herself.

Then, miracle of all miracles, she regained her footing, and I exhaled like I'd been holding my breath for an hour.

“This is way too stressful for me,” I said, clutching my chest.

Max put a reassuring hand on my shoulder as Haley rounded the final curve. She had one last jump and she’d hit the finish line.

With a powdery splash and a cheering noise in the distance, Haley did fantastic on her jump and slid across the line waving her arms proudly in the air.

Max and I began to applaud even though we knew she couldn’t hear us, and we exchanged an excited hug before he helped me climb down so we could wait for my best friend at the end of the lift.

Over the loudspeaker came the results of Haley’s run, putting her at the top of her heat. We applauded again, jumping up and down.

“We should get some champagne to celebrate,” Max said. “Do you know what kind she likes? I can arrange it now.”

“Wilson Creek,” I said without hesitation. “Almond champagne.”

Max nodded and jogged off toward the lodge. Only five minutes later, Haley came up over the hill, and I waved at her. She gave me two thumbs up, and I couldn’t help but notice her grinning so big she could split her reddened face.

“You did it!” I said as she jumped off the lift. I stumbled forward and hugged her tightly.

“That was my best time ever, even if I did almost wipe out.”

“Jesus, Hales. That scared the shit out of me. How the hell did you get your footing back at that speed?”

Haley shrugged and looked over my shoulder. “Is Max here?”

“He just ran inside for a minute, but he saw your run.”

Her smile got even bigger, and she hugged me again. “Let’s go up to the room so I can shower, then we can find him.”

Haley pressed forward, and I rolled my eyes behind her back. New couples really were the worst.

Back up in our shared room, Haley was in the shower and I was lying on the bed, covers pulled up, trying to warm myself from the chilly outside.

Lucky Haley, she would likely have someone to cuddle her later. I wished that I’d had managed to meet someone. A cuddle would be really nice right now.

Honestly, there were several physical sensations that would have been nice before this trip was over. I was looking at heading home and an ex-boyfriend, having to jump back into the abysmal dating scene. A hookup would have at least gotten me through the drought that would inevitably hit—or worse, the return to Caleb.

I started thinking about Kevin again and that stupid dream I’d had about him. I wondered if he really was so good with his hands.

My own hand slid south down my body, and I began to rub it between my legs, teasing myself, thankful Haley was taking



a long shower.

“Oh Kevin...” I breathed against my pillow, toying with my panties, pulling them tight against my body and feeling my own wetness coat them.

Suddenly the shower turned off, and I withdrew my hand as fast as lightning. The last thing I needed was for Haley to catch me fantasizing about my dad’s best friend.

I got to my feet and went to the closet where I had several dresses hanging. Each of them felt a little too formal, and I was worried I’d accidentally draw attention away from my best friend at her own victory party. Instead, I selected a pair of black slacks and a cream mock turtleneck. Nothing too flashy, definitely nothing to attract the gaze of one lodge manager.

Haley took almost no time at all dressing, and we bounced down to the lobby with excitement. Max was waiting there for us, a bottle of champagne in one hand and roses in the other. Haley shrieked and ran to him, jumping into his arms and kissing his cheek.

Let the third wheeling commence.

Max, of course, made a grand speech toasting Haley’s success, and the whole lobby cheered, even her competition. Haley cried a little, which was a bit dramatic if you asked me, and then the conversation devolved once more into skiing.

I noticed Kevin watching us out of the corner of my eye, and I turned to look at him. He was beaming with pride at the

success that this competition was having where his lodge was concerned. He looked across all the guests in the lobby, then his eyes landed on me.

For a minute, I had one of those paranoid thoughts where you are sure they can read your mind, and it was all I could do to focus on not letting him know that I had been fantasizing about him earlier. But as he walked toward me, it was clear that I was being paranoid (of course).

“Your friend did really well,” he commented. “I saw her run. A little touch and go for a moment, but overall, really clean.”

“I’m gonna pretend like I know what any of that means and simply raise my glass to Haley.” I replied.

“To Haley,” Kevin said back with a chuckle. “Is Max doing okay with your lessons? You don’t ever look very enthusiastic about skiing. At least, the times I’ve seen you.”

“I’m not,” I said back. “I’m doing it, like everything else here, for my best friend. Haley has had so few moments to shine that I really want to make this special for her.”

“Well, she is well on her way to making this special for herself,” Kevin replied.

I looked up at his handsome face as he watched Haley and Max being ridiculous and dancing by the fire, and something came over me. The words tumbled out before I’d really even thought them through.

“Do you want to join us?” I asked.

“What?” he replied.

“Do you want to join us? For champagne. Do you have time?”

I could see on Kevin’s face he was weighing propriety versus fun. “I might have a few minutes.”

“Great,” I said. “I’m sure you have some awesome ski stories.”

“Oh, I’m not sure about that,” he replied, following me.

But what he forgot was that my dad had told me all of them. And honestly, I was eager to hear them from Kevin’s own mouth.

## Chapter Twelve

### Kevin

*S*he's Henry's daughter .

I watched Anna sip her champagne as she congratulated her friend, but when her eyes met mine, I saw the catch in her breath and knew, for the first time, that I wasn't the only one feeling something.

*Henry's. Daughter.*

*She's a grown woman, I argued back. She can make her own decisions.*

*And Henry can decide to castrate you.*

The internal fight went on as the conversation flowed, though I missed most of it. They were recounting Haley's run down the mountain, where she had nearly taken a fall but managed to right herself well enough to finish the race and move on to the next round.

“It was really scary, to be honest,” Haley said with relish, leaning against Max. Suddenly the reason for Anna not wanting to go back to dinner the night before became apparent. Never fun being the third wheel. “I was scared, though, no lie. I came around that last curve, and the snow was already pretty tracked from other skiers, and one of my skis got caught... I definitely thought it was lights out.”

“Terrifying for sure,” I said, trying to remain present rather than letting my mind drift to ideas about what Anna and I could get up to together if we snuck away alone. I had to keep reminding myself that she was off limits, whether or not she was giving me eyes, too. “It's not easy to pull off a recovery like that. You have some intense skills.”

“She’s amazing,” Max chimed in. “Not sure how I got so lucky to stand in the presence of such greatness.”

“I can’t wait to see what you do next,” I said, looking at Anna rather than Haley. “I was hoping to get to watch some more of the competition. I worked hard to put it on, after all.”

“We could watch together,” Anna said casually, though the slight panic in her eyes let me know she was as nervous to ask me as I was to answer.

“That would be fun,” I said.

*Henry’s dau—*

*I know!*

“It’s a date then,” she said with a smile, and I could have sworn she and Haley exchanged a look, but it was over so

quickly I didn't even quite catch what the expression was, only that Anna looked slightly more irritated afterward.

I had to remind myself that she didn't mean it literally. At least, I didn't think she did. And *if* she did, I had to be the grownup here and do the right thing.

*She's a grownup too.*

Yes, I knew that she was an adult as well, and one who could make whatever decisions she wanted to. But that didn't negate my responsibility to my friend, and part of that meant not taking advantage of his daughter. Besides, I had nothing more than a few glances to go on as to whether she had any level of interest in me beyond being her host and father's friend.

So, I would keep my hands—and anything else—to myself.

And at that moment, I needed myself pretty badly.

"Excuse me a moment," I said with a charming smile. I drained my glass of champagne and set it down on the nearby table before walking up to my office. Once inside, I closed and locked the door, once more allowing myself to live that little fantasy that I knew could never come true.

Five minutes, a handful of tissues, and some hand lotion later, I emerged from my office and returned to the lobby, looking around for Anna, Max, and Haley, when I was stopped by one of my check-in employees.

"Mr. Young, someone named Gina Paulsson is here to check in, and her account has a note on it to come get you when she

arrives.”

“Oh, right,” I said, following him to the counter. “Mrs. Paulsson,” I said, reaching out my hand as I approached. “I’m Kevin Young.”

She turned and looked at me, and I was amazed to see a bombshell standing before me. Gina was tall and slender with golden hair and blue eyes. She looked about ten years younger than me and wore expensive athleisure wear.

“Miss,” she said, accepting my handshake with a smile I thought I understood. “*Miss* Paulsson. But you can call me Gina.”

“Gina, then,” I repeated, returning her grin. “And Kevin works just fine for me.”

She stared at me for just long enough before she licked her lips that I knew I was correct, but we had business to attend to before I could even think about that.

“I know you missed the first heat this morning,” I said. “We made do being down a judge, but it’ll be better now that you’re here.”

“I couldn’t agree more,” she said, and her tone would have removed any shred of doubt about her intentions if she hadn’t already made them clear.

“Why don’t I show you to your room?” I asked, reaching for her bag. I lifted it and began the walk to the elevator to take her up to the second floor where she would be staying in a junior suite.

“Thank you,” she said once we were outside her room. “That was very kind of you.” She leaned against the door, her back arched so that her breasts, which were large for her frame, jutted out at me.

I nearly drooled. This woman was beautiful, and much more appropriate for me age-wise than Anna. Not to mention, Gina had no relation to anyone I considered friend or family, of which Henry was like both to me.

“So,” she said, looking up at me through long, dark lashes. “Would you give me the grand tour?” She turned and opened the door, stepping inside and holding the door for me to enter behind her.

“I would love to,” I said, taking a step forward. It had been nearly a year since I’d gotten laid, and that was just a one-off. It had been months before that one, too. As it turns out, working morning, afternoon, and night doesn’t exactly leave one with a sparkling social life.

I walked into the room and looked around. The junior suites were upscale, with a plush king bed, a pull-out couch, a kitchenette with a small stove, and an oversized bathtub.

Gina walked in, and I started to walk around to show her the highlights, but she simply sat down on the sofa.

“Please,” she said, waving her hand with a smile, “go on. I’d love to see what you have to show me.” Her words might have indicated that she wanted to see the suite, but her eyes traveled up and down my body, very obviously giving double meaning to her request.



I walked through the apartment, pointing to things that were fairly obvious to anyone with eyeballs, but every time I turned one way or another, Gina's eyes followed me and did a scan of my body that made me feel appreciated in a way I rarely did.

“Well, Kevin.” She said my name so slowly that it felt like a caress. “Would you like to stay and join me for a drink?” She pulled out a menu for room service and fanned her face with it as she licked her lips.

I swallowed hard. I could enjoy this for what it was, for however long it was. But something about it felt wrong. I owed nothing to anyone. I was single and had been for a very long time. But now, the very idea of being with someone felt like infidelity, despite the fact that there was no one I was bound to.

Except but the possibility of something happening, even when I knew it shouldn't.

“I'm sorry,” I said, remaining standing. “I have a lot of work to get done tonight before the next event in a couple days. I'm sure you understand. I'll see you there, though.”

“And maybe sooner,” she said, crossing her legs seductively, and I cursed myself as I turned my back and walked out of the door.

Back downstairs, I made a pit stop in the kitchens to grab a fresh bottle of champagne, hoping to inspire another toast of some kind. I walked into the lobby again only to find that Anna, Haley, and Max were nowhere to be found. They had left to go somewhere else to celebrate. I was disappointed but

reminded myself that it was probably for the best for Anna and me to not be too intertwined—physically or otherwise.

Even if I'd just turned down sex with a beautiful woman for the chance to spend more time with Anna.

It wasn't the first time I'd gotten somewhere to find I was alone. It happened rather often with my staff. I tried to be a good manager—fair but firm, but I suppose the “firm” part was what really stuck with people more so than the “fair” part. But there would be plenty of times when the staff would hang around after their shifts were over, socializing and discussing where they planned to go together. Maybe I just wasn't clear enough, or maybe they really didn't want the boss tagging along, but the minute I'd turn my back, everyone would be gone.

It was fine. Honestly. I had too much work to do to have to worry about social obligations, too.

I was about to head back to my office to actually do work as I said when I heard my name.

“Kevin!”

I turned to the sound of Anna's voice and saw the three of them on the couches across the room from where they'd been when I left. She and Max were both waving at me while Haley only had eyes for Max.

“Oh,” I said as I approached. “I didn't see you.”

“Yeah,” Max said. “We saw you come back in, and I was going to come get you, but then you got caught up with work,

as per usual.”

“So I did,” I said, holding up the bottle of champagne. “I brought another round.”

“Really?” Haley said, suddenly aware of my presence.

“Yeah. I figured—”

“Mr. Young?”

Another employee came up behind me and tapped me on the shoulder. I tried to hide the exasperation I felt as I turned around to face her.

“Yes, Denise?” I said.

“There’s an issue with room three-oh-eight,” she said, citing the room number of the ski champion who had been rude to my employee at the opening night party.

“Oh, really?” I said, entirely unsurprised. The man had been calling down to the desk with a different issue every few hours. Complaining about the lack of amenities that were included, demanding his room service be comped even though he ate it all, and wanting the housekeeping staff fired because he felt like they were going to steal from him. Not that they *had* stolen. But that he thought they would.

I turned back to Anna, Max, and Haley, and sighed. “I figured you guys might enjoy this to continue your celebrations. I’m sorry I won’t be able to join you but please, enjoy it on me.”

“Thanks, Uncle Kevin,” Max said, giving me a thumbs up and essentially dismissing me.

It left me with a sadness in my gut. Maybe this was why I never got invited. Because even if I did, it didn’t matter. I’d make it as far as the door before work would draw me back in.

I watched them go, each of them laughing as Max popped the champagne, making the girls shriek before filling their glasses. And then, alone, I returned to my office to deal with work.

Like always.

## *Chapter Thirteen*

### **Anna**

**B**ecause we'd invited Kevin to spend time with us, when he returned, he did so with more champagne. I was surprised to be honest because I knew those bottles weren't cheap. It was odd and refreshing to see a generous, fun-loving side of Kevin. This must have been the version of him that Dad was best friends with.

Kevin got called away for work almost immediately, and I noticed how sad he looked as he walked away. I wouldn't admit it, but I was a little disappointed too.

By the time the sun went down, I was heavily buzzed, if not just a little drunk. Haley too was swaying more than she probably should have been standing perfectly still, and that's when Max suggested the hot tubs.

Max looked at his watch and then cheered. "It's dinner time. Almost no one will be in them right now."

“That sounds fire, I mean fine,” drunk Haley gushed.

“Well, what are we waiting for then?” I said. “Let’s go change into swimsuits.”

Haley jumped off the sofa, and together we hurried to the elevator and to our room.

I almost hadn’t packed my swimsuit, thinking there was no way I’d need it. It was Haley who insisted these places always had hot tubs and convinced me to pack it anyway.

“Do you think I should wear the pink or the black?” Haley asked, holding up the two choices to me.

The fabric I was looking at could hardly be called a swimsuit at all for how little fabric it had.

“I’m sorry, Haley. I thought we were wearing swimsuits, not shoelaces disguised as swimsuits.”

Haley laughed and looked at each. “Pink, I think. It will be a nice contrast against all that snow. What did you bring?”

I held out to her the simple black bikini I’d brought that was more like a sports bra and panties than lingerie.

“That’s practically a one-piece,” Haley said, rolling her eyes. “How are you gonna catch a hookup like that?”

“Haley,” I said, slipping off my clothes and stepping into the bottoms. “At this point I haven’t seen or met a single man that I would willingly jump into the sack with. You took the only good one, so I might as well be comfortable.”

“Good point, good point. Max is rather dreamy, isn't he? He looks like he stepped out of *Seventeen* magazine from a boyband photoshoot.”

I couldn't argue with her there. But I was a firm believer in girl code. She'd clicked with him first, therefore I was obligated to treat him like a brother or less.

“Have you guys...?”

“Not quite,” she said. “We've fooled around, but nothing more than oral.”

“Oh, just oral,” I said, mocking her. “Is that like only being a little bit pregnant?”

“Don't even joke,” Haley said. “I bought an entire pack of condoms. Not gonna catch me with an unplanned pregnancy.”

“Good,” I said. “I think it would be hard to carry a baby and become an Olympian.”

We both laughed and grabbed our stuff, then scurried through the lobby, parkas on and towels clutched to our chest as we headed to the hot tubs.

It really was amazing to look at snow all around us and be warm. I'd read about experiences like this in Norway, up at the “north pole.” Tiny huts in the middle of frozen tundras with hot tubs to watch the stars from. It always looked so peaceful to me, but I never thought I'd be in one.

Conversation was good at first, each of us comparing winter memories and childhood anecdotes. But pretty soon, I noticed Haley scooting into Max's lap, and Max certainly noticed too.

“What are you doing, girl?” he asked. “This is a public place.”

“Kinky, right?” she said joking with him.

“Hello? I’m literally right here,” I said, half annoyed, half trying to keep the conversation light.

“You know I’m only joking,” Haley replied, sticking out her tongue at me.

“Right...” I said, watching as she went back to making eyes at Max.

I could probably have tolerated the junior high level of affection, but then they started kissing each other. At first it was just tiny pecks on the cheek, but it didn’t take them long to essentially be having intercourse right next to me.

I sighed and climbed out, spouting off something about needing a drink. But neither Haley or Max acknowledged my departure.

I walked in my flip-flops and parka to the outdoor bar and ordered a Long Island from a very nice bartender there. Then I found myself a new hot tub, out of their sight and alone where I could watch the stars.

The cold air against my skin was a wild contrast to the bubbling heat around me, and the jets on my back turned me into pudding.

It was then that I realized I could see into Kevin’s office from the tub I’d chosen. He was sitting at his desk, hand in his hair, drinking something from a glass tumbler. His shirt was



unbuttoned, revealing a gorgeous, cut chest with a light sprinkling of hair, and his tie hung loosely around his neck.

My nipples went hard, and my center lit with a heat like molten lava. I looked around and didn't see anyone nearby. By moving as far away from Haley and Max as possible, I'd pretty much put myself far away from everyone.

My right hand slid between my thighs, and I used my fingertips to toy with my clit, watching him, knowing he had no idea he was on display. In my head, I kept willing him to do the same, to become so overwhelmed with lust that he touched himself where I could see it.

I watched the way his lips stuck to the glass as he drank, the way his tongue licked the rim to ensure no drips on his desk. I sank lower into the water, pulling my swimsuit top up and using my left hand to pull at my nipples.

Kevin stood now, turning to sit on his desk, picking up a paper and reading it. His face looked so serious. I imagined what it would be like to see it between my thighs as he consumed me, his experienced tongue lapping at every wet inch.

I shuddered, sliding one finger, then another inside me, feeling my wetness leak out into the water around me as my body made sure I could pleasure myself. I sighed as I felt a tiny ripple of orgasmic energy echo across my skin.

Kevin sat back down in his chair, and I saw him reach down to adjust himself, moving an unmistakably large penis to the other side of his trousers. My mind was immediately filled

with visions of him inside me, taking me, calling me a good girl and stroking my hair as he used me for his pleasure.

“Oh yes...” I moaned quietly. “Make me your toy. Use my pussy for your pleasure.”

“Oh I will,” said Kevin in my imagination. “I’ve wanted this sweet, tight hole since the moment I saw you.”

“Oh God, yes.”

I was now tracing my clit with my thumb as I vigorously plunged in and out of myself, eye closed, head back, panting Kevin’s name over and over again.

I imagined his mouth on my nipples, sucking and kneading them with his tongue. My perfect, young tits that would make him come everywhere just at the sight of them.

I could feel my climax building, and I focused in on the imagined sensation of Kevin’s massive cock, pumping into me over and over again, my body spasming with each thrust.

“Kevin!” I cried out as my orgasm overtook me, leaving me a pulsing, writhing puddle of oxytocin and dopamine.

I came to my senses almost immediately as I realized how loud I’d been. Could someone have heard me? Could they possibly mistake my cries of passion for cries for help? I looked in the direction of Haley and Max, but no one was coming my way, and I breathed a sigh of relief.

That’s when I saw him.

Kevin.

Staring right at me from his office, looking shocked and maybe a little horrified. The papers he was holding slipped from his hands as he stood, still as a statue, staring at me.

I wanted to die. I wanted to liquify and become one with the swirling waters of the hot tub that now also contained trace amounts of me.

Kevin was still a moment more, then he lifted his hand and held up his pointer finger as if to say, “Stay right there.” He darted off out of sight, and I felt nauseous at the inevitable chewing out I was about to get.

Perhaps I could convince him not to tell my dad I was masturbating in a public place.

*Yeah, said the voice in my head, and maybe it will rain champagne too.*

## *Chapter Fourteen*

### **Kevin**

I looked over the reports of how much money the resort had already sunk into this event. It was astronomical and made no better by the few guests who seemed to be taking advantage of our unusual generosity.

The asshole in three-oh-eight was chief among these, and had, on his own, cost the hotel as much as each of the other guests combined, and had brought in less than twenty-five percent of what we'd lost on him so far.

It was hard to continue to justify the expenses to myself. I knew it was damage control and that it was necessary to negate the effects of that damn article. I knew that it would bring in more money in the long run to outlay some now. But that didn't change the bad taste it left in my mouth to cater to people who didn't deserve it.

I stood from my chair, pacing a bit as I continued to pore over paper after paper detailing just how deep into this I

already was after only two days. There was still the better part of a week left. How was I ever going to recoup the cost of running this event?

I felt like I was suffocating, so I loosened my tie and undid the top few buttons of my shirt to let myself breathe. I glanced out the window at the hot tubs, which I'd had maintenance get perfectly clean. At a glance, the ones in my field of view seemed empty except for one person, but my mind was too occupied to pay much mind to who it was.

I poured myself a glass of whiskey as I gave up my pacing to perch on the edge of the desk. I took a long, slow sip and smacked my lips in appreciation of the rich liquid. It warmed me from the inside out and made me feel—if only a little bit—like I could handle this. I just needed to wrap my head around the numbers and find the balance between catering to the guests' every whim and not losing my entire business doing it.

It was also incredibly hard to concentrate when all I could think about was what it would be like to have Anna in here right now, splayed out on my desk and moaning my name.

I sat in my chair, trying to ignore the tingling in my groin and failing. I reached down to adjust myself as I began to stiffen. I stared at the papers in my hands, trying to concentrate and failing, so I stood and began to pace again before coming to rest by the window. It didn't matter. The words on the page may as well have been rearranged into a picture of Anna smiling at me.

It would have been so easy to just let go and give in to the fantasy, to pull my cock out and stroke it until I came thinking about Anna, moaning her name, hearing her say mine.

“Kevin!”

It was muffled, but it was distinct. I’d definitely heard my name coming from outside my window.

I looked up and saw the solitary figure in the hot tub outside and, to my utter shock, saw that it was Anna. Anna, sitting by herself with one hand under her bikini top and the other between her legs. Anna, with her head back as she breathed heavily. Anna, who, unless my eyes were deceiving me, had just masturbated to orgasm right in front of my window.

Saying my name as she did.

Suddenly her eyes shot open and met mine, and I knew she saw me watching. I was in such shock that I dropped the stack of papers I was holding, unable to move for several seconds. Surely, I wasn’t seeing this. Surely, I was imagining Anna touching herself over me.

I held up a finger to tell her to wait there, indicating I’d be down shortly to talk to her. She looked horrified, and I wasn’t sure if it was because I’d misread the situation or because I’d gotten it exactly right.

I rushed into my suite and pulled on a pair of swim trunks and a robe to head outside into the cold. If I was going to try to talk to Anna, I wasn’t going to stand like an idiot beside the hot tub. I was going to get in. I was going to get close to her

and see if she was just as interested in me up close as she was while she was watching me through my office window.

I rushed outside past several full hot tubs of people until I came to the area where the general public ones curved around the side of the building, to the ones in front of my office, where I'd seen Anna.

When I got to her, she was sitting with her entire body up to her shoulders beneath the water, looking nervous. She watched me approach with what was clearly some kind of fear, and I slowed down, not wanting to make her upset.

“Are... are you okay?” I asked once I was close enough.

“Fine,” she said a bit too quickly. “You?”

The way she said it made it perfectly clear that she had no interest in discussing what I'd just seen and heard her do. She gave me a tight smile, and I suddenly felt bad. Me coming out here had clearly embarrassed her. Damn. A part of me had been hoping that she'd done it on purpose, but I could easily see how that had been wishful thinking.

“Fine,” I echoed back at her. “You, uh... enjoying your night?” I realized how it sounded, so I quickly tried to recover. “Where are Max and your friend?”

“Haley?” Anna said with the slightest curl of her lip. “They're off somewhere together. Hopefully somewhere private for the sake of your other guests, since they don't seem to have much interest in keeping their hands off of each other.”

I laughed a bit. I didn't want to say so, but that had always been Max whenever he had a fling staying at the lodge. Hard and fast and over as soon as they left. But hey, maybe Haley would be different. Maybe the fact that they both did skiing in a professional capacity would be the thing that made it stick.

But I doubted it.

Anna reached her hand out of the water to down the rest of the cocktail she was drinking, avoiding my eyes. The more awkward the moment got, the more I was sure I'd seen what I thought I saw, but also the more sure I was that Anna didn't want to talk about it.

"So," I said, trying to break the silence a bit. "Do you want some company?"

She gaped at me for a moment, like she didn't believe I was actually asking her that, and I wondered if perhaps I'd overstepped some kind of boundary here. I felt certain Henry would think so, especially after I'd watched his daughter touching herself outside my window.

"Uh..." she said slowly. "Sure. Yeah, come on in."

She slid to the side to let me get in, and I was about to climb in beside her when I heard a large group of people come around the building. At least twenty of them began to file into hot tubs, making a lot of noise and surrounding us.

I looked at the sudden lack of privacy and felt very exposed. The way Anna's eyes darted around and the way she sank just



a little deeper into the water told me that she was feeling about as thrilled with the newcomers as I was.

“Do you want to go somewhere more private?” I asked her.

The look on her face was filled with shock, and it took me a minute to realize the potential meaning of what I’d just asked.

“I don’t mean...” I laughed and rubbed the back of my neck. “I don’t mean private like that.” *Unless you want to.* “I mean there’s a private VIP hot tub area. I’d be happy to take you over there if you’d like to talk.”

She bit her lip, and I couldn’t quite gauge her expression. It almost looked like she was thrilled and terrified at once, which I supposed I was feeling as well when she nodded her head.

I reached for the hook next to the hot tub where her coat was hanging and grabbed it.

“Here,” I said, holding it out for her as she climbed out of the hot tub. The hot black bikini she wore highlighted the incredible curves I’d only seen beneath heavy clothes so far. My eyes lingered on her tits for longer than I cared to admit, and I was certain she caught me staring. It was also hard to ignore the way her bikini bottoms, so similar to the ones I’d seen in my fantasy about her, were sitting slightly off-kilter, confirming for me that I’d seen correctly. Anna had, in fact, been touching herself outside my window, and, unless I was mistaken about it, she’d said my name when she came.

I forced the thoughts away and wrapped the parka around her shoulders, starting to walk with her away from the loud,

rowdy crowd which had begun to gather. Before I even realized what I was doing, I put my arm around her shoulder to keep her warm.

There was the slightest moment of tension in which I almost let go, but then she relaxed into me. The gentle weight of her was euphoric. It felt *right*, and it took all my willpower not to lean over and kiss her head.

Snow began to fall as we walked, and I could feel Anna shivering, her legs bare against the freezing air.

“You okay?” I asked, picking up my pace.

“Yeah,” she said, but I could hear the tremor in her voice from the chill.

“Don’t worry,” I said. “It isn’t far. Promise.”

She smiled up at me and nodded, and the simple trust she showed me made me feel like I was somehow worthy of such a thing.

God, this girl was going to do me in.

We walked past a hot tub with two people in it that I recognized. Haley and Max were wrapped so tightly around each other that they almost seemed to be one creature with eight limbs and no shame. Anna avoided looking at them, quickening her stride as we neared them and not slowing again until we were out of their sight.

“They seem to be... getting along,” I said, trying to defuse the tension between us by opening up a line of conversation.

Anna snorted. “No kidding,” she said. “I wasn’t expecting to be a third wheel on my girls’ trip.”

“Well, at least you have me,” I said without thinking it through. We looked quickly at each other, then away just as fast. I couldn’t be misreading this. There was definitely something here, but the only questions were what was it, and what did we want to do about it?

We finished the rest of the walk in silence to the other side of the lodge, where cabanas were draped with luxe fabric and separated from the rest of the area by red velvet ropes. A bouncer guarded the entrance, and, when he saw me coming, waved.

“Mr. Young,” he said as I approached. “How are you tonight?”

“Doing all right, Jack,” I said, shaking his hand. “Can you find us a private tub?”

Jack looked back and forth between us, and I could see the wheels turning as his eyes roved over Anna, who pulled her coat closer around herself in response to the scrutiny. But Jack was a professional, and as quickly as he’d started his observation, he ended it.

“Right this way, sir,” he said, lifting one of the velvet ropes to allow us in. “I’ve got just the spot.”

## *Chapter Fifteen*

### **Anna**

**W**hen Kevin returned with hot drinks, I could barely feel the shame of my “encounter” any more. He was being incredibly kind about it, and I genuinely had the feeling he wouldn't tell my dad after all.

“Thank you,” I said, sipping on some boozy hot cocoa. “This is delicious.”

“It’s a personal favorite of mine,” Kevin replied, taking a drink of his own. “When I bought this place, it was the first thing I put on the menu. Here, come this way. Something a little more private, I think.”

He winked at me, and my face burned with the heat of a thousand suns. So, it wasn’t forgotten, and he was ready to joke about it. Great.

“What made you want to buy the lodge?” I asked, following him through a velvet rope to a little alcove of bushes,

surrounding an even nicer hot tub. It was surprising how big this place was and still was able to feel cozy.

“I guess it was a childhood dream that I ended up fulfilling.” Kevin fiddled with the settings on the tub and nodded to the water. “Get in if you want.”

I did, noticing the difference in the jets immediately and relaxed in seconds, tossing my coat onto a chair nearby.

I could see Kevin trying to be discreet as he looked at my body, and I closed my eyes most of the way so he could really enjoy the view. I didn’t know what was wrong with me, but I was in too deep now to question it.

Kevin slid down next to me so that our shoulders were nearly touching. “It’s perks like this that almost make it worth it to be the ‘go-to’ guy here.” I laughed, and he seemed relieved that I found his comment amusing. I could almost hear my own dad saying, “I’m still hip with the kids, see?”

I wrinkled my nose at this, remembering the man sitting next to me was my dad's age. The man I had just fantasized about was my dad’s age.

And not just his age, but his best friend. Though if I’m being perfectly honest, Kevin’s toned arms and sweet smile were pushing that out of my mind just as quickly as it had landed there.

“Dad said you guys used to come here for competitions of your own when you were my age. Is that right?”

I saw Kevin visibly wince as I referenced our age difference, and something about the wounded look on his face made me want to hug him and tell him he still looked great.

“My history with the lodge goes back even further, actually. My parents used to bring me and my siblings here over Christmas every year. It wasn’t until I was seventeen that I met Henry.”

Dad had never really said when he and Kevin met, just that they’d competed at the same time. “But you did competitive skiing like Haley, huh?”

“Yep,” Kevin said, shaking his head. “That really is a sport for the young 'cause I watch those kids go down the courses these days, and I’m terrified for them.”

“I am young and it terrifies me. I saw how fast Haley was going. She could have broken her neck if she hadn’t regained her stride.”

Kevin nodded. “I’ve seen it happen many times,” he said grimly. “Not all of them survive, even less recover from something like that, and it’s one in a million who go on to ski again. I think it’s severely underappreciated for how damn dangerous it is.”

“So that’s what made you want to buy this place? The sentimental nature of it?”

“Partly,” he replied. “I was already interested in real estate management, and when this place announced it was going under, I hated to see all my childhood and young adult

memories get bulldozed. So, I sank all of the money I'd saved for the rest of my college into that. Gave up the frat parties and pretty girls to become a business owner."

"Do you ever regret it?" I asked.

"Oh, all the time. Like when I decide on a whim to host a skiing competition to boost my ratings. I should have just paid some people to Yelp me." Kevin tilted his head back and looked up at the stars. "It's gorgeous out here tonight," he said, not really to me but simply aloud.

"I bet the night sky views are just as popular as the views of the slopes," I said back.

"Weirdly," Kevin said, looking at me. "I've never even considered listing that as a selling point. Maybe I should."

I nodded. "It would be a feature to me," I replied. I felt Kevin's fingertips brush my leg, and it sent a lovely shiver down my spine.

*No, I said to myself. Fantasies are one thing, but this man is strictly off limits.*

"Buying this place was such a risk," he said after a long pause. "Your dad even told me so."

I looked at him. "He did?"

Kevin nodded. "As I said, the place was going under. No one was spending the kind of money needed to keep this place going strong. Certainly not on luxuries like skiing."

“I guess that makes sense,” I replied. “But you seem to be doing well now.”

Kevin shrugged. “Well is relevant. If it’s about the money, yeah, I’m comfortable. If it’s about the work-life balance, I’m broke.”

I could tell he was trying to make a joke, but the defeat in his voice was coming through loud and clear.

I suddenly felt really bad for him. Lonely and doomed to be married to his financial investment, hoping that someone would come to visit because he certainly wouldn’t be able to take a day off. I have no idea what possessed me, but I reached over and took his hand, giving him what I hoped was a reassuring smile.

“Sounds lonely,” I said.

“Can you tell?” he asked, accepting my hand apprehensively. “This is the first time I’ve held hands with someone since I was twenty-three.”

I gave his hand an extra little squeeze, and he smiled at me gratefully.

I could feel the several drinks I’d had that night fizzing in my veins, and I began to feel a little bold. After all, the man *had* seen me...well...

“Is that how long it’s been since you were with someone?” I asked.

“Well, I suppose it depends on what you mean by ‘with someone.’ If you're asking when my last relationship was, then



yes, twenty-three was the last one. If you're asking when the last time I got laid is..." Kevin gave me an embarrassed look. "I really shouldn't be talking about this with you. You're Henry's kid."

"I'm not a kid, though," I said with a drunken giggle. "I'm twenty-five years old. I'm all woman."

I could hear the flirty tone in my voice, and somewhere in the back of my head, a siren was going off telling me to slow my roll. But drunk Anna was a flirty Anna.

Kevin looked me up and down, his eyes lingering on my cleavage a little too long to be casual. "I can see that," he said in a voice that wasn't convincingly joking.

"Oh yeah?" I said, taking his hand firmly in mine. "Did you notice this?"

I led his large and somewhat apprehensive hand to my chest and placed it on one of the breasts he'd been practically drooling over for the last hour. I watched as he visibly shuddered, and I couldn't help but feel like the master temptress I was currently being.

Without really thinking over the consequences, I pounced on him, straddling his lap and kissing him deeply on the lips. He must have been ready for it—or at least hoping it would happen—because his hands went straight to my waist and down my hips as he kissed me back.

"Fuck you feel good," he whispered in my ear.

“Not just on the outside,” I replied drunkenly. Not one of my best lines, I’ll admit, but I was definitely sloshed, and Kevin was available.

Kevin groaned as I curved my hips up against him, and I could feel him harden beneath me as he fumbled with the strings on my bikini top. “Get this fucking thing off,” he said, laughing.

I helped him to expedite the process, and my tits dropped free, pressing into his chest, nipples hard against the cold air.

“Dear God,” he said in awe at them. “They really are perfect.”

I reached to my waist and pinched myself to be sure that I wasn’t dreaming this time, and once I was fully convinced, dived back into making out with my dad’s best friend.

I loved the way his enormous hands felt cupping my ass, pulling my center against him through his swim shorts as if he was determined to penetrate me through the fabric.

“Fuck,” he hissed against my lips. “Do you know how badly I want you?”

“Then have me,” I said. “Put that massive cock inside my tight, young pussy.”

I could have sworn Kevin seized out for how aroused he looked at my dirty talk, and he reached into his shorts, pulling his length out. I groaned and took it in both of my hands, stroking him with deliberate pacing to torture him deliciously.

“You like that, big boy?” I asked, and he nodded without a word.

Somewhere in the back of my mind, a warning was getting louder. Not only was it trying to make me aware of how absolutely cringey my dirty talk was, but something else, something more physical.

Something that definitely was not an orgasm.

Before I could stop it, I felt my stomach seize, and I flung my top half over the side of the hot tub as I emptied my stomach of every drop of liquor I’d consumed since the champagne. I’d always been a lightweight, but the booze without food and sitting in this heat? I should have seen vomiting a mile away.

“Fuck,” I choked, and Kevin jumped into action, pulling my hair back out of my face.

“It’s okay,” he said reassuringly. “I’ve got you. You’re not the first person to have done this here.”

*But I bet I was the first one with their hands on your dick,* I thought to myself.

My stomach was still cramping, despite feeling empty, and I clutched it in pain. Kevin grabbed for a towel, wrapping it around my naked chest then draping my coat over top of that.

“Let me walk you back to your room,” he offered.

“No,” I said in protest. “I’m okay, thanks.”

“You sure?” he said with audible uncertainty.

“Uh... yeah.”

I was sobering up by the minute, and the full weight of what I'd just done washed over me. That was my dad's best friend. My dad's *best friend*. He was as old as my dad, practically close enough to be my uncle.

I felt like I might be sick all over again.

When I got back to my room, I found Haley and Max asleep in each other's arms, naked. Their adorable relationship with age-appropriate people made me feel even worse about tonight, and I vowed to avoid Kevin at all costs for the rest of the trip.

Maybe if I was lucky, Dad would never know. Maybe if I was lucky, in time I'd forget the way it felt so damn good too.

## *Chapter Sixteen*

### **Kevin**

I sat in my office nursing the hangover I had as a result of the night before. My head spun just a bit, and there was a pounding behind my eyes that was only rivaled by the acid churning in my stomach.

“Are you okay, Kevin?” my secretary asked me as I walked past her. I must have looked about as good as I felt based on her reaction.

“Yeah,” I said with a smile. “Just overindulged a little last night.”

She laughed. “Well, good for you,” she said. “You need to get out more. I’ve been saying it for years.”

Oh, I’d gotten out, all right. In the harsh light of day, I was faced with the fact that I’d seen my best friend’s daughter masturbating and had then taken her to a private hot tub where I kissed her and...

The memory of how her body felt against mine was nearly enough to get me hard again. Her skin had been so smooth and soft, and her tits had been absolutely perfect.

I was so fucked.

“Give me about ten minutes before you send me any calls, okay?”

She nodded, going back to her work, and I went into my office to try to get my head out of the clouds and into a place where I could actually get some work done.

My eyes immediately went to the papers I’d dropped on the floor the previous night. I bent down to pick them up, my gaze drifting out the window to where I’d seen Anna in the hot tub, one hand between her legs and the other toying with her nipple.

How did I allow things to go so far last night? And why couldn’t I feel bad about it? Why was it that the only thing I could think about was how quickly I could get my hands on her again?

I sat down at my desk and pulled out a bottle of water and some ibuprofen to help with the headache. I was getting too old to drink like I was in my twenties, even if I was spending time with someone who was. But I had barely swallowed the pills when my phone line went off.

“Yes?” I said. “I hope it’s important.”

“I’d say so,” the voice on the other end said. It was Hank, the head of my kitchen staff. “We have a problem.”

Shit.

The bottom dropped out of my stomach. Not another one. I couldn't deal with one more issue.

“What?” I asked dangerously, the nausea from my hangover suddenly compounded with a healthy dose of anxiety to really test my constitution.

“Well,” Hank said slowly, clearly trying to find a way to say whatever it was he needed to without making me any angrier, “we’re going to be a little short-staffed for the dinner event tonight.”

“What do you mean ‘short-staffed’?” I demanded. Tonight was the second event of the week, celebrating the athletes who moved on to the second round. There would be press there to conduct interviews on top of the VIPs who were already present. This had to go off perfectly. There was no way we could afford for anything to go wrong.

Hank sighed, clearly resigned to just coming out with the bad news. “Half the staff just called out. They all went out last night after their shifts and apparently got food poisoning.”

“Are we sure they’re not hungover?” I said, feeling my own predicament hit me with a wave of unease.

“No,” Hank said slowly. “But there were enough calls that I’m inclined to believe it was either a mass conspiracy, which would be stupid considering how much they’re getting paid for tonight, or they’re telling the truth.”

He was right that it would be ridiculous to call out for something like a hangover when they were being paid triple their usual rate to make sure the event went off perfectly. But I'd also seen plenty of young employees make questionable decisions.

Ultimately, though, it didn't matter. The only thing that did matter was that I was going to be short on my serving staff for the event tonight.

"Do we have any backups we can call?" I asked.

"A few," he said, "but not as many as we're going to need. Even if I get every single one of them to come in, we'll be short by one."

"Damn it," I said, rubbing my temples with my fingers. "Okay. Well... thanks for letting me know, Hank. Why don't you get calling on those backups and I'll see what I can manage on my end."

"Sounds good. I'll let you know how it turns out."

"All right. I'll talk to you in a few hours."

"Yup," Hank said before hanging up the phone. I looked at the receiver as I slowly set it down.

The rush I'd felt after last night had quickly faded to nothing in the light of day. Between the shame of making out with and groping my best friend's daughter, even though she was an adult in her own right, and the dire situation of not having enough staff to cover a major event, my hangover suddenly seemed like the least of my worries.



I made a few phone calls of my own, hoping someone who was off for the day might be willing to come in and work as a server, even if it wasn't their primary job. One person agreed once they heard what the pay was, but that was about it.

I went down to the restaurant around lunchtime to get something to eat and to talk to Hank in person.

"Any luck?" I asked him as I took a bite of my sandwich, sitting in his office.

"Some, but not enough," he said. "I got five people, but I really needed seven."

"Well," I said, wishing I had better news but glad the news I had was good at all, "I've got one more for you. So, you're only short one."

He sighed and looked at the seating charts. "I mean, if we have to make it work, we have to make it work. Thanks for the help, boss."

"No worries," I said, smiling and clapping him on the shoulder as I finished my lunch and left the office, feeling slightly better, both from my hangover and about the event nearly being staffed.

Maybe I'd get lucky, and someone would feel well enough to come in after all.

I was nearly back to my office when I nearly ran right into Gina in the hallway.

"Kevin," she said with a large grin, as though she couldn't imagine anything nicer than seeing me.

“Gina,” I replied with a nod. “How are you?”

I had expected standard pleasantries. “I’m fine, and you?”  
“I’m fine, too, thanks.” But that wasn't what I got.

“Better,” she said, stepping toward me, “now that I got to see you.”

Her voice was low and sultry as she said it. And I know it had been a while, but I was fairly certain that she was coming on to me, and I was not in the mood for many reasons.

“That’s great,” I said, trying to sound polite but uninterested. “Well, let me know if you need anything. You can reach the front desk at any time from your room phone, or just by going to the lobby.”

I turned to keep walking toward my office and was less than thrilled when I heard her high heels on the carpet alongside me.

“And why would I do that,” she said in a sultry voice, “when I have you right here?”

I sighed and ran a hand over my face. “I’m very busy, Gina,” I said. “I have a lot to prepare for with the event tonight and the next heat of the competition tomorrow.”

“Wow,” she said. “That sounds stressful. Is there some way I can help you... relax a little?”

I looked at her and blinked. She was bold, that was for sure, and I wasn’t sure that I liked how forward she was being, especially when I was already in a bit of a bad mood.

“Thanks,” I said, “but I don’t think I have the time.” I tried to avoid saying what I knew she meant, hoping she’d take the hint and leave me alone, but Gina didn’t seem to be the type to give up easily.

I walked the rest of the way to my office with Gina at my heels. Every time I turned and saw her, she was giving me coy but seductive smiles, and I grew more and more uncomfortable the closer we got to my destination.

When we finally arrived outside my secretary’s office, I turned to her and tried to shake her off.

“Well, thanks for the company,” I said. “Hope you have a great rest of the day. I suppose I’ll see you at the event tonight?”

It was supposed to be a dismissal, but Gina was nothing if not persistent. As I opened the door and walked inside, she followed me in without an invitation and closed the door behind us both.

“Or you could see me right now,” she said, crossing her legs as she hopped up on the desk in front of me. She ran a finger over her lower lip, which jutted out just a bit in what I assumed was intended to be a sexy pout. And it would have been if my mind weren’t so equally divided between my current predicament with work and my current predicament with Anna. As such, her advances were coming across as irritating rather than sexy.

“Sorry, Gina,” I said, walking back toward the door to open it for her. “I have a lot of work to get done. I don’t really have

the time for—”

“For what?” she said quickly, rushing to beat me there. She leaned against the wooden door, looking up at me. She arched her back to make her breasts look more prominent as she reached up and began to slowly unbutton her blouse. “For this?” She ran her finger along the open neckline, just revealing the very top of a red lace bra. “Or this?” She popped open another button to show just how see-through the bra was. Her nipples were on full display and were hard enough to cut glass. “Or how about this?”

She reached down and ran a hand over my crotch, which was when I lost it. With Anna still on my mind, I didn’t want this woman, who I’d had little more than a fleeting interest in, touching me in any kind of sexual way. Especially not when I preferred to be in charge in the bedroom. I didn’t much care for the way she was coming on to me.

“No thanks,” I said, taking a step back and grabbing her wrist to keep her hand away from me. “I’m busy.”

“Too busy for this?” she said, pulling her wrist back and unzipping her skirt to reveal skimpy red panties in the same design as the bra she wore. She kicked off the skirt, and I took a step back, crossing my arms. “Too busy to feel my mouth on your cock? Too busy to bend me over this desk and fuck me until I can’t say anything but your name?”

“*Far* too busy,” I said, thoroughly annoyed now and wanting nothing to do with this woman.

“And what if I refuse to judge the competition until you agree?” she said, clearly thinking she’d found some kind of way in, but I wasn’t having it.

“Then I’ll tell the Olympic governing board how one of the judges was sexually harassing me, and I doubt I’m the first. I’ll see to it that you don’t get paid for your time, and I’ll send you a bill for your stay since it will no longer be comped as a competition judge.”

She gaped at me with an open mouth, scowling, then gathered up her belongings. She got dressed in silence, pausing only once to shoot me an angry look before storming out of the door.

I sat back down at my desk and put my head in my hands. Gina was a sure thing. She would have probably been a good lay, and it had been far too long since I’d had one of those. And yet, I was willing to give up that sure thing for the possibility of something happening with Anna.

And I no longer cared if it was wrong because, after last night, I knew nothing anymore except how badly I wanted her.

## *Chapter Seventeen*

### **Anna**

I looked up from my book to see a flustered-looking woman leaving Kevin's office in a state of disarray. Kevin sure knew how to turn things around. I was still reeling from the hot tub incident from last night, but clearly it wasn't an issue for him.

At least, that's what I assumed until I heard a large crash come from behind the wooden door.

I looked around, waiting to see if any of his staff were going to go check it out then resigned myself to do it instead. So much for avoiding Kevin the rest of the trip.

I approached his door with caution and knocked gently. "Kevin?" I asked, half hoping he wouldn't reply.

I heard another clatter from inside then a loud "fuck" that followed. "Yes, come in."

I pushed the door open and stepped inside, immediately noticing the golden award that was broken in two on the floor. “You okay in here? I saw that woman leave and then heard a lot of crashing.” I knelt down to pick up the two halves of the prize.

“Don’t touch that,” Kevin barked, and I had to admit I was taken aback. Who was this angry asshole that had resumed its residency in the sweet, fun-loving Kevin’s body?

“Okay...” I replied, backing away, hands in the air. “That still doesn’t answer my question. Are you o—”

“I don’t owe you answers, Ms. Knight,” he said shortly.

“Okay, well fuck you too then,” I snapped back before I thought it through entirely. Kevin’s face blanched as if I’d slapped him, and he nodded.

“Just get out,” he said. “If you’re not gonna be useful, enjoy your free stay and leave me the hell alone.”

“What the fuck, Kevin?” I asked. “I know I threw up last night, but does that really erase the nice interaction we had before...”

I didn’t want to say it. Before I’d barfed everywhere we’d been well on our way to intercourse. Me and my dad’s best friend. A man double my age.

“I’m sorry,” Kevin said, sitting down at his desk. “You’re right, you’re not the issue here. But unless you know where I can hire a server by tonight, I can’t really spend time talking about our mistake last night.”

The word mistake hit me like a ton of bricks. He thought kissing me was a mistake? Not that I hadn't felt that way, but for some reason, coming from him it felt a thousand times more hurtful.

"A mistake..." I echoed, looking anywhere in the room but at Kevin.

"What?" he said in confusion. "You don't think it was a mistake?"

If I was perfectly honest with myself, no. I wanted him. It was clear I wanted him because the vision of him having me was haunting my every step night and day.

"I think it was... potentially complicated. How would we ever tell my dad? But I guess... no. I'm not sure it was." I folded my arms across my chest, feeling a little vulnerable.

Kevin sighed and stared down at his desk, where he began to tap his fingers nervously. There was a pregnant silence between us, and I breathed in deeply, giving him just a few more moments before I was gonna turn and leave. But then suddenly he spoke.

"It was nice, to be honest. Other than the vomiting part, of course."

I blushed crimson and tried to hide my face under the guise of fixing my hair.

"I mean, like I said," I replied, "it would be complicated, but... that doesn't stop it from feeling right."



Kevin stared at me, and I stared at him, then he made a face like he was struggling to remove himself from a fly trap and sighed. “I would love to talk more about this, but I can’t right now. I have a huge server issue, and no one is answering their damn phone.”

“I’ll do it,” I interrupted. “I worked at an Applebee’s in college.”

“Anna, no. I couldn’t ask you to do that. You’re on vacation.”

“I said I’d do it,” I insisted, taking an emboldened step forward. “I have the time while Haley is literally living with Max inside her, and I want to help.”

Kevin looked taken aback by the comment about Max but shook it off and looked at me with pleading eyes. “Are you sure? This is gonna be a hellishly busy night.”

“Please,” I replied. “Nothing could beat the week where every high school in the area has their Prom.”

Kevin laughed a little, nerves still stifling his ability to relax completely. “Let me get you a uniform. What size do you want?”

I waffled with lying about it, but the truth was the truth. “Please, Kevin. With tits like these I need at least a large. Extra-large would be better.”

Kevin stared at the aforementioned parts for a moment, then simply nodded and disappeared into the lobby.

I took this as an opportunity to have a look around, noticing how badly the office needed some care. The shelves had a fine layer of dust on them, and the carpet looked like it had been neglected for vacuuming for a while. Maybe if all went well with me filling in as a server, I'd offer to clean this for him.

Kevin returned in a flurry, uniform in tow.

"I hope this is a good fit. They're all a bit standardized, so you will have to forgive me if the cut is odd."

He held it up in front of me, and I realized that what he had there was a little black dress. It certainly was no "White House Black Market," but it looked simple enough to be classy.

"I assume you have some heels with you that would work to go with this?" he asked with desperation. "If not, anything will be—"

"Yes, Kevin, I have heels. Black ones."

Kevin exhaled and plopped down into his desk chair once more. He looked so relieved it was almost adorable.

I took the dress from him then looked around for a closet or even a bookshelf to change behind, but no luck.

"Where should I...?"

"Oh, uh. I can turn around. You should be okay in here."

I stared at him and watched him shift, his hand adjusting himself as he spoke. Maybe it was the perfect opportunity to see if this was meant to be something more. Low risk, possible high payoff.

“I don’t mind,” I said. “You already saw me in a bikini. How much is there to be revealed?” I laughed, and he attempted to join in. But I could already tell his breathing was accelerated.

“Uh... sure. I’ll just...” He put his glasses on and started looking very hard at some papers on his desk. His fingers began to tap again, and I could tell he was trying to keep his cool.

I slid off my shirt in what I hoped was a seductive way. While I wasn’t trying to get laid right now, I did like the idea of him seeing me as sexy. “You know I’m gonna need your help with this zipper,” I said. “And I have no idea how someone is supposed to wear a bra in this. It’s probably tight enough that I won’t need one.”

Kevin looked up and caught me in my bra and panties, and even he couldn’t mask the gentle moan that escaped him.

“Shit...”

“What?” I asked in mock innocence. “See something you like? Come help me put this on.”

Kevin was on his feet and behind me in seconds, his hands reaching out for something to do.

“Help me get this bra off,” I said, trying to sound all business while I got wet where I was standing.

Kevin reached up and unhooked the lacy white bra that I was wearing. He was extremely delicate about it, almost as if he were trying to do it while debating running away.

But when the last clasp was undone and my bra fell to the floor, I felt him press into me from behind and wrap his arms around to cup my breasts.

“This is really not gonna help me get dressed,” I breathed as his fingers went straight to my nipples.

Kevin groaned and ground into me. “I know,” he said with terrible indecision. “I know...” He pulled himself away, taking a few steps back and waiting for me to put on the dress.

I turned as I did, letting him have a full view of my naked body. He was stick straight in his slacks, and it made me want to drop to my knees and have a taste.

“You might just be the death of me,” Kevin said as I slid the black dress on and spun so that he could help me with the zipper. His hands were cold as he did, but we managed to get it on nonetheless.

I swiveled and posed. “How do I look?” I asked.

“Far better than you should in a work uniform,” Kevin replied. “You are definitely going to be getting huge tips tonight.”

I have no idea what possessed me, but I stepped toward him and grabbed his cock through his pants. “And what about your huge tip?” I couldn’t be sure if it was sexy or not, but the gentle thrust he made against my hand told me it was effective.

“That’s...” he started, “a conversation for another time.”

“Or we could make that a conversation for now,” I said, backing him into the wall as I took a step forward.

“Anna...” he said in an overly paternal and yet strangely arousing tone.

“Yes?” I said, toying with the waistband of his trousers.

“I have to get work done,” Kevin insisted as my fingers slid down across his lower abs.

“I have a feeling this will only take a minute or two.”

I was in full force, caution to the wind, seductress mode now. I wanted him, he wanted me, we were both sober—why shouldn't we?

“Anna,” he said again, more insistently. Then he grabbed me by the shoulders and shifted so that it was my back pressed into the wall, the weight of him holding me in place. I could have melted, and by the state of my panties, you would think I had.

Kevin too seemed enthralled by the power shift, and in seconds, he was on me, kissing me like we were two divers, one of our oxygen tanks was failing, and the only air left was in my lungs.

His big hands went around my waist, and my fingers went to his hair. This was really happening.

And then came a knock on his door, causing Kevin to back away from me like he'd just heard I was infected with plague. A second knock, and I straightened the dress while Kevin adjusted himself. “Come in,” he said.

The door opened and a tall man with dark skin entered. Kevin nodded as though he should have been expecting this intrusion.

“Any luck with finding a replacement, boss?”

“Yes, Hank, come in. This is Anna. She’s Henry’s daughter and a guest with us right now, but she offered to help us out tonight. She’s got years of experience apparently.”

“Okay,” Hank said, folding his hands and nodding pleasantly. “Sure. Let me give you a tour, Anna.”

“Sounds good,” I said. “See you later, Kevin.”

When Hank turned his back, I gave my paramour some flirty eyes and licked my lips. I was honestly excited to see where this went, just how far I could push Kevin before he decided to really take control. All thoughts of my dad or their friendship would have to wait until I’d gotten what I wanted.

And with that, I left a very sad-looking Kevin in sexual agony and went with Henry to see what my night was going to look like.

## *Chapter Eighteen*

### **Kevin**

I could hardly believe that the event went off as well as it did after there was such a chance of it going poorly when I got the call from Hank that morning. Every single person I spoke to, champions and current athletes and other guests alike, all couldn't help but talk about how great a time they were having.

“That Anna...” Hank said to me toward the end of the night. “She’s great. Where’d you find her?”

I felt a strange pride at his words. I had no claim on them—Anna wasn't my family, and she wasn't connected to me in any way other than by her father being my friend. But I still wanted to take her into my arms and thank her, congratulate her, kiss her...

After all, what was one more at this point?

As the rest of the serving staff began to clear out, I took a walk through the dining room and kitchen to see if I could find her. Eventually, I did. She was by herself in the back, washing dishes—something she hadn't been asked to do but had taken upon herself to complete nonetheless.

“Anna?” I said as I approached her.

She jumped a little, bubbles spraying into the air from the suds she was working with.

“Oh,” she laughed. “Kevin. Hi.”

“Having fun?” I asked jokingly, looking down at the work she was doing.

“Loads,” she said, still giggling a bit. She grabbed a handful of bubbles and blew them in my direction. “See?”

“Careful,” I said with a sly grin. “Two can play at that game.” I reached in and held up a foamy arsenal of my own.

“Don't ruin the uniform!” she squealed, putting her hands up to block me.

I chuckled and put the bubbles back in the sink. “Okay, okay,” I said, wiping my hands on my pants, not caring if they got wet. “I actually am glad I got you alone.”

“Oh?” she said again, though this time it was a question. “Why's that?” She turned around to face me, and her breath caught as our eyes met. I could see the tiniest tremor in her lower lip as she waited for me to speak, and I felt a jitteriness in my lower abdomen as I thought more about what that lip had felt like between mine...



And how it would feel in other places.

But that wasn't the reason I'd wanted to get her alone. I reached into my jacket and pulled out an envelope.

"You're not exactly on payroll, so I couldn't get you in the system to pay. I took a draw out instead, so... here you go." It was a lame delivery, but something about Anna set me off balance in a way that I couldn't get enough of.

She took the envelope from my hands and opened it, then gasped and looked up at me, shaking her head. She gave me a shocked smack on the arm.

"No way," she said, quickly closing the envelope back up and handing it to me. "How much is in there?"

"A thousand," I said, gently pressing it back in her direction. "I'll admit, it's a little more than the others made, but you filled in when you didn't have to and did a fantastic job. You earned it."

"I can't," she said, pushing the money at me again. "Kevin... It's too much. I didn't do it for money."

"Then what did you do it for?" I asked, stepping closer to her so that our bodies were pressed together, with her ass pressed against the sink behind her.

I thought I knew the answer, but hearing her say it, knowing I was right would be confirmation enough that this wasn't some figment of my imagination. That I wasn't just some dirty old man hitting on a girl that didn't want it. If I was right, she wanted this too.

“I...” She trailed off, her eyes exploring my face, looking for what I didn’t know.

“You what?” I said quietly, one hand snaking around her back to hold her against me, eliciting a gasp. “What did you want?”

“I want...” she whispered, grabbing my lapel with wet, soapy hands. I didn’t care, because the next thing she said was, “I want *this*,” and she pulled me toward her, kissing me with even more passion than she had the night before.

I couldn’t help myself anymore, and any desire to had fled along with my sense when her lips met mine. I grabbed her by the waist and set her up on the edge of the sink, stepping between her legs and forcing the tight black dress up toward her hips so that I could just get a glimpse of the white panties I’d seen before.

She wrapped those smooth, strong legs around me and threw her arms around my neck, holding me to her as her body pressed into mine. I felt the twitch in my pants turn into a stiffening, and I knew there was no doubt for either of us what our intentions were anymore.

My hands slid up under the hem of her dress and under the lace of her panties to cup her ass. I squeezed, pulling her against me. She moaned into my mouth as my mass pressed against her center, which was warm and welcoming.

A clatter from the other side of the kitchen brought me back to my senses, but I wasn’t ready to be done. Not this time.

I ripped the apron off of her and tossed it onto the counter, then grabbed her by the hand and marched her out of the kitchen behind me, not caring who might see. At that moment, it didn't matter, because the only thing that mattered was Anna and having her.

My secretary was long gone for the day, so my office and the area around it were empty, giving us complete privacy. I led her inside and locked the door just in case.

“Kevin,” she giggled, running a hand through her hair like she couldn't believe what we were doing.

“Anna,” I said back, rushing toward her and pulling her against me as I kissed her again, letting my tongue explore her mouth before trailing it down the sides of her neck and relishing in the shiver I received for my efforts.

“Oh,” she moaned, arching into me and gripping my shoulders like she'd fall off the earth otherwise. “Oh, Kevin...”

My hands went to the back of her dress and pulled at the zipper, freeing her from the fabric prison. She let it fall to the floor and stepped out of it so that the only things she had on were the white lace panties and the black heels.

“Fuck...” I said, taking a step back and admiring how amazing she looked. “You're fucking gorgeous, Anna...”

She blushed, then stepped back toward me. She leaned her head up for another kiss, but I grabbed her around the waist and lifted her into the air, feeling her legs wrap around my

waist. The feeling of the heels digging into my back was nearly as erotic as everything else, and I made a mental note to have her leave them on.

I set her on the edge of my desk and held her against me by her hips, feeling her pressed against me. My cock was at full attention now, and I reached between us to undo my button and zipper, needing to be free of the tight restraints. I pulled at the waistband of my underwear and let my cock spring forth, its full mass pressing against Anna's lower belly.

She reached up and began tearing at my shirt and jacket, removing them from my body and throwing them to the floor so that I stood before her, bare-chested, with only my pants pulled down to my thighs.

"I want to taste you," I moaned into her ear as I pulled her against me again. "Let me taste you."

"Yes," she moaned, running her hands along my body as her chest heaved, making her breasts pulse upward at me. "Yes, please..."

I dropped to my knees without any further discussion, running my hand down her sternum, then her abdomen, then across her hips before slowly sliding across the lips of her pussy. They were soft and perfect, and it took all my restraint not to just dive right in.

But I wanted to do this right. I wanted it to be as good for her as it was for me. I wanted to show her what it was like to be with a *man*.

I stroked the soft skin of the lips before slipping a single finger between them to rub gently at her clit, which was already slick with her juices. At first contact, she gasped, gripping my shoulders, and I chuckled, bringing my thumb to my mouth to lick away the wetness. She watched me, panting heavily, then threw her head back as I reached back in to keep touching her, enjoying her.

She whimpered as I continued to stroke and rub until finally, I slid my finger past the clit to her entrance, which was dripping for me. My mouth watered as I slid a finger inside of her, feeling the warm, moist flesh tighten around me.

“God, you feel incredible...” I said as I dipped my face between her legs. I pressed my nose against the soft thatch of hair above her crease and took a long sniff, relishing in the scent of her, before gently opening her lips with my fingers and letting my tongue slip from inside my mouth to lap at her clit.

“Oh, fuck,” Anna moaned, her hands tangling in my hair.

“Mm,” I said. “You taste so good, too.” Then I recommitted my mouth to its task, circling and stroking the swollen nub and feeling her jolt and thrash, listening to her whine and groan in response to my touches. Feeling the gentle pull on my hair when I did something right and continuing that motion until something new sparked that same reaction.

I felt her center clench around my fingers once, twice, three times before her breathing began to grow short and fast.

“Kevin...” she moaned, her hips writhing and pulsing against my face. She tugged at my hair, forcing me deeper into her folds. “God, Kevin... I’m gonna come...”

“Good,” I said, letting my thumb take over for my tongue while I spoke. “Just as long as you know we’re not done here. You can come for me now, but you’re going to come again for me. Understand?”

She nodded, and I smiled at her, curling my fingers inward to stroke at her G-spot. She let out a sharp cry as I edged her just a bit closer.

“Good girl,” I said. “That’s Daddy’s good girl.”

She moaned in appreciation and leaned back, enjoying what I offered her. She wrapped her legs around my head, tightening her thighs against my ears and driving me to want more.

I ate at her like a starving man who’d found a feast, and her cries of ecstasy were like music as I did. My fingers pounded out a steady but firm rhythm, and after only another moment, she was clutching my hair, driving me as close as I could go.

“Yes!” she yelled. “Yes, fuck! Oh, yes, Kevin!”

I felt her pulsing against my face and around my fingers, her orgasm rocking her entire body and sending her legs tighter around my face, making me never want to stop. But as I felt her climax subside, she gently pushed me away, and I stood.

She lay on the desk, breathing heavily with her eyes closed, and I briefly wondered if I’d actually left her too spent to continue. But seconds later, her eyes sprang open, and she sat

up, looking at me with a wicked look that had my member tensing with need.

“You are masterful,” she said, standing in front of me. She pressed her body against mine, and I could feel her wetness along the skin of my cock, which rested against her. “And I think it’s time I returned the favor.”

I raised an eyebrow, taking in her full meaning.

“Oh, really?” I asked, stepping to the side to sit in one of the oversized armchairs in front of my desk.

“Really,” she said, dropping to her knees and crawling over to me. Her hands went to my knees and slid up my thighs, then back down. My length gave a mighty twitch, and she grinned. “You have something for me... Daddy?”

I moaned in need as she said it, the word almost as sexy as everything else she’d said or done so far.

“Yes, baby... if you’re a good girl who deserves it.”

“Do I deserve it, Daddy?”

Fuck, this girl was perfect.

“Yes, baby. I think you do. Why don’t you give Daddy’s cock a taste?”

She nodded and leaned forward, gripping me in her hand. The pressure she used was exactly right, tight without being restricting and loose enough that she could stroke me. She gently pressed her lips to the side of my tip, and my hips

bucked up toward her mouth. She opened her lips in a soft gasp but pulled away, teasing me.

“Yes, Daddy,” she said quietly. I reached out to stroke her hair, which she pulled away from her face. I took it from her, twisting it in my hand to keep it held back, and urged her forward until her lips met my cock.

She slipped her lips around the outside of my length, and the warmth of her mouth had me dripping from my tip within seconds. She licked away the little pearls, smacking her lips like I’d given her some great treat.

“Oh, Anna...” I moaned. “That feels so fucking good.”

She gave a gentle moan, which sent vibrations through me, making me shiver in pleasure. Her hand stroked my base as she kissed along the tip, taking only the very end into her mouth and gently suckling, licking, toying with me.

Finally, I needed more. I tugged at her hair, urging her down, and she obliged, opening her lips so that they wrapped around my stiff member. I felt a jolt go through my entire body at the sensation, and she seemed to feel it too, because she started to bob her head up and down, slowly at first, then picking up speed. She stroked the base and pulled her mouth away to lick up and down the sides, along the underside where the sensitive ridge was exposed for her to feel, to toy with.

My hands guided her by her hair, and she took direction like she was made to. Like her mouth and her lips were made to service my cock. She cupped my balls, massaging them as she pumped up and down along my shaft.



“Do you like it, Daddy?” Anna asked.

“Yes, baby girl. Yes, I like that.”

And by God, I didn't know if I'd ever like anything more.

## *Chapter Nineteen*

### **Anna**

**I** was in ecstasy. This was every bit as good as I thought it would be, and Kevin was an incredibly skilled lover.

I had been right about his tongue, though what I didn't expect would be his skills with his fingers. I'd always been fond of being digitally pleased, though few people ever got it just the way I liked it. Caleb certainly never had.

Kevin's cock in my mouth was like candy, salty and sweet all mixed together, and I loved the way my lips stretched as I was challenged to consume him. His fingers in my hair nudged but never forced me up and down on his length.

"Baby, I'm not sure how much longer I can take this," Kevin moaned. "And I'll be damned if I don't get to feel my cock inside you."

I pulled away from him with several strings of saliva still connecting my mouth to his tip. Kevin shuddered, looking

down at me looking up at him, and reached out a hand to help me to my feet. Then he grabbed me by the hips and roughly sat me down on the edge of his desk, pressing his fingers inside me once more.

“You’re such a dirty girl, Anna. You knew I wouldn’t be able to resist your sweet pussy.”

I nodded as his cheeks pinked and his chest heaved. “I hoped you would like it. All pink and pretty for you.”

“Fuck,” he exclaimed. “You know just what to say to get me going.”

In and out his fingers pressed the soft palate of my insides, and I could feel wave after wave of tiny orgasms ripple across my neck and nipples. Every time my body would tense, he’d issue some kind of praise to me.

“That’s it, that’s my girl, come for me.”

Shit, until this point, I didn’t even know girls could climax more than once per session. Kevin had made me come so many times that I’d lost count.

“Yes, God. Thank you,” I replied, barely being able to remember my own name let alone how to speak intelligently.

“Are you ready for me?” he asked, slowing his touch.

I nodded fervently, and he pulled back, using some of my wetness to lubricate himself.

Truth be told, I was a little nervous. Kevin was big in ways that no other man I’d been with had been. It would not have

been an exaggeration to say he was as thick as a can of deodorant.

Kevin pushed himself against my entrance, hovering over me animalistically, groaning with pleasure as he pushed inside. At first, it seemed like there was no way he was going to fit, and that strangely turned me on. The idea of him molding me to encompass his mass was mouthwatering.

Inch by inch, he pressed forward, and my body filled with him to the point that I could see him bulging in my lower stomach.

“Shit you’re tight,” he said, holding perfectly still while I adjusted to him. Then slowly he began to thrust as agonizingly, as he took me.

I know some women are weak for being pounded into oblivion, but I have always been much more aroused by control and power. A man who can take me slowly and decisively, not rushing anything but making me suffer just a little for my orgasm, was always incredibly sexy. Kevin, of course, was one of those guys.

“God, Kevin,” I moaned. “Oh fuck you’re big.”

“And you’re a very good girl, Anna. Taking it all. Nice and slow, waiting for me to give you your finish.”

“Thank you,” I panted. “Please keep doing that. It feels so fucking good.”

“I bet it does.” he said as he reached down and began to run his fingers up and down my clit. “I’m gonna make you come

so hard you forget where you are.”

“Yes, fuck, oh God, please.”

It was like I was incapable of full sentences anymore, and all I could perceive through this orgasmic haze was the overwhelming pleasure.

Was it possible to be in so much pleasure that you couldn't orgasm? Every sensation was so intense that I couldn't think about anything else but whimpering his name over and over.

“You close, baby?” he asked.

“Yes,” I panted. “So close.”

“Good girl,” he said back. “You gonna let me finish you now?”

It was like those words unlocked a secret button inside my brain, and as soon as he said it, I came. Screaming, howling, panting, grabbing for hair and clothes, sitting up to grab his face and kiss him. It was the best orgasm I'd ever had.

Moments later, Kevin followed, pulling out and spilling himself on my lower stomach in warm, wet pools of glistening seed. He collapsed forward so that our bodies were pressed together on his desk and nestled his face in the crook of my neck.

“That was...” he started, but his sentiment faded away. We lay there for several minutes, to the point where I almost dozed off, then he spoke again, rising and grabbing some tissues. “We should get cleaned up and get some sleep.”

I stared at him, half expecting him to invite me to his bed. But he didn't; in fact, he almost looked ashamed. Was this what guys always talked about—post-orgasm clarity? Was he suddenly remembering his best friend was my dad the way I was?

“Sure.” I nodded, grabbing some tissues myself and wiping off before tossing them in the trash and grabbing my clothes. “No need to overly complicate this.”

“Right,” he said, nodding. “Smart.”

“Totally,” I agreed. But I couldn't help feeling like both of us wanted something more. Maybe it was just my imagination, but as I dressed, I kept seeing him open his mouth out of the corner of my eye as if to say something. However, when I'd look straight at him, he'd look away, suddenly very focused on whatever was nearest him.

When I was finally dressed, I hovered for a moment, then said, “Well, good night.”

“Yes, uh,” Kevin took a few tentative steps towards me, and gave me a fatherly kiss on the head. “Good night.”

I turned to the door and had just reached for the handle when—

“Anna?”

I turned to see Kevin looking at me. “Yes?”

“Would you want to come sleep in my room tonight?”

My heart leapt. I was honestly feeling very dismissed after having really put myself out there. This showed me he was worth the risk. “I–”

As soon as I went to accept his invitation, a flash of Haley’s face entered my mind, and I froze. How in the fuck would I explain to her where I was if I was still gone when she woke up? Would she believe I’d been in the kitchen all night cleaning dishes? I certainly couldn’t tell her the truth. That I’d fucked my dad’s oldest and best friend.

“I should probably get back to Haley,” I said with a sigh. Kevin nodded and turned to shut off some lights.

“Of course,” he said. “Well, if you change your mind, the offer stands.”

I lingered, wanting more than anything to say yes. But I slowly moved toward the door once more, slipping out into the lobby and heading for my room.

When I got back, Haley was sound asleep, no Max to be seen. I quietly slipped into the shower and washed away any remaining evidence of the affair in Kevin’s office, then dried and scrambled across the room in a towel to find clothes.

“It’s two a.m.” came a voice from behind me. I spun on the spot to see a tired-looking Haley, sitting up in bed with her arms crossed, looking like she wanted to murder me. “Where the fuck have you been?”

My brain raced with possible excuses I could feed her. The dishes excuse was weak but not impossible. Could I tell her I

fell asleep in the lobby?

I opened my mouth to reply, but Haley cut me off. “You were supposed to be here to support me. But instead, you’ve been God knows where else, treating this like a vacation rather than an important event in my future.”

I stared at her dumbfounded, unsure what to say or do.

“Haley, I—”

“Don’t,” she said simply. “I thought you were better than this, Anna.”

“I am, I mean—okay I’ve gotten a little carried away with enjoying the place, but you’ve been spending all your time with Max.”

Haley’s jaw dropped, and she stood in anger. “I certainly have not,” she sniped. “I’ve only been with Max at meals and the one night in the hot tub. Do you know how much other time I’ve been spending alone here?”

I didn’t know was the truth. My head had been so full of worry about losing Haley and then about being with Kevin that I had no idea where she was outside of competition and meal times.

“Hales...” I started.

“Just tell me what you were doing that was so much more important than us spending time together,” she said, a pained look on her face. “Did you meet someone?”



I certainly had, or rather, re-met someone. But Kevin was not going to be the kind of bedmate that Haley approved of.

“No,” I said quickly. “It’s not that. I’ve... I’ve been doing a lot of reading.”

“Reading?” she said in a voice that clearly conveyed that she didn’t believe me.

“Yeah,” I said, doubling down. “You saw all the books I bought. I just keep getting so caught up in them that I lose track of time. I promise I’ll be more careful.”

Haley stared at me hard for a long minute, then sighed. “Fine. But please, Anna, let’s actually spend some quality time together. It’s killing me that we could be about to be torn apart and we’re not here making hella memories right now.”

I nodded and indicated for her to scoot over in bed. She did, and I climbed in beside her, giving her a big hug and a smooch on the cheek.

“I promise, Hales. The rest of this trip is just me, and you, and your journey to the Olympics.”

Haley brightened at this. “Do you really think I’m good enough to make it?”

“Definitely,” I said. “Now get some sleep. You’re gonna need it.”

She nodded and lay down, and I scooted in next to her and lay on my back, staring up at the ceiling and thinking over the past twenty-four hours.

I realized suddenly how tired I was. Working and then the incredible, rigorous sex had really taken it out of me in a way I hadn't been accustomed to since college.

I thought about the connection I was feeling with Kevin and wondered if we'd be allowed by fate to be together again before I had to go back to the real world. Before our roles in my dad's life kept us apart once more and we existed with a mutual secret between us.

As I dozed, I pretended that I had gone back to Kevin's bed, and I was now falling asleep next to the strong, sexy man that had made me feel like such a woman less than an hour ago. And I wondered, if just maybe, he was thinking about me too.

## *Chapter Twenty*

### **Kevin**

I woke up the next morning feeling more emotions than I could remember feeling in the last twenty years. My brain first went to what had to be done for the day. Ensure the event was ready to go. Ensure the champions and other VIPs were taken care of and happy. Prepare the banquet for after and make sure that we were fully staffed, even if I had to ask Anna again.

And then my mind focused in on what had happened with Anna the night before.

I'd slept with Henry's daughter.

*I slept with Henry's daughter.*

I waited for the shame to wash over me, but it didn't come. Instead, I fell into a sort of daydream about the soft loveliness of her skin, the delicate curve of her waist, the deep sea color of her eyes. Anna was, for all practical purposes, my dream

girl. And thanks to the twenty-year age gap we were working with, that made me a dirty old man, to say the least.

Anna was smart and beautiful, but also practical and self-sufficient. Exactly the kind of woman I had always envisioned ending up with. Maybe that's why no one else had ever caught my eye. Or maybe I was just a workaholic who literally had to stumble into my dream girl at work or I never would at all.

Even if that girl happened to be the daughter of my lifelong best friend.

I sat up and swung my legs over the bed, not yet ready to face the day and definitely not ready to run into Anna. I was still stuck between deciding whether to feel guilty or try to continue this fling to see what it turned into.

My brain went to my invitation from last night that she'd rejected. She didn't want her friend to know she had been with me.

But what could I expect? She was young and vibrant and could have pretty much anyone she wanted. Why would she ever want anyone to know she'd fucked a man twice her age?

I heard my phone vibrate on the bedside table. With a groan of protest at the idea of having to be the boss so soon, I looked over to see who was calling and ended up seeing my worst nightmare.

Henry was calling.

Half of my brain was telling me to ignore it. It was perfectly reasonable to be too busy to answer his call. The other half of

me, the paranoid half, was telling me that not answering would look suspicious. Logically, I knew that, unless Anna had said something, there was nothing for him to be suspicious about. But that didn't change the nervousness I felt as I reached for the phone.

I picked up the call.

“Hey, Henry, how's it going?”

“What's up, big man? How's business?”

Pleasantries. Good. That meant he didn't know about Anna and me. If he did, he'd be asking whether I wanted my balls crushed or incinerated.

“Ah, business is... well you know. Too steady for me to have a life and just steady enough to afford one.”

Henry laughed at our old joke. As two men of some wealth, we often lamented having the kind of money to live a life we'd never have time for.

“Ain't that the truth, brother,” he said. “Hey, how's Anna doing?”

My heart began to pound in my chest, my nerves electrifying and a thin sweat coating my palms. “She's great,” I said a little too enthusiastically to be natural. “I mean, the few times I've seen her.”

“You better be looking out for my girl, Kev. I don't want any of those douchebag athletes near her. I know what we were like at that age.”

I laughed a little too loud, and Henry went quiet.

“She’s not already hanging all over one, is she?” he asked solemnly.

This was a trick question. Could I consider myself a douchebag athlete? Surely not. I was his practically geriatric best friend.

“Nah,” I replied. “She mostly keeps to herself and reads in between ski lessons.”

“She followed through with the lessons?” Henry asked excitedly.

“Yeah,” I chuckled. “Hates every minute of it, though. How in the world is that yours and Jessica’s daughter?”

Henry laughed. “I’m glad she’s her own person. The world would be a boring place if we were all the same, right?”

“Too true,” I agreed, hoping the conversation would end naturally.

“Have you caught any basketball lately?” he asked.

“Not much. Hey, listen, I’ve got a loaded schedule. Can I call you back later?”

“Sure,” Henry said. “No problem. Tell Anna hi for me, okay? I swear she never answers my texts.”

“Yeah, okay.” I replied. “Have a great day, boss.”

“You too, chief.”

I hung up the phone and tossed it on the bed like it was on fire. The guilt had nearly forced the truth out of me.

I took a moment to consider what would actually happen if Henry did know what had happened between me and Anna. The end of a thirty-year friendship was likely, but was it possible that he would be cool about it?

*In your dreams*, the voice inside my head said to me. And I knew it was right. The only way my friendship with Henry would continue is if he never knew about what had occurred.

But even if he never figured it out, there was another concern eating away at me. The end of the competition meant the end of whatever this was with Anna. She'd go back to LA, and I'd be here in the snow, struggling to stay a top-rated ski resort.

Tiny flashes of the night before replayed in my mind, and surprisingly, it wasn't the dirty ones. It was the way her lashes fluttered when she was embarrassed, the way she had put me in my place not once, but twice since she'd been here. Almost like a wife...

I shook my head to free myself of the thought. I couldn't even keep Anna as a girlfriend let alone more than that, and her life was on the West Coast. I couldn't possibly ask her to leave behind the job she loved.

I got dressed sullenly and headed to the front desk for a status report update.

"How's it going?" I asked Rowan, my shift lead at the check-in.

“Slow,” he admitted. “Everyone here for the competition has checked in already, and everyone not here for it has just checked out to return to their homes before work tomorrow.”

I sighed and nodded. “Good work, Rowan. I know this week has been hellish. I’m glad I could count on you.”

“Thanks, Mr. Young,” he said, a look of surprise on his face. Was it really so hard to believe I’d be issuing a compliment to him? Maybe I really was failing as a manager.

When I started this endeavor, I had aimed to be the kind of employer that my staff felt like they could go to, not the kind that would yell at you across a dining room.

“Rowan, can you send me an email reminding me I was to give Rita, the server, a bonus? She really deserves it for putting up with my shit.”

Rowan froze for a moment, unsure of whether to agree with me or not, then said, “Sure, Mr. Young. That’s really generous of you.”

“Not generous enough. I wanna plan something for all the staff. You guys really bust your asses for me, and I’m grateful.”

I didn’t give him time to respond before setting off to check on maintenance and then on the restaurant staff. I wanted them all to feel supported and prioritized.

Anna was having a really good effect on me, and now I was even more scared of losing her.



## *Chapter Twenty-One*

### **Anna**

“I swear to God,” I said in frustration. “After we’re done here, I’m never putting on snow boots again.” I had spent the last ten minutes relacing my boots because the ties were wearing out.

“You don’t mean that,” Haley said, putting on her gloves. “You love the snow.”

“Correction,” I replied. “I did love the snow. I think I might now be a beach girl instead.”

Haley gasped in mock horror, which made me laugh despite my irritation, and she bent to help me sort my footwear out. “You better not let your dad or Kevin hear you say that,” she said, giggling. “This is your legacy, after all.”

“Well, I guess it’s time for me to get a new legacy,” I said back. “I’m thinking baker of world-famous dog treats.”

Haley gave me an amused look. “You are an odd one, Anna Knight.”

“I was only kidding,” I laughed. “Are you nervous for today?”

Haley stood and smoothed out her jacket. “Well, I wasn’t until you said that.”

I gave her an apologetic look, and she stuck her tongue out at me. Haley was trying for a redemption run today. No tumbles on this course if she could manage it.

“Where are you planning to watch from?” she asked. “The tower again? Maybe I’ll wave as I go past.”

“You will do no such thing,” I said, laughing. “You already have a hard time getting down the mountain without falling. You will be keeping your eyes on the course, you crazy woman.”

“Do you think I’d get extra points if I did a perfect run with my eyes closed?”

“You had better be joking,” I said, taking her arm as we left the room.

The lodge smelled of vanilla and winter today, and there was a pianist in the lobby entertaining a few people. It seemed that the place was packed on competition days and a ghost town the rest of the time.

I found my mind wandering to Kevin, hoping that he was making enough money on these kinds of days to make up for

the shit ones. He had sacrificed everything for this place, as he'd told me. If this competition didn't revive its reputation...

"Haley," a voice called out behind us. We turned around to find Max jogging after us. "I just wanted to wish you good luck. Not that you need it."

He pulled Haley into a tight embrace and kissed her, and I looked away to avoid feeling like I was gawking.

As I glanced around the room, trying to ignore the sounds the two of them were making, I locked eyes with Kevin. He smiled the minute he realized, and I felt my heart begin to race as I got flashes of his hands on my body, the sounds of his moaning in my ear. I could practically feel him inside me, and from the look on his face, I bet that he could too.

Kevin took a few steps toward me, looking left and right to cross the busy room, then stopped, seeming to think better of it. I could see the indecision in his eyes, mirroring what I was feeling too. I was moments away from going to him when Haley and Max broke apart, seemingly sated with each other's mouths.

"Well, good luck then," Max said, patting Haley on the back. "I'll be watching."

"Maybe you shouldn't," she giggled. "Maybe you're the reason I wiped out."

"Hey," Max said. "Anna was watching too. Maybe she's the bad luck."

“I’m more than happy to stay inside if that will help you win. I’m not gonna freeze my nipples off in here.”

Haley slapped me on the shoulder playfully. “Oh, don’t be such a baby,” she said. Then she looked at her watch and nodded. “I’ve got to go. See you on the other side.”

Max and I watched her jog out of the lodge and then turned to each other.

“I didn’t anticipate having another member of Haley’s personal cheerleading team,” I said, laughing and tugging on my ponytail. “But here we are. Ski lift?”

“Ski lift,” Max replied.

We headed out of the lovely vanilla-scented heat of the lodge and into the sunny but cutting-cold air.

“The tower is just south of here,” Max said loudly over the sound of the crowd talking.

“You mean we’re about to trek through this snow? Good lord. What have you gotten yourself into, Anna?”

Max laughed. “Oh, don’t be so dramatic. Come on.”

It took us about fifteen minutes to get to the tower we’d watched her last run from and settled in. Once again, we cheered as Haley mounted the summit and poised for her run.

“Here’s to hoping she stays upright,” Max said, pouring some hot liquid from a thermos.

“Where the hell did you get that from?” I asked.

“I’ll never tell,” he replied, grinning.

“To hoping she stays upright,” I agreed. I took a long drink of the hot liquid and found spiked cocoa. I began to cough, caught off guard by the alcohol. “Jeez, Max, you could have warned me.”

“Where’s the fun in that?” he asked.

The starting buzzer went off, and Haley whooshed down the hill, form excellent, at least to untrained eyes like mine. Hell, just staying upright looked like Olympic-level skill to me.

As before, Haley quickly disappeared from our line of sight, and Max and I turned our attention to the TV where she was currently clocking in at 90 mph.

One jump, then two, around a particularly sharp curve, and then a third jump. Haley was flying, and she seemed totally in control.

But just as her last jump came into sight, her ski caught a divot in the slicked path, and she tumbled forward.

“Shit,” I gasped.

But somehow, by a miracle, she righted herself, leaning all her weight forward.

“Fuck,” Max said, shaking and grabbing my arm. “She did it. Twice now. She’s either a really good skier or a really good faller.”

Haley sailed over the final jump and crossed the finish line, but Max and I were silent. This was twice now we’d almost watched Haley disqualify at best—and break her neck at worst.

“Should we go to the top?” I asked. “So she has someone to tell her it’s okay?”

Max nodded, his face white and a cold sweat on his forehead.

I put a hand on his shoulder reassuringly. “It’s your own damn fault for getting feelings for an athlete.”

He almost laughed, and we climbed down, beginning the hike to the top.

We’d nearly reached it and could see Haley from where we were when a ripple of screams came from the starting line.

I looked to where they’d come from and saw a woman drop to her knees. Max and I looked around and saw paramedics hurrying forward.

“That’s not good,” Max said, now speeding up to jog toward Haley.

When we reached the summit, we could hear people talking about what was happening.

“—he’ll be lucky if he didn’t break his neck,” said one man.

“You could almost hear the sound when he landed,” said another.

Suddenly, a roar came from the skies as a helicopter dropped down where the finish line was. Haley ran over, flinging herself into Max’s arms, and all of a sudden Kevin was at my side.

I looked up at him in surprise as he stood close enough that our hands brushed. Kevin looked down at me, a worried look in his eyes, and I wanted to hug him. I knew I couldn't, but I wanted to.

“What can I do to help?” I asked softly.

Kevin was about to answer when Max caught my eye, then looked down where our pinkies were linked.

Shit.

I crossed my arms and took a small step back. Kevin noticed and looked at Max, who was still staring at us over Haley's head. This was gonna be trouble once everything had calmed down.

Suddenly media were rushing Kevin, swarming us as Max tugged my arm to go with them.

“Get inside,” Kevin shouted.

He didn't need to tell us twice.

## *Chapter Twenty-Two*

### **Kevin**

**T**he flash of the cameras was blinding as it hit my face like a strobe.

“Mr. Young, what exactly happened out there?” one of the reporters asked.

“As in any sport, there are risks,” I said. “Skiers are well aware of the dangers of the sport, and those at the level of skill who have been out on our slopes these last few days know that if their skis aren’t level upon impact, they are likely to crash, which, unfortunately, is what happened to the poor young man who lost his footing on the trail today.”

It had taken only a few hours for the resort to be completely overrun with media, and I’d given almost the exact same speech to at least half a dozen new cameras and reporters by the time night fell over the lodge. I’d watched the whole thing happen from the stands, as he’d gone up on the final jump and come down on the tip of his ski, snapping it in two and taking



a fall unlike any I'd ever seen. I was amazed he'd lived at all, but he was able to be medevac'd out.

Anna was distraught at the time, but she'd gone with Haley while I dealt with the media circus my hotel had turned into.

“What precautions could have been taken to ensure this didn't happen, and will they be put into place going forward?”

I gaped at the reporter. Was she actually suggesting that this was somehow my fault? That something I had done or not done had led to a young man nearly being killed on my course?

“Ma'am,” I said, trying to be as polite as I could despite the anger boiling up inside me at her thinly veiled accusation. “*Every* precaution has been taken, and the courses have been inspected and approved by the Olympic judges as both safe and up to standards.”

“Every course?” another reporter chimed in, and a murmuring overtook the crowd as they all made noises of approval at the question.

“Yes,” I said with a little more bite than I intended to, something I knew would reflect back on me in the reporters' retelling of the interview. “Every course has been examined and approved.”

“Last week your resort had a review in *Powder* magazine saying that your courses were subpar and the rooms were outdated.”

“Yes?” I said, turning to the speaker. “I’m not sure what this has to do with the events of today.”

“Well,” the young man said with the hint of a smirk as though he was a cat who’d caught a juicy mouse, “it’s just that if that’s true, how do we know that the athlete got proper rest before he went out on the course? And how do we know that the course remained safe from the time the judges examined it to the time the skier fell?”

I glared at the man.

“Your questions are not only asinine, but they’re insulting, as well,” I said, and a hush fell over the room. Apparently, no one had expected me to actually fight against their dirty tactics. “Whether or not the skier got any rest is in no way the fault of Brother Bears, and the courses do *not* remain identical to the way they were when the judges examine them because they get compacted and slick as more people ski on them. If he hit a patch of snow that had been skied over too many times as he made the jump, that would account for the miscalculation in his jump. All good skiers know that this is a possibility and work hard to avoid it. Sometimes, that’s just not possible to do at ninety-five miles per hour.”

“And how do you know all of this about what skiers do or don’t know?” the man retorted, clearly unsatisfied with my response.

“Aside from owning a very successful ski lodge?” I said. “I myself was a champion skier and competed on these very same slopes.”

“What do you—”

“I’m taking no more questions,” I said, interrupting whatever the next vulture was about to ask. “I would like to extend my sincerest condolences to the young man and his family for the devastating injury he’s received and the long road to recovery he will likely have ahead of him. Thank you.”

I waved my hands, and my employees opened the door of the conference room I’d opened up to give the press a private area to accost me away from the eyes of guests, competitors, and judges. Several of the reporters lingered, not wanting to leave without asking whatever question they had, but I left the room out a back door, which I locked behind me.

I’d told my employees and security to escort any non-guests off the premises, but I was certain there were still reporters and bloggers who would manage to avoid ejection to get interviews from guests. I didn’t want to risk being seen by any of them, so I took the long way around and up the service elevators to my office, where I sank into my chair and rested my head on my folded arms.

This was a disaster. The qualifier was supposed to be the thing that redeemed Brother Bears after the *Powder* review. Now, with the additional bad press we would be getting, I’d be lucky to still be in business by the time the competition was over.

I could still call it off, I realized. I could claim safety hazards and cancel the remainder of the contest. I could let someone else deal with the pressure and scrutiny. And why

stop at the qualifier? Why not sell the resort and use the money to move far away from here? Hell, I could change my name and go into hiding. It would be easy.

I was seriously considering those options when a knock came at my office door. My secretary was gone for the day, so I wasn't sure who could be there. I was worried it might be another one of the press who'd managed to find their way up here past security, but then the door cracked open, and Anna's face peeked in.

"Hi," she said. "Can I come in?"

Seeing her pulled a sigh of relief from me. I couldn't believe how quickly she'd become a source of comfort for me.

"Yes," I said, standing and waving her inside. I walked around my desk to perch on the edge of it, facing her. "What's going on?"

"I was going to ask *you* that," she said with a sympathetic smile. "Today was... a lot."

"No kidding," I said, folding my hands over my thigh. "I'm surprised they haven't dragged me out to beat me in the town square."

Anna laughed and came in, sitting down in a chair right in front of me.

"I think they stone you for shame this big," she joked.

"Hilarious," I said, but I couldn't help smiling. I nodded toward the door. "Not that I'm not glad to see you, but

shouldn't you be celebrating with your friend? She did great on her run.”

Anna shrugged. “I think the idea of celebrating kind of fell by the wayside when that guy got hurt. She went to the hot tubs with Max, so I figured I'd come and see if there was anything you needed.”

“A rewind button so I could stop that guy from doing his run? Or even better, so I could go back and change every single thing from that reviewer's stay so I never had a poor write-up to begin with.”

“I don't have one of those,” she said with a smile that sent a tingle up my thighs and into my abdomen. “But maybe there's something else I could do to... cheer you up.”

She stood and stepped so that she was against me. She ran her hands up my chest to my neck and wrapped them around the back of my head. She pulled me to her for a kiss, and the way she leaned on me made me begin to stiffen.

I gripped her waist and held her against me, about to spin her around to pin her to the desk, but she pulled away and put a finger to my lips with a devilish look in her eyes. She reached between us and undid my belt, pulling it free and tossing it to the side.

“Kevin...” she said slowly, “has had a very, very hard day. And I think you deserve a little rest.”

She unbuttoned and unzipped my fly slowly, letting my rapidly growing bulge press forward through my boxer-briefs.

She pressed her palm to it and gave it a squeeze which drew my breath from me in short, quick bursts.

“You are a very... very bad girl...” I said, pressing up into her hand, needing more.

“Yes, I am,” she said. “And I need to be taught a lesson.” She got down on her knees and pressed her face into the “V” where my jeans were undone and my length was pushing its way out, desperate to be free of its prison.

“Oh...” I moaned as her warm breath surrounded me. “God, yes...”

Anna gave a little giggle which sent delightful vibrations through my shaft, and then I was fully hard. She cupped her hand under my package, giving it the gentlest massage and pulling a groan from deep within my throat. Then she pulled away and gripped the waistband of my underwear.

“May I?” she asked coyly.

“Yes,” I said. “In fact, I insist.”

She laughed again. I could have listened to that sound all day and never gotten tired of it. Especially when it accompanied the incredible way she was touching me. Her fingers tugged down my boxers, and my length sprang up toward her face, which was still very close. She looked up and made eye contact with me, gripping my shaft and eliciting a gasp of pleasure from me. Then, without breaking her gaze, she opened her mouth and pressed my tip to her tongue before closing her lips around me.

“Fuck, Anna,” I said as she began a gentle sucking motion, swirling her tongue on the underside of my cock as she used both hands to pump from my base to her mouth. The movements she used were slow and calculated, much less hasty than the first time she’d done this, when it was a part of our rushed tryst right here in this office. Now, when it was its own event, when she took her time, her motions and movements were expert and left me with a feeling of perpetual ecstasy.

I reached down and gripped her hair, pulling her in closer, feeling my tip press into the back of her throat. I tugged her back and forth, giving her a rhythm that felt like pure ecstasy. She took the direction well, bobbing up and down of her own accord even once my grip slackened, though I never let go. I loved the feeling of control, and she seemed to enjoy it as much as I did.

“Yes, baby,” I said, grunting as I wrapped my hands around her head and began to fuck her face. She let out little gagging sounds, and I paused. “Are you okay? Do you need me to stop?”

“No, sir,” she said, leaning forward to take me in her mouth again. I thrust into her throat a few more times but knew that this wouldn’t be enough. I pulled her off and stood her up before switching our positions, bending her over my desk. I pulled her shirt up and gripped her breasts, rubbing the already hard nipples. Then I pulled down the leggings she wore to reveal a lacy thong.

I bent down to bite at the band. I pulled it down as well, noting how wet it was as I did. “For me?” I growled.

She moaned in reply, and I slipped one finger, then two inside of her.

“Oh, thank you,” she whimpered.

“Don’t thank me yet,” I said. “We’re only getting started.”



## *Chapter Twenty-Three*

### **Anna**

I gasped as I felt Kevin's belt tighten around my wrists. I'd dabbled in a little bondage, but Caleb was so awful at it that it didn't seem worth that hassle of the setup.

"Is this okay?" he asked, brushing some of my hair off my neck.

"Yes..." I sighed. "I like this a lot."

"Good," he said, tightening the belt and pinning my hands above my head. "Now let me have a good look at your gorgeous ass."

I felt his hands go to the flesh and pull my cheeks apart then let out a groan of pleasure. Quickly he gave me a tight smack on my backside, and I gave him a girlish whine in reply.

"Thank you," I said, my nerves alight.

"The pleasure is mine," Kevin groaned.

It suddenly went silent for a few seconds, then I could hear flesh on flesh and Kevin moaning softly.

“Do you like when I stare at you and touch myself?”

God, this was fucking hot. The control, the dominance. “Yes,” I said. “It’s so fucking sexy.”

The fleshy sound got faster, and so did Kevin’s breathing. “You want this thick cock inside you, sweetheart?”

I did. I really did. But I also knew the power I held right now, despite being bound and splayed across the desk.

“I dunno...” I said like a seductive vixen. “Not sure it would fit in my tight, wet pussy.”

Kevin grunted and smacked my ass again. “Only one way to find out.”

“Let me see your cock,” I said. “I think I need to see it to make an informed decision.”

Now Kevin sighed in frustration and dropped my hands so he could walk around where I could see him and offered an eyeful of his juicy cock to me.

“It’s all right,” I said with a little whine. “I’ve seen better.”

Kevin’s jaw dropped open. “You have, have you? Well, let’s see how you feel about it once I’ve fucked you so hard you forget your own name.”

He walked back around me and positioned his cock at my wet entrance. Then he grabbed hold of his belt once more and pressed inside me. His ample size expanded within me as I

tightened around him, and almost immediately he began to give me deep, reckless thrusts.

The power of his desire had my tits bouncing around my face and my entire body sliding back and forth across the shining mahogany surface.

“Fuck,” I whimpered. “Yes. Kevin... yes.”

“This fat cock isn’t good enough for you? How about now, you spoiled brat?”

I screamed as his hand came down on my ass once more, and for a moment, we threatened to devolve into a fit of giggles. If anyone had been walking within fifteen feet of this office, they definitely would have heard.

“Harder,” I begged.

His enormous hands grabbed my waist, flipping me on my back, my wrists still tied with his belt. Kevin took a step back, his girthy length bouncing as he moved, my own wetness dripping off him.

“God, you’re delicious,” he growled. He reached out and used two fingers to toy with my clit, then stuck them in his mouth. “And tasty too. With your perfect, pretty pussy.”

I squirmed as he touched me, wanting more and yet totally pushed to the limit of my tolerance for pleasure. “Give me your cock,” I begged.

“What’s that?” he asked with a sly grin.

“Please give me your cock,” I said again. “I need it so fucking much. I’m empty without you.”

As if those were the magic words, he plunged back inside me, filling me to capacity. The head of his cock pressed tenderly against my G-spot.

“Is that what you wanted?” he growled. “Does that fill you the way you wanted?”

“Yes,” I gasped. “You’re so thick. I feel like I’m gonna split in two.”

His hands gripped my hipbones, and his fingers dug into my skin, pulling me down onto his length as if to use my pussy as a sheath for his desire.

He slowed down suddenly, now rocking his hips in a tantalizing rhythm. Every woman knows that all other factors pale in comparison to a man’s ability to keep a steady rhythm, and Kevin was showing his experience with each thrust.

“I’m... I’m...”

I couldn’t even get the words out before I climaxed so hard my eyes rolled back in my head.

“That’s it. Good girl,” he said, stroking my face and hair. “Now get on your knees.”

“But,” I said, panting and holding up my bound wrists, “my hands.”

He grabbed my restraints and pulled me to the floor, holding my wrists above my head. “That won’t be a problem,” he said.

He took his cock in his hand and began to stroke it. “I could die in your fucking tits,” he groaned. “You dirty, dirty girl with your huge tits and nipples like cherries.”

He kept going, slowly in graceful strokes pleasuring himself. His eyes never left mine, and he was nearly silent until he erupted, dumping hot cum on my chest.

Almost immediately, he released my wrists, and the belt fell away, skittering across the floor.

For a moment, Kevin simply stared at me, covered in his fluids, and then pulled up his boxers, moved around his desk, and opened a drawer pulling forth a pack of wet wipes. He crouched down in front of me and cleaned my chest before handing me my shirt.

“Was that okay?” he asked, taking my chin in his hand. “I know stuff like that isn’t for everyone.”

“I actually liked it,” I said, biting my lip. “I’ve never been with someone who was so good at controlling the dynamic.”

“Really?” Kevin said in amusement. “You obviously have never been with anyone worthwhile then.”

I resisted the urge to agree with him and instead pulled myself up to my feet.

Kevin took me in his arms and kissed me tenderly. “I’m worried this is really turning into something, kid.”

My heart fluttered at the nickname, and I nodded. “I think I’m gonna tell Haley. She’s my best friend.”

Kevin looked at me nervously, then shrugged. “Whatever is gonna make you happy.”

“Does it bother you?” I asked. “The fact that she would know?”

Kevin was silent for a long while, then he sighed and said, “No. But it does make me nervous that your dad would find out.”

“We’re going to have to tell him sometime, you know. Especially if we want to see where this can go.”

I felt like I was begging, but Kevin waited only moments before nodding in agreement. “You’re right. I will figure that out. Your dad isn’t gonna kill me, after all.”

I fastened my shirt and fixed my hair. “I hope not,” I said. “I wanna see what else you can do with that... thing.” I looked at his crotch and bit my lip, causing him to groan.

“You’re going to be the death of me,” Kev said, taking my face in his hand and kissing me.

“As I said,” I replied, “I hope not.”

I found Haley back in our room, watching other ski runs and eating popcorn.

“Where have you been?” she asked.

“Around...” I replied.

“Around?” she asked, muting the TV.

I gave her a look that I knew would convey that I had a secret, and her eyes widened in excitement.

“It’s a boy,” she gasped, flopping down onto her stomach and scattering popcorn everywhere. “Who? Which one? Sondre?”

“Who? God, no. It’s...” This was it. After I told Haley it would become impossible to deny. “It’s...Kevin.”

Haley made a weird sort of noise like she was gasping and choking at the same time. I rushed to her side and began to pat her on the back.

“Don’t die on me,” I said. Haley grasped my arm and looked me dead in the eye.

“Uncle Kevin?”

“Oh, gross. Don’t say it like that. He’s not my uncle.”

“Well, close enough. How the hell did this happen?” she asked.

“Suddenly and all at once,” I replied, choosing not to fill her in on the details of the night in the hot tub.

“But he’s such an ass,” she replied, standing and beginning to pace.

“He’s really not,” I said, sitting on her bed. “He’s actually really loving and caring. And he knew my mom really well.”

“Oh well, that makes it better. The weirdo had a crush on your mom, and when he couldn’t get her, he settled for you.”

“He’s not a weirdo,” I snapped, feeling hurt by her outrageous response.

Haley stared at me, mouth gaping, probably surprised that I was defending this so hard. “You really like him, don’t you?”

I hung my head and nodded. “He’s incredible. Smart and thoughtful, and really, really good in bed. Not that we’ve had any bed encounters—”

“Anna!” Haley replied, scandalized but smiling. “Where in the world has he been giving it to you then?”

I hesitated a moment before answering. “His office.”

I’m not sure what I expected from Haley, but it certainly wasn’t for her to burst into laughter.

“Well, this wasn’t really what I had in mind when I said a vacation boyfriend, you ridiculous woman. But as long as you’re having fun, you slut, I’m happy for you.”

“Haley, I think this might be more than a hookup.”

She raised an eyebrow. “Yeah?”

I nodded. “We just spoke about it briefly today. He said he would be sure to tell my dad. But that being said, him telling Dad might be the last thing he does, so maybe I shouldn’t have told you. Could be short-lived.”

We giggled together, and I felt all warm inside. I knew Haley would support me; that was just the kind of friend she was. And that was why I didn’t mind coming out here just to be her cheerleader and wingman.

“You and Max are pretty cute,” I said, grinning.



“I know,” said Haley, twirling on her toes and then fixing her hair in the mirror. “He’s the cute part.”

“Oh shut it,” I replied. “You are gorgeous, and you know it.”

Haley grinned at me, pinning her hair back. “Well, after the next run it won't matter how gorgeous I am. Hopefully, I'll be an Olympic contender.”

I squealed, and she joined me, grabbing my hands and pulling me to my feet so we could jump up and down together.

“Are you nervous?” I asked.

“Is the sky blue? Is the snow white?”

“Well,” I said stopping my bouncing, “I suppose it depends on whether there have been any dogs nearby.”

“Gross,” Haley said, making a face. “Yes, I’m nervous.”

“Don’t be,” I said, sitting down and panting. “You’re amazing. So long as you don’t trip on something *again*.”

She threw a pillow at me and stuck out her tongue. “It’s not like I do it on purpose. And besides, my coach has been giving me some tips on how to avoid it.”

“Good,” I said, turning and looking out over the slopes. “Someone ought to.”

“See here, miss,” Haley said, getting in my face playfully, “I’d like to see you do better.”

“Fat fucking chance,” I said. “I’m just glad you’ve given up on me taking lessons.”

“Well,” she said, giggling, “doesn’t seem you can teach an old dog new tricks.”

“Pardon you, *ma’am*. I’m twenty-five, thank you very much.”

“Practically ancient,” she replied.

I threw the pillow back at her, and she dodged it, letting it hit the TV.

“Haley! Don't break anything.”

“Why?” she asked. “Gonna tell your boyfriend on me?”

## *Chapter Twenty-Four*

### **Kevin**

I scoured the front pages of the local papers and the online news outlets, searching for mentions of the resort or me. I didn't have to look very far. Every single one had coverage of the skier's fall and misquoted words I'd supposedly said that made both me and the resort look terrible.

I threw the papers I could hold into the garbage and closed out all of the news windows on my laptop before slamming it shut and leaning back in my chair.

It had been two days since the disaster, and somehow, the story only got more extreme in the thirty-six hours since it had happened.

**Former Competition Skier Fails to Keep Competitors Safe**

**The Hidden Dangers at Brother Bears Ski Lodge**

## **Fall or Foul–Did the Owner of the Lodge Create the Disaster out of Jealousy?**

## **Sinister Slopes–Retired Competitive Skier Sabotages Rival of Family Friend**

Those were my favorites. The ones that somehow implied that I had deliberately done something to make the poor kid crash. It was almost as fun as the reasons people gave, like I was trying to cheat to get Haley to win or that I was jealous I'd never made it to the Olympics, so I took out the kid with the best chance. That one was laughable. I'm not usually one to make disparaging comments about people fighting for their lives, but before his injury, he'd been well behind the time he needed to beat to move on. But no one cares about that when you need click bait.

I took a large swallow of my scalding black coffee, hoping for something to feel besides the despair of watching my entire life's work slowly circling the drain. Before I could even react to the burning in my throat, someone knocked at my door.

I looked at my watch. Seven-thirty in the morning. Who the hell would be at the door of my suite this early? Only one person came to mind, someone I hadn't seen since our encounter two nights ago.

I went to the door and opened it.

“Anna?” I said as I did, but the person on the other side was definitely not Anna.

“Expecting someone else?” my friend James said, clapping me on the shoulder and walking in despite the lack of invitation.

“Uh, maybe,” I said, knowing that to deny it now would be difficult, but I wasn’t quite ready to share. “To what do I owe the intrusion?”

He looked at the overflowing garbage can and raised an eyebrow.

“Is your browser half as cluttered as your trash?”

I scowled and went to sit down on my sofa. “I didn’t ask you to comment on my housekeeping or on my computer habits,” I said, staring him down. “Why are you here, James?”

James simply smiled, having seen me in moods like this one too many times to be affected by it. He strode across the living room to sit kitty corner to me in my leather armchair, crossing his long legs and running a hand through his reddish hair.

“Because your resort is a circus, and I wanted to check on you to see if you’re holding up,” he said. “Judging by the state of your garbage can and the slightly more than a five o clock shadow gracing your chin, I’m guessing it isn’t too well.”

“Can you blame me?” I asked. “First the *Powder* review, and now this? If I believed in curses, I’d be convinced someone had put one on me.”

“Maybe someone did,” he joked, but when I didn’t laugh, he sighed. “I know it’s rough. I can’t even imagine what it would

do to me if my resort came under this kind of scrutiny and critique.”

“I can’t imagine it, and I’m living it.”

There was a long, thick silence, and then James said, “So what do you need to get through this?”

“Honestly?” I said, leaning forward on my knees. “I don’t really know.”

“What you need,” James said, “is a woman to comfort you.”

I gave a wry laugh. I already had that. Anna had come by my office the night of the accident and had made me completely forget about it, even if it was only for a short while. And I’d made no effort to see her the following day like an absolute ass, with the whole media circus I’d been dealing with.

“What’s that laugh for?” he asked. “Is it because of maybe ‘Anna’?”

I wanted to glare at him and deny it, but I couldn’t help but smile a little at the sound of her name.

“Yeah,” I admitted. “Maybe Anna has been... great since she got here.”

“Got here?” he said, his smile fading. “So she’s a guest? Kev, that’s not going to end well.”

“You don’t know the half of it.” I said, rubbing my eyes with my fingertips.

“Oh, no,” James said, uncrossing his legs and leaning forward. “What did you get yourself into?”

I hesitated, wondering how much I wanted to share, unsure if James would be understanding of my plight or if he’d judge me.

“Anna is...” I looked for the word. “Younger.”

“How young?” James said quickly, and I heard the panic in his voice.

“Not that young,” I assured him just as fast, not wanting him to get the wrong idea. “She’s twenty-five.”

“Wow,” James said, raising his eyebrows. “You weren’t kidding.”

“No, I wasn’t.” I debated not sharing the rest but knew that the opinion of a friend might help me get my head around the situation. Either that or it would confuse me further, but there was only one way to find out. “There’s more.”

“Of course, there is,” he said wearily, leaning back again. “It couldn’t just be a fling with a twenty-something guest with you. It would be something bigger.”

“Yeah, well...” I sighed and ran my hands down my face. “She’s Henry’s daughter.”

James seemed to choke on his own tongue. “Henry? Anna is Henry’s Anna?” he barked.

“Yeah,” I said.

“His daughter?”

“Yeah.”

“He’s going to murder you,” James said.

“That’s exactly what I’m worried about,” I said.

“Why would you even consider screwing around with his kid?”

“She’s not a kid,” I said, bristling in defensiveness. “She’s... amazing. She’s smart. Not just smart, but clever. She’s witty and funny, and my God, she’s beautiful. And when I tell you it’s the best sex I’ve ever had—”

“You would be saying that because any man our age is going to feel that way about fucking someone half our age, but come on, man. It’s Henry. Have you lost your mind?”

“Maybe,” I said, suddenly unsure. “I just... I haven’t been able to stop thinking about her since she got here, and I thought sleeping with her would get it out of my system, but it’s only made me want her even more. But how do I face Henry ever again? How do I even tell him? Do I let her do it? Or is that the coward’s way out?”

“That’s definitely the coward’s way out,” he said, much to my disappointment. I looked down at my hands, and he continued, “But I think the more immediate question is, is this going anywhere after this week? When she goes home, will this just be a blip on your radars, or is it something more?”

“I don’t know,” I said. It was an honest answer. I was completely taken with Anna, but I had no idea if she felt the same.



“Because if it’s nothing more than a one-week tryst,” he said, “telling Henry only hurts him. You and Anna would need to be on the same page about keeping it to yourselves, but if you agree to be done when she leaves, you’ll have to live with the guilt, but you’ll be able to keep your friendship.” He paused, taking a deep breath. “But if you think there’s more there, you need to decide if it’s worth risking your friendship over, because if you want anything to do with her beyond this, you need to be ready for him to hate you forever. And there’s every chance that you’ll still lose her, if he ends up hating you and it’s too much for her.”

“Paint me a drearier picture, why don’t you?” I said dully, knowing he was right on all counts.

“Sorry,” he said with a sympathetic smile. “I wish I could say something different. But you have to decide if it’s worth the risk, if you like her enough to take the chance of losing her and a friend for the chance to keep her.”

I sighed, knowing he was right and hating it. “Yeah. I guess I do.”

James shook his head and laughed in dry amusement. “I was expecting a very different conversation when I came over this morning,” he said. “I was expecting to be talking you off a ledge.”

“You nearly were,” I said. “Believe me, I was debating selling the place and going into hiding before you showed up.”

“And now?”

“Oh, I still am,” I said, eliciting a chuckle from him. “But for more reasons than one.”

“Well,” he said, standing, “I was going to sit around and help you work through the media stuff, but I feel like maybe you have some working through to do on your own.”

“Yeah,” I said, standing and shaking his hand. “Thanks for coming by. It helped. A lot.”

James nodded, and I walked him to the door.

“Now listen,” he said, the door already open and ready to shut behind him. “I’m sure this goes without saying, but don’t do anything I wouldn’t do.”

“I think I already have,” I said with a wry laugh, which he returned before he left.

I wandered aimlessly around my suite, reading more of the articles about the accident on my phone but not really seeing them. After a while, I gave up and went to my room, wanting to remind myself of what I might be losing by making this thing with Anna a real deal.

I opened my closet and pulled out a box I hadn’t looked at in years, dusted it off, and set it on my bed. I stared at the outside, knowing what I’d find inside and somehow still feeling like I was in for a surprise. As it turned out, I was surprised, but not by what was inside. I was surprised by what I felt about it.

I pulled out photos of Henry and me, medals from skiing, letters we’d written to each other. There was a picture of the

two of us at the base of the very hill where the skier had fallen, holding up a silver and gold medal, with me placing just above him. He didn't seem to mind, though. He was as happy as I was in the picture.

He had always been a supportive friend, and the guilt about having developed feelings for his daughter doubled as I looked through even more pictures of our youth here at the lodge. Eventually, I came across a picture of me, Henry, and Jennifer sitting on a ski lift, strapped up with skis. I picked it up and looked at it for several minutes. It was incredible how much like her mother Anna looked. I'd been almost as close to Jen as I was to Henry. Once they got together, it was the three of us more than it was just me and him, and I loved it that way. When she died, it was like losing a member of my own family.

I smiled at the memory captured in the photo. It was our first run of the day, and Henry and I had a bet on who would make it down first. We ended up both losing when Jen, who was never as competitive with skiing as we were, somehow left us both in the dust—or powder, as it was.

I looked at my watch. Anna would likely be having breakfast now. I hadn't seen her the day before, so maybe taking this picture to her to show her a memory of her mother might make up for being a jackass.

And in that hope, I knew my answer to James's question.

## *Chapter Twenty-Five*

### **Anna**

**H**aley woke me up bright and early and instructed me that we were going to breakfast. I'd rarely been awake before ten since we'd arrived, so this would be my first breakfast with all the skiers.

I had yet to figure out how to talk to any of them, still hardly understanding any of the skiing lingo, but I struck up a conversation with a lovely Norwegian man named Sondre, who was currently leading his heat.

"You have the most fabulous Californian accent," he said, digging into some watermelon.

"Do I?" I replied. "I didn't think Americans had accents."

"Oh definitely. And Californian is my favorite."

The spread that had been laid out for the champions, compliments of the lodge, was incredible. Croissants with

Nutella, fruit of all sorts, bacon, eggs, and five different types of juices.

Blond and very Scandinavian Sondre brushed his hair back and leaned in a little closer. “Do you live close to the beach?” he asked.

“Well,” I said, “I guess it depends on what you mean by close.”

Sondre looked at me like he didn’t understand.

From across the room, a door opened, and Kevin walked in. I tried not to stare, but after what had happened the other night post competition, it was hard for me to think of anything else.

Kevin too seemed to be trying awfully hard to look like he wasn’t looking for me, but when our eyes met, his shoulders relaxed.

I gave him a little smile, and he returned it. That is until he saw Sondre place a hand on my shoulder.

“Do you have a date for the party tonight?” Sondre said, his fingers going to a strand of my loose hair. His blue eyes sparkled as he flirted, but the only gaze I could feel was Kevin’s.

“I... I don’t know if I’m going,” I said, resisting the temptation to look at the man I should definitely not be sleeping with.

“Oh, why not? You should,” he said, leaning in a little more. “You should come as my date—”

“Hello, Anna,” came a voice from behind me.

I turned to find Kevin standing there, not looking at me, but at Sondre.

“Who’s your friend?” he asked.

Sondre put out his hand. “Sondre Sorenson,” he said. “Nice to meet you. You’re the owner, right? The man behind all of this?”

Kevin nodded. “Indeed. And if you have complaints to lodge, I can bring you a gorgeous trash can.”

Sondre laughed, and it was clear that Kevin was trying to come off as joking. But I could see the nerve twitching in his neck.

“Kevin,” I said, “I actually had a question for you. Can we go to your office?”

“I wanted to show you the breakfast room. Let’s go there instead,” Kevin said, holding out his hand.

But I walked past him, heading for the direction of the breakfast room, conveniently directed by a sign in the lobby. His office was becoming a well-known location to me now, and it would be nice to see other things besides the ceiling above his desk.

Kevin followed me into the brightly lit room and then closed the door behind him.

“Very subtle, Kevin,” I said with irritation.

“He was looking down your shirt,” Kevin said, rounding on me and landing with his hand on the wall over my head. “It was disgusting.”

“And why shouldn’t he?” I snapped back. “I have really nice tits.”

Kevin actually growled and pulled away, beginning to pace the floor. “Your dad told me to look out for you. I’m pretty sure that young man is exactly the kind of thing Henry wanted me to protect you from.”

“Oh,” I said incredulously. “As opposed to being sure his best friend didn’t accidentally slip and fall into my vagina.”

Kevin’s face drained of color. “Don’t say it like that,” he said. “We have... a connection.”

“Oh, really?” I asked. “And that connection goes beyond what a condom can block out?”

“Don’t be crude,” Kevin barked. “I was only trying to look out for you.”

“Well, don’t,” I said, taking a step toward him and putting my finger in his face. “I am a grown woman who is perfectly capable of taking care of—”

Kevin grabbed me by the wrist and pulled me up against him, mashing his lips into mine. In seconds, his hands went to my ass, and I moaned as he deepened the kiss.

“You’re so... fucking... jealous,” I tried to shout into his mouth. But he silenced me with his tongue, picking me up and setting me on a table.

I spread my legs, and he pressed up against me for a moment, toying with his belt.

But then he stopped. Pulling back, he turned away, wiping his mouth. “No...” he said.

“No?” I replied, tugging my skirt down.

“No,” he said again. “That’s not why I came looking for you.”

I walked over to him, wrapping my arms around his waist. The fighting had fueled me up, and now I wanted him badly.

Kevin turned, grabbing my arms to keep me from my seduction. “I came to find you to show you something really special. And if we sleep together now, it’s not gonna be as...” he stopped, staring at me with an odd look. It was almost like a cross between longing and frustration. “I really didn’t like seeing you with that guy.”

I folded my arms and stared at him. I couldn't explain why, but I loved hearing him say that. If I was perfectly honest with myself, I think I could admit—even if only in my head—that I could picture myself as being more than just the occasional romp to Kevin. The only issue would be to explain it to my father. I loved the idea of being a young wife to a handsome billionaire.

“I have something for you,” Kevin said, tearing his eyes away from me. “I came across these while I was organizing my drawers yesterday.”



He grabbed a manila envelope off of one of the tables and handed it to me. The date on it was 1996, and the label read, *Kevin, Henry, James, Jen.*

I reached in and pulled out a stack of old photos, two of them fluttering to the floor as I did. I held one up and looked at it to see the smiling faces of my parents looking back at me. “Kev...” I gasped.

“I knew I had them around here somewhere. They were my best friends, after all.”

One after another, I looked through the photos, tearing up as I saw how happy they had been. “These are amazing,” I sniffled, kneeling down to grab the photos that fell.

I turned them around and saw Kevin, Dad, and Mom all sitting side by side on a ski lift. “This looks incredibly dangerous,” I said, reaching up to wipe a tear from my cheek.

“Oh, it was,” Kevin replied, laughing. “We thought we were invincible.”

I couldn’t help but really stare at my mother’s face, one I’d never known and yet looked at every day in the mirror. Dad had always said I looked so much like her, and now I could see why. She was my age in these pictures, and she’d only lived two more years after them.

“She’s so beautiful,” I said with a gentle sob. I could feel myself really starting to break down, and I sank to my knees in heartache.

Kevin slowly crouched beside me, putting his hand on my shoulder. “She was glorious,” he said. “The funniest person I’ve ever met and such a generous soul. The four of us were all great friends, and for a while, I was jealous that your dad had managed to snag her. No one could make fun like Jen could.”

I sat down, crossed my legs, and looked at the other picture. It was Kevin with Mom and Dad at their wedding. Kevin looked incredible, but Mom was radiant. Dad was handsome as always, but you could hardly see either of the two men with Mom in the middle.

I had once found her wedding gown in the basement and tried it on without asking. Dad had been furious with me and told me not to ever touch her stuff without permission again. I was so confused at the time about why it mattered. But now, as an adult, I could see that my dad had still been grieving the loss of her. And from the way Kevin spoke of my mother, it seemed clear why.

“Thank you, Kevin,” I said. “This means more to me than you can possibly know.”

Kevin dipped his head in embarrassment. He was clearly very pleased with himself, and it made him look even more handsome.

I got to my feet and took his face in both my hands, kissing him softly. His arms went around my waist, and he buried his face in my hair. “You remind me so much of her, but you are very much your own woman, Anna,” he said. “If I knew Jen the way I think I did, she would be so proud of you.”

“Do you really think so?” I murmured against his chest.

“Definitely,” he said. “She would have loved how you care fiercely for your friends and always stand up for what you think is right. That night you stormed me in the restaurant, I could have sworn it was Jen coming for my head. She would have done almost the exact same thing.”

Through my tears, I beamed with pride. It made me feel comforted to know that I was like her, and yet Kevin liked me for my own merits. It would have been so easy for him to have coveted his best friend’s pretty, funny wife and to see how his daughter was a second chance at that. Instead, he saw me as my parents’ daughter, but ultimately, my own person.

“My dad blames me for her death,” I confessed softly.

“Anna...” he said, shaking his head. “I’m sure he doesn’t—”

“Fine,” I said, nodding. “He doesn’t blame me. But every time he looks at me, all he can think about is how he lost her. I’ve had to live with that my whole life.”

Kevin stood silent. I wouldn’t have known what to say if I was him. It was a confession I wasn’t always willing to accept myself, let alone share with another person. Particularly with my dad’s best friend who knew my glorious, pillar of light of a mother.

“Henry would never—”

“No, he wouldn’t,” I said, shaking my head. “But he does.”

Kevin began to twirl his keys around his fingers nervously. “Well, if he can’t see what an incredible daughter he has, and

what a gift Jen gave him, then that's his loss."

My heart flooded with gratitude. "Kevin..." I whispered desperately.

His cologne filled my senses, and his strong hands around my waist made me feel like this was truly where I belonged.

"Anna... I want this... I want you." Kevin leaned in and kissed me again. "So damn badly..."

"Then have me," I breathed. "Have all of me."

Kevin pulled me tightly against him and carried me to the enormous picture windows that looked out over the mountains. He pressed me against them and ran his fingers over my neck and down my breasts. I felt him get hard against me, deliciously, impossibly hard.

While Kevin fumbled with his belt with one hand, he used the leverage between me and the window to tug my panties down around my thighs. I pulled hard on the neck of my sweater, leaving me in my bra and skirt.

Kevin's hand went to my center, and he used his thumb to stroke my clit. "Get that bra off, my angel."

"Yes, sir," I groaned, reaching behind me to unclasp the bra that was a barrier between his mouth and my perked nipples.

"God you're wet," he said, his eyes rolling as he licked his fingers.

"It's because I want you so fucking badly," I replied. "And I want you to take it nice and slow."

Kevin's eyes widened, and he got a wicked grin on his face.

“Oh, I plan to.”

## *Chapter Twenty-Six*

### **Kevin**

I didn't think I'd ever get over the feeling of Anna against me, of the way my cock throbbed when I reached between her legs and felt how wet she was for me.

Her perfect tits were out, and in the chill from the window, her nipples were hard enough to cut glass. As one hand swirled around her clit, sliding through the juices she emitted for me, the other hand went to her breast and began to squeeze and toy with the little pink nub atop it.

"Fuck," she whined, arching to press harder against the hand between her legs. "God, Kevin..."

"Yes, baby?" I said in a low voice, pressing my nose against her jaw to turn her head so that I could press my lips to the hollow behind her ear.

"You feel..."

I wasn't sure exactly how I felt to her because she devolved into a long, drawn-out moan which was punctuated with a deep gasp.

A sudden need to have my mouth all over her overtook me, and I stopped my stroking between her legs and bent down to pull her panties all the way to the floor so she could step out. Once she was free of them, I remained on one knee, looking up at her and stroking my length for a moment where she could feel it against her. She leaned into me, and I had to fight the urge to skip straight to the grand finale.

But I wasn't going to rush things. Not now.

I pressed my nose to the small, soft thatch of hair above her thighs, which was glistening from my previous toying with what was inside of it, and breathed in her lovely scent. I kissed the top of her crease and let out a groan of my own. I wanted to devour her.

I nudged her legs apart with my shoulder just enough to fit my face between them, and I ran my lips along the length of her entrance, lapping up her wetness as I went, until I finally slipped my tongue between her lips and found her clit once more, this time with my tongue.

“God, yes,” Anna moaned, her hands going to my hair, her fingers twisting in it and tugging at it slightly. “Oh, yes...”

I took the encouragement and ran with it, using my tongue to circle and stroke the sensitive little bud, drawing whimpers and moans and gasps from her mouth, each of which sent me further into a frenzy.

When she began to grind against my face, I decided to offer her a little more. The hand which wasn't pleasuring myself, which had been wrapped around her, squeezing her ass, went instead to her tight little hole, where I slipped one, then two fingers inside and curled them slightly toward me, pressing into the soft spot inside which I knew would send her into spasms of ecstasy.

"Shit," she gasped, letting go of my hair with one hand to press it against the window over her head. It was only a second later that her legs began to shake and I felt her convulsing around my fingers.

"That's a good girl," I murmured, barely moving my lips from her center, wanting to wait until she was done before I moved on.

She came twice in quick succession, and I would have gone on that way for hours, but I had something else in mind.

"Fuck," I moaned. "I need you. Now."

"Yes," she said. "Yes, *please*."

Her consent to move on was good enough for me, and I stood to face her. She started to drop to her own knees, lips already parting, but I stopped her.

"No," I said firmly. "I want this to be different."

I slowed down and pressed her harder into the window, kissing her deeply. Her hands went to my chest, where her fingers curled in like she was trying to grab onto a shirt that



wasn't there. She let out the tiniest whimper as she leaned into me, putting all her trust in me.

I wrapped my hands around her waist and held her to me, feeling my length pressed between us. My hips moved, wanting, needing more, but I forced myself to wait.

I slightly bent my knees and lowered my hands to the backs of her thighs, where I gripped tightly and lifted, hoisting her up and pinning her against the window once more for leverage. Her legs wrapped around my waist, and she flung her arms around my neck, holding herself to me.

Her slick, damp entrance was pressing against my stiff cock, which was beneath her now, perfectly positioned for what I was going to do next. I slipped a hand down between us and gripped my length, directing it to her crease, feeling the tip press gently into her, ready for the rest to follow.

I looked into her eyes and she into mine, both of us panting. I paused, and she nodded, biting her lip.

“Oh,” I moaned as I arched my hips forward, sliding inside of her and feeling the now familiar clench of her sex around me. Her warmth was like nothing I'd ever felt before and like nothing I wanted to be without ever again,

With her pressed against the window, one of my hands holding her ass for support and the other wrapped around the back of her neck, I began to move, grinding inside of her and feeling the small waves of mini orgasms as I hit that same spot again, this time with my rod.

Holding her while I fucked her—while I made love to her, because that’s really what this was—was a singular experience. Her weight added to the sensation in my cock, and the effort it took to keep her up helped me to last longer.

I kissed the side of her neck opposite my hand, then felt my thumb trace her windpipe.

I slowly wrapped my hand around her throat, gently, without pressure at first. I looked at her, our bodies still moving together as her fingers dug into my shoulders.

“Do you want me to?” I asked in a low voice.

“Fuck, yes,” she said, throwing her head back to allow me greater access.

I squeezed in a technique an old ex-girlfriend had taught me. It restricted airflow for the sensation but didn’t cut it off completely, and it left the blood flow alone entirely. It allowed me to choke her for erotic purposes without hurting her.

“You like that?” I asked as she leaned even harder into my hand.

She gave the slightest nod, her eyes on mine. I felt her clench around me and knew she’d come again, but I wasn’t nearly finished.

I pounded into her fast and hard, hearing the tiniest of whimpers escape through her mouth with the air she could utilize.

“Yeah, you do, don’t you?” I could see it in the way she looked at me and feel it in the continued climax which seemed

to be going on without end.

“Yes,” she breathed, unable to do more.

“Good girl,” I said, slowing my thrusts but making them more intense, each one punctuating my words. “That’s... a... good... fucking... girl...”

I released her throat so I could grab her with both hands and fuck her properly, without worrying she might fall.

“Thank you,” she panted as I slammed into her. “Thank you... yes... yes...”

I felt her come again on my cock, and I knew I was getting close myself. But finishing here, like this, would be a huge mess for housekeeping, so I carried her, bouncing atop my length, over to the buffet where, on busier days, we would serve breakfast.

I laid her down and finally slipped out for a moment as I looked at her, splayed out for me to see. Her throbbing center was dripping with her delicious juices, and I licked my lips as a reminder of how she tasted.

“What’s wrong?” she asked.

“Not a damn thing,” I said as I began to stroke myself, looking at her. I took a step forward so that I was between her legs. My tip pressed against her but didn’t penetrate, and I put my thumb to her clit and began to massage it.

“Oh...”

“That’s it,” I said. “Just like that.” I pressed into her as I rubbed at her swollen nub, only going as far as the tip, pumping my hand up and down my length, jerking myself off inside of her while I played with her. She quivered in pleasure, and I could feel her writhing and pulsing. She was close.

Good.

“You there, baby?” I asked.

“Yes,” she gasped. “Yes, Kevin, fuck, I’m going to come.”

“Come for me, baby.”

Right on command, she let out a cry I was worried would draw attention from outside, but I didn’t care enough to stop. The second her climax began, I moved my finger away from her clit and pressed the rest of the way inside of her, furiously thrusting over and over, feeling her tighten around me in an orgasm that seemed to go on and on.

She was still coming when I felt my own orgasm starting, which was perfect. Coming together was something rare, but I wanted it to happen now.

“Anna...” I said, the words rough and gravelly, “I’m ready. Do you want me to...?” I hadn’t pulled out yet, since Anna had assured me after the first time she was on birth control, but it felt right to at least ask her.

“No,” she said, grabbing me by the waist to hold me to her, her face twisted in a glorious expression of ecstasy. “No. I’m not done yet.”

“Good,” I said, allowing myself to freely pump in and out of her, feeling that wave build up within me and, right as she seemed to be finishing, crashing over. With a single, mighty push, I released every ounce of tension within me, filling her and bringing her to her finish.

We lay there for several more minutes, breathing and staring at each other. I couldn't remember ever having a more intense orgasm, and it sent ripples of pleasure through me even after it was over.

Once I was able to move of my own volition again, I grabbed some napkins from a dispenser nearby and cleaned Anna up. She shuddered at my touch, and I knew her afterglow was as intense as mine.

I pulled her up to sitting, and she pulled her skirt down before hopping back up to sit at the edge of the table.

“Well...” she said, running a hand through her thoroughly tangled hair. “That was... something.”

“Something good, I hope,” I said, zipping my pants back up.

“It was okay,” she said in an offhand way. I gaped at her, unsure if she was being serious, but then she laughed. “I'm kidding. Kevin, that might have been the best sex I've ever had.” She blushed once she said it, like she couldn't believe she'd uttered the words that had come out of her mouth.

“Me too,” I said, stepping back toward her. I stood between her legs. She was still warm, and a shiver rippled through my body at the still-fresh memory of how she felt.

“Really?” she asked, frowning but reaching up to put her arms around my neck. “You’re not just saying that?”

“Of course, I mean it,” I said, putting my hands on her waist and leaning down to give her a quick kiss. “You are something really, truly special, and the idea of not having my hands or body on you at all times is enough to drive me insane.”

“Yeah,” she said breathlessly. “I know the feeling.”

I kissed her again, this time slowly and deeply, holding her tightly against me, not wanting to let go. And as she laid her head on my chest and melted against me, I knew that any chance I had of giving this up and forgetting it had happened had gone up in smoke.

## *Chapter Twenty-Seven*

### **Anna**

**H**aley had gone out for some late afternoon practice, so I was lounging in Kevin's office while he worked. Once again, I was gazing at the photos of my parents and feeling a little sentimental.

Being near Kevin actually seemed to make me feel oddly closer to my parents—especially my mom. They had been friends, close friends. The only other person I'd ever had to ask about her was Dad, and he was never very happy to talk about it.

“What is she drinking in this picture?” I asked him, holding up one of the Polaroids.

Kevin squinted and laughed. “That,” he said, “was a drink of our own making. We called them avalanches, and they were pretty much anything we could get our hands on at the time as poor athletes.”

“Gross,” I replied. “Anything?”

Kevin nodded. “There was one time we got our hands on some Kahlua. Turns out it doesn't mix well with lemon seltzer.” I mimicked vomiting, and he chuckled. “Yeah. That was pretty much how it went.”

“Well, it's not half as bad as some of the shit Haley and I used to drink in college. We once mixed orange juice with beer and called it a ‘beermosa.’” I shuddered just thinking about how bad it had tasted. Of course we'd finished it all because we were trying to impress the frat boys that had been camping out at our apartment, but that was beside the point.

“You're right. That does sound truly repulsive.”

We shared a chuckle, and I went back to gazing at my mom. But I soon noticed Kevin staring at me.

“What?” I asked.

“You are just so... lovely,” he said, caressing his chin with his fingers. “I'm trying to remind myself why I'm risking the best friend I ever had to be with you.”

I blushed. “You don't have to, you know. I'm not that special.”

“Bullshit,” Kevin said, getting up and coming to sit down beside me. “You are clever, and kind, and gorgeous.”

“Funny,” I replied. “I said something similar about you recently.”



Kevin raised an eyebrow and reached for my face. As he stared at my lips, he softened. “How would you like to go on a date tonight?”

“What, like a real one?”

“Yeah,” he replied.

“I’d love to,” I said. “But where could we go that we’re not gonna be seen?”

“I have a few ideas,” he replied, getting to his feet. “Do you trust me to pick food?”

I nodded, a grin spreading across my face that I couldn't stop. “That sounds amazing. What should I wear?”

Kevin looked at his watch. “Meet me back here at six in something nice.”

I hopped to my feet and gave him a little salute. “You’ve got it,” I said, turning and bursting out of the office to make the trek to my room.

In the lobby, I ran into Haley, who insisted on helping me pick what I was going to wear as well as styling my hair.

“No... no... definitely not,” she said as she went through my clothes with dissatisfaction. “Are you sure you don’t just want to borrow something of mine?” she asked.

“Haley,” I replied flatly, “there is no way that all of this boob is gonna fit into one of your dresses.”

“You make a fair point,” she said, grinning. “I was blessed with athletic talent, not tits.”

“And be thankful you were,” I said. “Having huge tits is annoying most of the time.”

In the end, we settled on a dress of mine. A tight, black number that gave off a distinctly old Hollywood vibe.

“Damn, you look sexy,” Haley said as she helped do my hair. “If Kevin wasn’t taking you out, I would.”

“You’re ridiculous,” I said, laughing at her nonsense. “I wonder where he’s gonna take me.”

“You don’t know?” Haley asked. I shook my head no, and she shrugged. “Huh. I would have assumed it was the early dinner at Bob Evans or something on account of his age.”

“Shut it, you,” I said, standing with a wobble in my six-inch heels. “He’s not that old.”

Haley stuck out her tongue at me and reached for the clutch I was borrowing from her.

“Don’t lose this,” she said, wagging a finger at me. “If you do, I’m taking it out of your wardrobe. And I really like that limited edition Coach mini backpack you have.”

I gave her a look of shock. “You wouldn’t dare,” I said in mock horror.

“Oh, but I would,” she said back. “Now get out there and make Mama proud.”

“I love you,” I said as I opened the door and slid out.

“Love you too,” she called after me. “Don’t do anything I wouldn’t do.”

Considering I'd once walked in on Haley giving a guy a blowjob through a donut, it seemed like pretty much everything was on the table.



“Jesus,” Kevin said taking me in as I met him in his office. “You look...”

“Overdressed?” I asked.

“Stunning,” he replied. “I’m gonna have a hard time keeping my hands to myself.”

I wrapped my arms around his neck and bit my lip. “We can just stay here if you want. Then you don’t have to keep your hands to yourself at all.”

“Tempting,” he said. “But I made reservations, and I really think you will like this place. A really homestyle comfort feel.”

Holy shit. Maybe Haley was right. “You’re not taking me to The Cracker Barrel, are you?”

“Does Cracker Barrel take reservations?” he asked. “I’ll have to tell all my old man friends.” He gave me a small pinch in the side, and I squealed with laughter.

“Don’t,” I groaned. “I’m ticklish.”

“Noted,” he replied with a wink.

Kevin had a chauffeured car waiting for us outside the lodge, and he ushered me, a little too quickly to be absolutely comfortable, into it.

“Kev,” I said looking around at the leather and digital temperature controls. “This is too much.”

“Look,” he said, “if I’m taking you out, I’m doing it to the max.”

“To the max, huh?” I said teasingly.

“Do I need to pull this car over?” he asked. “You’re being bad, and we haven’t even had supper yet.”

“Yes please,” I said, scooting over so I could slide into his lap.

But Kevin put his hands on my waist and prevented me from doing so. “I’d really like to arrive at the restaurant without being fully erect, thank you,” he said.

“Does that mean you’re partway there?” I joked.

“Wouldn’t you like to know?” he replied with a wink.

Turned out the restaurant was not a country kitchen-type place but rather a very nice family-owned Italian place. I absolutely loved Italian food, and I wondered if he’d known that when he picked it.

“This smells amazing,” I said, breathing in the glorious scents deeply.

“Good,” he replied. “It tastes even better, I assure you.”

The maître d' approached us and nodded to Kevin. "Signore," he said, smiling. "You look well. I have your usual table ready for you."

"Grazie, Giovanni," he replied. "I appreciate all you do."

Giovanni ushered us to a table near the back, lit by candles and perfectly tucked away from most of the others. For a moment, I wondered how many other women he'd brought here to warrant a special table and knowing the staff by name. But before I could ask—

"I love this place so much that I come here once a week by myself," he said.

"Once a week?" I laughed. "Who can eat that much Italian food?"

"You'd be surprised. Not all Italian food is heavy. Their chicken Francese is phenomenal."

Having this kind of conversation with him when most of our interactions so far had either been shouting or fucking was really nice. It was good to know he could hold up a conversation in the way he could do some other very delicious things.

"So, what would you recommend off their menu?" I asked, flipping the one-page menu in my hands to look at the back.

"The shrimp marsala is mind-blowing; then again, most of their dishes are. You really can't go wrong with anything here."

I turned the menu over and over a few more times, indecision lingering.

“You look frustrated,” he said, resting his hand on mine and lowering it to the table. “Would it help if I ordered for you?”

“God yes,” I said with relief. “I’m terrible at making decisions.”

Kevin was just flagging down their waiter when a man I didn’t know approached us. He had dark hair and extremely manicured eyebrows. The kind that looked professionally done but in the comfort of your own home, if you catch my meaning.

“Kevin,” he said, putting out his hand to shake Kevin’s. “How are you? The qualifiers seem to be going good. Minus the little—”

“Please, Zane. I’d rather not have a reminder. I’m already getting them twenty-four seven from the media.”

“Of course,” he said. “That was careless of me. And who is this?”

Kevin suddenly got a look of panic on his face and looked from Zane to me and then back to Zane.

“Oh, this?” he said putting a hand on my shoulder. “This is my niece, Anna.”

The fine hairs on the back of my neck stood on end as a quiet rage spread over me. In just a matter of minutes, this had gone from delightful dinner to awkward encounter. Why would he say that?

“Nice to meet you, Anna,” Zane said. “Your uncle here is a great guy.”

Kevin looked at me apologetically, half sorry, half begging.

“Maybe not as nice as you’d think,” I said, pulling his hand off my shoulder and putting it on the table. “If you will excuse me. I need to use the ladies’ room.” I stood and grabbed Haley’s clutch, then marched toward the bathrooms but took a detour to the exit.

How could he do this? Was he really so ashamed to be with me that he couldn’t even tell someone I didn’t know that he was my date? I was practically his girlfriend at this point, and he had pulled this shit.

“Guess that was fun while it lasted,” I said to myself as tears welled in my eyes. If he couldn’t even tell this random guy we were together, how was he ever gonna tell my father? I opened the Uber app and ordered one to pick me up a block away.

I passed Kevin’s driver as I walked but didn’t make eye contact. The last thing I needed was—

“Anna, wait.”

Fuck. I thought I’d been fast enough that he didn’t notice.

“Anna, please, I’m a coward. Please wait.”

I stopped once I reached the place where the Uber was supposed to get me, but unfortunately, it was still ten minutes away, giving Kevin time to catch up to me.

“Anna—”

“Don’t,” I said. “I may not be as old as you, but I’m not a fucking child. I don’t even know that guy. Why wouldn’t you introduce me as your date?”

“Anna—”

“I mean, if you can’t do that, do you really think you will ever tell my dad? You know what? I’ll tell him right now.”

I whipped out my phone and held it to my face to see, then dialed my dad’s number.

It rang once.

“Anna, please. You deserve much better, and I know that. I’ll make it up to you.”

It rang twice.

“Please don’t do this, Anna. If you don’t let me tell him, our friendship will be over. And you and I will never know what this could have been.”

It rang a third time, and then my father answered.

“Hello?”

“Hi, Daddy,” I said. “I—”

Kevin knocked my phone flying, and it shattered on the ground.

“What the fuck, Kevin?” I screamed in anger.

“I panicked,” he said, trying to pick up the pieces of the broken phone. “I’m sorry. I swear I’ll get you a new one.”



I dropped down onto the curb and began to cry. Kevin froze, clearly unsure how to proceed before trying to put his arm around my shoulder.

“Don’t touch me,” I said.

“All right,” he replied softly. “That’s fair. I’ve been an absolute jackass.”

“I have spent the last two years of my life with a guy that would never claim me as his in public, Kevin. Do you have any idea how much this fucks me up?”

Kevin had the decency not to reply and instead signaled for his car, which drove to us slowly.

“No thank you,” I said getting to my feet, my tears frosting on my cheeks as a light snow fell. “I’d rather walk.”

“Anna,” he said, following me as I began to walk in the direction I thought the ski lodge was. “You are not gonna walk sixteen miles at night. Especially not up that mountain. Please just let me take you back to the lodge.”

“Fine, but don’t expect me to be happy about it.”

I climbed into the car and buckled myself in, Kevin sitting next to me looking worried.

“Let’s take a detour so I can get you a new phone,” he said.

“Well, it’s literally the least you can do,” I sniffled.

“With an upgrade?” he asked, throwing a cautionary smile at me.

“It better be.”

After he got back in the car with not only a new phone, but also a smart watch, I began to explain why I had reacted the way I did.

“Caleb never wanted his friends to know we were together. He had a hard enough time calling me his girlfriend when we were alone. Having someone I really care about deny me is like driving a knife into that old wound.”

“So, you really like me, huh?”

I shot him a look. “Don’t push your luck.”

“Okay,” he said, smiling to himself. “Okay. I’ll tell your dad later this week. Deal?” I glared at him, and he rolled his eyes. “Anna, I swear, if you can let me off the hook this one time, I will never deny you are with me in a romantic capacity again. Okay, baby?”

I fiddled with my new smart watch. “Fine. But only cause I want you to skewer me like a marshmallow when we get back.”

I reached over nonchalantly and ran my hand up his thigh.

“Oh, I can definitely see that you get exactly that.”

## *Chapter Twenty-Eight*

### **Kevin**

I gathered up the equipment Anna and I would need to ski together. I knew she was still a novice, so we'd need to take it really slowly and easily, but I didn't mind. It couldn't always be double black diamonds, even as a former skiing champion.

I was standing in the lobby with two pairs of skis, two pairs of boots, two sets of poles, and two sets of goggles, waiting for her to come down to meet me. I couldn't believe she'd been so willing to forgive me after my faux pas on our date, and I was determined to make it up to her by showing her how fun skiing could be.

I looked at the clock. I was early when I got down here, excited to go, but she was running late. I debated texting her but figured I'd just wait.

That is until doubt crept into my mind. I wondered if perhaps she wasn't so gracious about me lying and saying she

was my niece after all. Maybe she was standing me up to make me look like a fool like I'd done to her at the restaurant.

I barely had time to register the thought that I wouldn't blame her for it when I felt a tap on my shoulder and spun around to greet her.

Only it wasn't Anna.

It was Henry.

My heart leaped into my throat as I faced him, mouth wide open in shock. Why was he back? Did Anna tell him? Did James? He didn't look angry, but maybe he was smiling because he was about to murder me.

"You okay?" Henry said with a slight laugh. "I figured you'd be surprised, but I didn't think you'd go comatose. I didn't give you a heart attack, did I, old man?"

I shook my head, then cleared my throat. "Why, uh..." I started. "Why are you here?"

"Not happy to see me?" he said, the words light, but I could see the hurt he was hiding behind them.

"Of course, I am!" I said, putting down the supplies to give him an embrace. "I'm just wondering what the occasion is."

"You really don't know?" he asked, and I shook my head again. "They asked some of the former winners to come for the winners' ceremony to present the prizes. Didn't the Olympics people ask you?"

When he mentioned it, I vaguely remembered an email that had come in after the skier fell on the course, and I had decided to read it later, only to forget it.

“Maybe,” I said, shrugging. “I’ve been... a little busy this week.”

“I bet,” Henry said, sitting down on the couch and leaning back. “The tumble that guy took was harrowing, to say the least. And the media did what the media does and found a scapegoat. But it seems to have mostly died down. There was some other big news story down in Texas that the national news shifted their attention to.”

That was good. I’d honestly stopped paying attention to it since Anna and I had been making things a little more serious between us, but I couldn’t exactly say that, could I?

“Oh, really?” I said. “I hadn’t been paying attention.”

“That’s good,” he said. “James said he was going to come over to check on you, but I didn’t hear back, so I assumed it was all okay.”

So James hadn’t told him. And judging by the way he wasn’t throttling me, I had to assume Anna hadn’t either.

“Yeah,” I said. There was a lump in my throat the size of a melon. I’d thought I would have a lot longer before I had to face him, longer to figure out exactly what this thing was with Anna before I told him. “I’m doing all right.” I didn’t think I’d ever been less all right, and it was only because my best friend

was standing in front of me, something that had never failed to make me happy before.

“I guess so, if you’re going out skiing,” he said, pointing toward the gear. “Two sets, huh? Who’s going with you?”

“Uh...”

And to my horror, at that exact moment, Anna came bounding down the stairs toward me from behind her father. She smiled at me, and there was no way I could tell her that he was here without it being suspicious.

“Hey, Kev,” she said, reaching for me as she came around the table, and I handed her one of the skiing poles.

She looked slightly hurt and confused, but then I said, “Look who showed up to surprise us” and pointed at Henry.

“Dad?” Anna practically squeaked. She stared at him, though I could feel her eyes darting to me as I tried not to look at her. She finally recovered enough to say, “Dad! I can’t believe it.”

Henry rose to hug Anna, and when he did, she shot me a questioning look. I shrugged at her in panic and mouthed, *Not yet*, but we didn’t have time for more silent communication because, just then, he released her and started looking between us.

Oh.

Oh, shit.

He’d figured it out before I could tell him.

“So...” he said so slowly I thought I might die with anticipation of his next words, “have you guys gotten any time to get to know each other?”

I felt a hysterical laugh bubble up in my throat, but I managed to keep it under control. I looked at Anna.

“A little,” I said, trying not to think about *exactly* how good Anna and I had gotten to know each other while her dad, my friend, was watching.

“Great,” he said, beaming at us. “I can’t believe you spent most of your life not knowing my best friend, Anna.”

That might have been better, I thought, because then I would have watched her grow up and wouldn’t have fallen for her.

But then, I wouldn’t have fallen for her, and even with Henry there, I couldn’t help but notice how beautiful she was.

“I, uh...” I said awkwardly, “I was just about to take Anna out for a personal ski lesson.”

“Really?” Henry said. “That’s great. Kev’s an incredible skier. You can learn a lot from him.”

Despite my own anxiety over the interaction, Anna seemed to have recovered quickly and was now cool as a cucumber.

“Yeah,” she said with a smile at me that was all too easy to read. “That’s what I understand about him.”

My cock twitched in response to her comment, but, thankfully, it went unnoticed.

“Well,” Henry said, “I know you two have plans, but do you think you could put them off until after lunch? We could all eat, and then I’d love to join you on the slopes. I just need to get my bearings after the flight.”

“Sounds great!” I said in a voice I didn’t even recognize as my own. It was too big, too boisterous. Thankfully, Henry didn’t seem to notice, so I cleared my throat and tried speaking again. “Would you like to eat at Three Peaks? My treat.”

Anna laughed and gave me a playful shove. “As if you don’t own the place,” she said.

I didn’t know how she could be so calm with her dad here, knowing what we were doing behind his back. But I supposed if he did find out, it wouldn’t have been her he would have blamed. No, it would be the dirty old man who’d taken advantage of his young, naïve daughter, even if she wasn’t.

“Sounds great,” Henry said, smiling at the interaction between Anna and me. He wrapped an arm around Anna’s shoulder and kissed the top of her head. “I’m so glad I get to be here to share this with you.”

Anna hugged him around the middle, once again shooting me a look that told me she was no less panicked than I was, but she was just hiding it well.

Over lunch, Anna and I somehow kept our cool and gave him just enough information about us getting to know each other to let him believe it was all chaste and platonic. Anna even mentioned the young skier who’d been flirting with her at breakfast the day before to throw Henry off the trail.



I wondered how he'd react when he found out that we not only lied by omission, but had told a lie straight to his face.

"Have you tried skiing yet?" Henry asked her. "Or is this your first time getting out there?"

"I went out once before with Max."

"Your nephew?" he said, pointing to me for confirmation.

"Yeah," I said.

"And how did it go?" Henry asked.

"Not so good," she said. "I did okay the first few runs, but then I fell, and Kevin helped patch me up."

"He did that for me so many times, I lost count."

"That was what he said," she said with a tinkling laugh.

When we finished eating, we went back down to the lobby, and I gathered up the supplies once more, grabbing an extra set for Henry since he hadn't brought his own.

Out on the slopes, I felt awkward trying to help Anna. It felt like every time I touched her, even in the context of helping her ski, a signal went off, alerting Henry to what was going on. Of course, he had no idea, and was just as quick to help teach Anna as I was.

When we finally got a moment alone away from him, Anna cornered me.

"I thought you weren't going to lie about me anymore," she hissed at me. "And you said you were going to tell him."

“Later this week,” I said, reminding her about the details of my promise.

“It *is* later this week,” she said.

“I know,” I said. “Just give me a couple more days to figure out how I’m going to tell him, okay?”

She glared at me for a long time, and I wondered if she might not stomp off and just tell him like she’d nearly done the day before. But then, finally, she said, “Fine. But if you don’t tell him before the competition is over, *we* are over.”

“That’s tomorrow,” I said. “I haven’t even started to think about what to say.”

“Better get a move on then,” she said before slowly skiing away down the hill without falling.

## *Chapter Twenty-Nine*

### **Anna**

**K**evin and I decided to sleep apart for Haley's sake. I didn't want her to be left alone the night before the last competition day. Instead, we had a movie night and talked about Max. The two things combined seemed to take her mind off the pressure she was under.

"Is he good in bed?" I asked her.

Haley giggled. "How do you know we've ever done anything?" she asked.

"Because neither you nor Max can keep your mouth shut," I said, laughing. "You two talk to me about each other more than you probably talk to each other period."

"That may be true," Haley said with a smirk. "But when Max and I are together, we're not doing a lot of talking."

"See?" I said, throwing a pillow at her. "I asked if he was good, and you feel this need to tell me about that."

“Yes,” said Haley, nearly choking on popcorn. “He’s good.”

*Must run in the family*, I thought to myself.

In the morning I snuck out of Haley’s suite before the sun was fully up and went to see Kevin for some intimate time. Talking about him all night had made me want him even more, and since my dad was here, and Haley was about an hour away from waking up, I knew I’d have to be fast.

The sex was great, but after a close encounter with my dad, I wasn’t eager to push my luck further. He had asked Kevin to see the suite because apparently Kevin had done some renovations. I wish I could say that was the first time I’d had to hide in a closet after being caught out, but it definitely was not. Caleb and I had once been caught having sex at his family’s Thanksgiving, and I’d had to hide in the closet then too. By the time they left, and I managed to sneak out, the sun was just fully risen, and I would be needed to help Haley with her stuff.

Haley was really quiet as she got ready for her final run, and I was quiet with her because I wasn’t really sure what the right thing to say was.

I watched as she dressed in her gear, wishing more than anything that I would summon some encouraging words or thoughtful anecdote. But nothing came to me. How could it? I knew next to nothing about what she was going through emotionally. I had barely committed to lunch most days; dedicating my life to something like a sport was unthinkable.

It was surprising how much equipment a skier seemed to need for a three- to four-minute run, and I wondered how they didn't fall over more often with the weight of the backpack alone.

"I never did ask you how your date went the other night," Haley finally said once we were on the ski lift.

"It..."

I thought about dishing out the juicy details of Kevin's fuck-up. Haley would have loved a bit of drama, but I didn't want her to get a bad impression of the guy that I would be seeing now.

"It went great," I said, smiling. "Kevin was a lot of fun, and I don't know if you noticed, but I brought your clutch back in one piece."

"I did," she said with a mock impressed tone. "Kinda sad I won't get to steal your backpack, though."

I gave a maniacal laugh, and she giggled. I was glad I could do something to keep the mood light.

The truth was that this was what every single ski lesson, every packet of ramen eaten to save money for entry fees, every fall had led up to. This was the moment that would determine if she went on to be the athlete she'd always dreamed of or if she gave up skiing for good.

"You know," I said. "If you do this, everything is going to change."

“I know,” she said. “I’ve been thinking about that too. I can’t imagine not living together.”

“I know. The last seven years are practically a blur,” I replied. “You’re like a piece of furniture to me now.”

“Gee, thanks,” Haley said flatly. “But regardless of how you see me, we’ve been together so long that I can’t imagine not waking up a room apart.”

“Well, it’s not like we could do it forever,” I replied. “Besides, I think there might really be something for you and Max.”

Haley nodded. “He is really wonderful. So gentle and sweet. How in the world could I ever go back to LA guys after that?”

“I know what you mean,” I said. “Kevin is all the flash of an LA billionaire without the douchebag personality.”

This wasn’t entirely true. Kevin had had a spectacularly douchey moment on our date. But I trusted that he would make this right. That he would be sure that by the time I left, my dad would know.

“So, what, are you gonna like... marry him?” Haley asked.

It wasn’t like I hadn’t thought about it. But I couldn’t stop feeling like it was too soon. Like I knew that the man I’d seen so far was someone I could see myself spending my life with, but I couldn’t stop waiting for the other shoe to drop.

“It’s too early to say...right?”

Haley shrugged. “Who knows? Maybe it’s some kind of true love at first sight shit.”

Maybe it was. Kevin had really come out of left field for me, and I had no idea how I was supposed to go home at the end of the trip.

Maybe I wouldn’t.

“Kevin has to tell my dad about us before we ever try to talk about marriage. And by the way he talks, there’s a fifty percent chance he will bitch out.”

Haley laughed so hard she snorted. “I wonder what he will say? ‘Hi Henry, I just wanted to let you know I’ve been spending an awful lot of time inside your daughter. That’s okay with you, right? That I’m giving it to someone who used to live inside your balls?’”

“God, Hales,” I said pretending I was going to shove her off the lift. “That’s horrifying. I’m trying not to think about it at all, to be completely honest.”

“Fair enough,” Haley said.

We reached the top of the slope and jumped off, Haley taking her things from me.

“I’m not sure whether you’re allowed back here, and I want you to get a good place to watch.”

I felt tears well in my eyes, and I flung my arms around her. “You’re gonna do great. I know you, Haley Birmingham. You are incredible.”

“Thanks, Anna,” she said, hugging me back. “Now go get a view. I need to know you’re gonna see when I don’t trip and fall.”

We giggled together, and then I turned and walked away from her. My chest was tight from the nerves I was having on her behalf.

I took out my phone and texted Max to find out his location, to which he replied: *The usual*. I could only take that to mean the ski lift control tower we’d been watching from thus far and turned south to get there.

While I walked, I contemplated how worried I was for Haley, and how much I would miss her when she inevitably crushed this. I wanted my friend to succeed, but either way, this was the end of an era, and I didn’t know if I was ready for that yet.



## *Chapter Thirty*

### **Kevin**

**T**his morning had been not only a trial of my patience but of my heart health. Henry's presence had left Anna and me a lot less time together than I had anticipated. Turned out that when he wasn't with me, he wanted to be with her and vice versa. So I figured if Anna and I were going to be intimate, we'd need to do it before he woke up in the morning.

The knock came on my door right on schedule, and I went to open it.

"Hi," I said to Anna, stepping aside to let her in. It was the first time she'd been here, and I'd spent most of the time since Henry and I had had dinner making sure my suite was perfectly clean.

"Hi," she said, her arms crossed as she walked in, but she quickly began to smile at me. "I'm furious at you, you know."

"I know," I said, matching her grin. "And I totally get it."

“Do you?” she asked, the smile suddenly vanishing and one eyebrow shooting upward.

“Yes,” I said. “I do. And I know I broke the promise about not lying, but I think we can both agree that this is a unique case. And as soon as I figure out what to say tomorrow, I’ll tell him. We’re having breakfast, so I’ll try to do it then.”

“You’d better,” she said, stepping toward me and putting a finger to my chest. “Because if the competition ends, and I see the two of you, and you *haven’t* told him, this will be the last time this ever happens.”

“The last time what ever happens?” I asked, confused.

“This,” she said, getting even closer. She opened her palm so that her open hand was lying on my chest and slowly lowered it until her fingers were dancing along my waistband.

“Anna,” I said breathlessly, putting my hands on her upper arms, wanting to pull her in against me, but also wanting to see where she would take this on her own.

“Yes, Kevin?” she said as her other hand joined the first, grazing over the surface of my belt. Her fingers tucked into the end of the strip of leather and pulled it free before undoing the buckle quickly, then slowly drawing the belt free and tossing it to the side. “You won’t be needing that today.”

“No?” I said, the challenge in her voice causing some sleeping beast inside of me to rear its head. It wanted to take her and show her who was in charge. Who could offer her pleasure or not, and she would have no say in it.

“No,” she said in a sultry voice as she undid the button on my jeans. “Because today you owe me, and I plan on making sure I get exactly...” She unzipped my fly quickly, causing it to make a *zzt* sound. “... what...” She pulled the waistband of my jeans down just enough that she could reach my boxers beneath them. “I want.” She slipped her hands inside my boxers, her hands coaxing my already half-mast length even stiffer.

“And what is that?” I asked, panting and moving my hands from her arms to her back.

“You.”

I bent down to kiss her as she continued to stroke me from outside my pants, and I groaned into her mouth. I slid my hands down to grip her ass, pulling her more tightly against me. She rapidly pulled my pants down so that my dick was freed, already fully hard from the way she was touching me.

“God,” I moaned.

“Yes, you are,” she said before bending down and forcing me back into the front door before taking me swiftly into her mouth. My hands tangled in her hair, to pull it back from her face so I could see her with my cock in her mouth. She looked incredible, and I wanted nothing more than to slam into her throat and fill it with my seed.

But I was allowing her to take charge today, and as she reached a hand down her own pants and began to touch herself as she serviced me, I knew I could have watched her do this

forever. I wouldn't interfere. She could be in control all she wanted if I got to look at this sight forever.

Her free hand stroked my length as she suckled on the tip, sending electric jolts of ecstasy up through my body, causing me to clench my hands in her hair, pulling until she whimpered.

“Too much?” I asked. But she simply looked up at me, pulled away for a moment, and smiled. She ran a finger over her lip where some of my fluids had leaked and sucked it off as she shook her head no before sliding her lips back around me and taking me into her throat so that she was all the way down to my base. “Fuck...”

I allowed her to suck on me for another few minutes, but then I pulled her hair to let her know I wanted her to stop.

“Unless that's how you want me to finish—which, believe me, I have no issue with—you'd better stop now.”

She wiped her mouth and nodded, then stood and pressed herself against me.

“Take me to your bed, then,” she said.

I gave a slight growl of assent and reached down to tug her shirt off over her head and undo her bra, which I tossed to the side. I bent down to take a nipple in my mouth, and she wrapped her arms around my head with a gasp of pleasure.

Once I felt satisfied that I'd gotten her good and wet, based on her reactions, I stopped and lifted her into my arms so that her legs were around my waist. I carried her past my couch

and through the door to my bedroom, where I all but dropped her onto the bed in my haste.

I knelt down and grabbed her leggings by the band and pulled them free. She had on a new lacy thong, and I ran my finger over the thin strap between her legs, which was, once again, soaked for me.

I licked my thumb to taste her and started to stroke myself again. Her juices were sweet and perfect, and I could have spent all day with my face buried between her legs.

And for now, I was willing to give it a few minutes at least.

“Give me these,” I said as I yanked the panties down, tossing them just as wantonly as I had done with her bra.

“Yes, sir,” she said in a voice that had me throbbing for her. But I was going to wait.

I knelt by the edge of the bed and threw her legs up onto my shoulders to give myself access, then used my fingers to spread her lips so I could dive in with my mouth.

My lips pressed against the smooth skin and soft hair of her center as my tongue went to her clit, drawing a gasp from her.

I slipped two fingers inside of her, and she began to writhe in pleasure. I felt her convulse and clench on my fingers once, twice before I stood, still fingering her, as I moved to hover over her.

“Do you want me?” I asked.

“What?” she said, as though it was the dumbest question ever.

“Do...” I kissed her neck. “You...” I kissed the other side. “Want me?” I curled my fingers in a way I knew by now made her pant and whine, which she did.

“Yes,” she said, arching up into my touch. “God, yes.”

“Good,” I replied. I took my cock in my hand and positioned it between her legs before slowly sliding inside as she gripped my shoulders, adjusting to my mass.

By this point, being with her was easy and familiar, but this was the first time we’d been in a bed—in *my* bed, and there was something so much gentler about the way I moved when we were surrounded by the soft mattress and blankets rather than being against the hardwood of my desk or the frigid cold of a window.

“Fuck,” I moaned as I thrust into her. “You’re amazing.”

She whimpered in response, and I felt her clench around me as she came, her body responding to me in a way I would never tire of.

“Do you want to be back in control?” I asked her suddenly.

She opened her eyes, which had been closed in ecstasy, and looked into mine, searching for my meaning. I slowed my movements and licked my lips, wanting to give her this chance.

“Yes,” she said after a moment. “Yes, please.”

I gripped her by the hips and gave her a moment to realize what I was about to do before I spun, ending up with me on my back and her straddling me. The feeling of her weight coming down on me, filling her completely, so that she was pressed right up against my base, made my eyes roll back into my head for a moment.

“Yes, please...” I repeated back to her, and she laughed.

“You’re welcome,” she said, preempting any thank you I might have said next, not that I would have even been able to speak once she leaned forward, so her tits hung down near my face. I took one in between my lips, and she began to move her hips forward and back, riding me. It had been years since I’d had sex this good, and even with Anna, this was new and exciting and unbearably hot.

After grinding against me for several minutes, she transitioned to sitting upright and sliding up and down my length. My hands started at her hips, but once I saw her breasts bouncing like that, I reached up and took one in each of my hands, squeezing them and feeling myself getting closer and closer to orgasm.

“Yes,” Anna said suddenly, and I felt her tighten on me. I reached forward to rub at her little nub as she came, bringing her to a more intense orgasm. “Oh, fuck, yes... Kev... oh, God...” She cried out, riding me in earnest and taking her pleasure for her own. It was the sexiest thing I’d ever seen, and it brought me right to the edge of my own climax.

“Anna,” I managed to say exactly once before I came, letting loose my own cry of ecstasy and spilling every drop I had into her.

We both lay there panting and catching our breath for several minutes before I went to my bathroom for a washcloth to clean her up. Once she was comfortable again, I lay down beside her and pulled her against my chest.

“Are you really going to tell him?” she asked quietly.

I stroked her hair and kissed her head. “If it means keeping this, I’d tell him anything. If keeping you means I tell him about us, I’m going to.”

She cuddled up against me.

“Good,” she said, yawning. “Because I’d hate to have to tell him for you. I kind of like you and would hate for him to have to kill you.”

“Hilarious,” I said drily. “Absolutely not at all what I’m worried about.”

“It’ll be fine,” she said sleepily, pressing her face into my chest. “I think it will, anyway.”

“You are most reassuring,” I said, but she was already snoring. An impulse came over me, and I had no way of knowing why, but I kissed her head and gently whispered, “I love you, Anna.” Then I closed my eyes to rest.

I only realized I had actually fallen asleep when I woke up to the sound of someone banging on my front door, a sound which shook both Anna and me from our sleep. My heart rate



spiked, and Anna looked at me in a panic. She'd stayed longer than we planned, and now we were about to pay for it.

"Wake up, idiot," Henry's jovial voice said through the door. "We need to get a move on if we're going to eat and make it down for the competition."

"Shit," I said, leaping from the bed and gathering up clothes to put on. I wore the same jeans I had the day before and tore a long-sleeved Henley out of my closet. As I put it on, I watched Anna looking at me in horror as she pulled my sheet up over her naked body. "Don't worry. I'll keep him out there. Once we leave, you can go. I'll see you later." I walked over and kissed her deeply, wishing nothing more than to be able to stay here with her. But we both had places to be.

I closed the bedroom door behind me and walked to my front door, pausing to pick up Anna's bra, which I saw sitting on my dining table. I didn't feel like explaining that just yet. I tucked it into a drawer and opened the door.

"Hey," I said breathlessly. "Sorry. I overslept."

He came inside and looked around. "Wow," he said. "It's been a while since I've been here. You've had the place redone. I'd like to see it."

I saw my face in a mirror behind Henry go white, but I managed to force a smile.

"Uh, sure. How about after we eat?" The last place I wanted him to go was my bedroom where his daughter was lying completely nude in my bed.

“After we eat, we need to get down to the slopes,” he said.  
“Come on. Give me the quick version of the tour.”

I couldn't find a good excuse to get out of it, especially when Henry started wandering around on his own. He went to the guest room first and looked around appreciatively.

“Nice,” he said. “I may have to use this next time instead of paying for one of your overpriced rooms.”

I had no idea how I was going to warn Anna. It was Henry's arrival yesterday all over again, except this time, I wasn't sure how she was going to pretend this was some innocent meeting.

I followed Henry as he moved through my suite, saving the master for last, which only heightened my anxiety the longer he waited. I tried to figure out how I could explain it to him before he found her there, or worse after he found her.

*It was an accident?*

*It was her fault?*

*Sorry I fell into your daughter?*

Nothing seemed like it was enough to truly convey the way I felt about Anna without making it sound like I was a lecherous old bastard. I opened my mouth so many times to try to tell him that I probably looked like a goldfish.

But Henry wasn't looking. He was examining the renovations I'd had done over the last fifteen years since he'd been here. He reached for the doorknob, and I tried to stop him, but my voice seemed to have stopped working.

He opened the door and walked in.

“What the hell is this?” he said, and I rushed in behind him, ready to take my beating and to tell him it wasn’t as bad as it looked—well, that it was exactly how bad it looked, but that I wasn’t just being a creep.

But when I got inside, Anna was gone.

Where did she go? And what was Henry talking about?

I looked at him, and he had a lacy thong dangling from his finger.

“Been having some fun you never told me about?”

It took me a moment to realize he probably wasn’t recognizing his own daughter’s panties. The whole situation was so insane that I almost went into a hysterical fit of laughter but managed to somehow keep it together.

“Uh, yeah,” I said, taking them from him and tossing them toward my closet, which I realized was just slightly cracked.

Anna.

I had to get Henry out of here.

“So, uh,” I said quickly. “I kind of forgot to cook, so would you be cool with eating down at Three Peaks?”

“Sure thing,” Henry said, walking out of the bedroom, totally unaware that his daughter was feet away from him, naked...

I glanced back and saw Anna’s eye peeking out at me from the crack in the door, and I waved her back. *I’ll tell him. Not*

*like this*, I mouthed to her.

“I have to get back to Haley,” she hissed. “I promised I’d carry her stuff for her.”

“I’ll be quick,” I told her, giving her an apologetic look.

She slipped back into the darkness as I gathered up my things so Henry and I could leave directly from breakfast and ushered him out of my suite and down to the restaurant. I hoped Anna heard us leave because when I walked into the lobby, the sun was up and competitors were already making their way to the slopes.

We ate a quick meal with only a little talk about who we thought might place or win this competition. We both thought Haley was a good bet, but there were a few other contenders, and you could never rule out a dark horse coming in at the last minute and taking the gold.

We were just finishing up when someone walked past the table, looking out the window and said, “I hope everyone is careful out there today. This looks like avalanche weather.”

I thought my eyes would bulge right out of my head, but Henry put a hand on my arm.

“Hey,” he said. “It’s just someone’s opinion. Nothing else bad is going to happen.”

I looked at him, appalled. “Are you fucking kidding me?” I said. “Don’t jinx this. We’ve already had enough bad stuff happen to this event. Any more, and I might as well move into one of the mountain caves around here and never come out.”

“Sorry,” Henry said with a chuckle. “Didn’t think you were the superstitious type.”

“I’m not,” I replied, standing up from the table and zipping up my coat. “But at some point, you start to think maybe you’re just cursed.”

“Look,” Henry said, fastening the buttons on his own coat, “I saw the guy fall on TV. It was an ugly spill, but there was nothing you could have done about that. It was bad luck and a little bit of bad aim on his part.”

“Didn’t stop the media from piling on, though,” I reminded him, thinking about the collection of newspapers I’d thrown away.

“No,” he said. “It didn’t. But that’s just how the media works. They need someone to blame so that they have a good story. But I told you, it’s not even on the news anymore.”

“Bet it will be today.”

Henry had nothing to say to that as we pulled our gloves on to head out into the cold. It was the final day of the competition, and Henry and I were going to be watching from the judge’s booth, which was where Henry would walk from to put medals on the winners.

We adjusted in our seats, tapping on the foot warmers that were set up for the judges. I still hadn’t figured out exactly what I was going to say to him, but I did know I was running out of time.

## *Chapter Thirty-One*

### **Anna**

**M**ax and I met at our usual spot, and he had brought a bottle of champagne with him.

“I would have rather had something hot,” I said sarcastically as I climbed the ladder.

“It’s free,” he said sardonically. “So ungrateful. Although I suppose now that Uncle Kevin has given you a taste of the high life, free champagne in a ski lift control tower is beneath you.”

I’d been setting a blanket down in the chair there, but I froze in place as he blurted out the one thing I hadn’t expected. He knew about Kevin and me.

“How the fuck—?”

“Haley,” he said with a chuckle. “That girl loves a scandal.”

“That traitorous bitch,” I said, spinning around to look at him. “Why would she tell you?”

“Relax,” he said, holding up his hands. “I’m not gonna tell anyone. Besides, I kinda coerced it out of her... with my fingers.”

“Oh, ew, Max. That’s gross. Don’t tell me shit like that.”

Max laughed as if he’d said the funniest thing in the world, and I rolled my eyes at him. Boys could get older, but I’m not sure if they ever really become men.

“For the record,” he said, “my uncle is smitten with you too.”

“Really?” I asked. “How do you know?”

“Well, for one,” Max replied, “he won’t stop asking about you. I keep telling him I’ve told him all I know, but he doesn’t seem to be accepting that answer.”

I smiled softly to myself and toyed with my watch.

“Oh look,” Max said with a grin on his face. “There she is. This is it.”

Like the times before now, Haley mounted the starting position, all geared up and looking more focused than I’d ever seen her before. In my head, I was sending her wishes of good luck via telepathy, and I hoped that she could feel it.

Then the beep went, and she pushed off, making a beautiful, smooth start down the slope.

“Oh, that was a great start,” Max said, pacing the tower. “That should build her some speed.”

And indeed, she was soon going ninety miles per hour, according to the TV broadcast that was covering the event.

When she disappeared out of sight, I turned my attention to the TV fully, hoping that I wouldn't see my friend in a moment of disaster, but rather a moment of victory by the time this was done. All my fears about being separated were temporarily pushed aside to give way to the pride I felt watching her live her dreams.

Round one bend and through a jump, Haley was maintaining perfect balance and stability. She made it past every single thing that had tripped her up before and did it with style.

In what felt like mere seconds, she was crossing the finish line, and Max and I were on our feet, screaming. Max had popped the champagne and was pouring it into his mouth, then he turned to do the same to me.

“No thanks, you animal. I'll have a glass.”

He nodded, grinning so widely it looked like he might split his face in two, and grabbed for one of the champagne flutes he'd brought with him.

“Here you go, princess. I know you are too snooty for some good old-fashioned necking the bottle.”

I gave him a middle finger and drank the sweet elixir. I was so proud of Haley that I could burst.

“Whatever her coach told her must have worked. No tripping for once.”



“I know,” Max said with a grin. “It’s almost like a seasoned professional took her down the course in advance.”

“That little liar,” I said, gasping. “She said her coach told her how to get through... oh.”

Max laughed and patted me on the back. “How in the world would her coach be able to get a good idea of the track over FaceTime?” he asked.

“Okay, okay. I get it. Well, you did a great job of coaching her, and I can say from personal experience you weren’t too bad of a teacher for a beginner, either.”

“Well, thank you,” Max said. “And for a beginner student, you weren’t... no you were terrible. I’m not gonna lie. I’ve never heard someone whine about the cold so much.”

I pretended like I was gonna hit him, and he dodged my feeble punch.

“We should probably get out there to her,” he said with a grin. “She will be coming up the mountain soon enough.”

I nodded and began to gather my stuff.

That was when the tower began to shake, gently at first, then with enough strength to knock over the remainder of the champagne.

“Oh God no,” Max said, turning horrified to me. “It’s an avalanche.”

“What?” I managed to cry before the rumbling grew so loud that I could barely hear my own thoughts.

Sure enough, from about a quarter mile below where we were, a large section of icy mountain broke loose, dropping what would be tons of snow down below it. I screamed as it fell, knowing that it was headed right for the tent where the athletes recovered.

“We have to get down there,” I cried, tugging on Max’s arm.

“No,” he said, grabbing me. “We have to wait until everything stops or we run the risk of getting buried beneath it too.”

I dropped to the floor and began to sob. The statistics for surviving an avalanche were good, but only if you were found within fifteen minutes. After that, your chances of survival decreased by ten percent for every ten minutes you were buried.

Max knelt by me, pulling me tightly against him until the rumbling stopped. He then got to his feet and flipped on some of the surveillance cameras, staring into the horror that was the recovery tent.

“It’s gone,” he muttered. “It’s all gone.”

“No,” I sobbed. “Haley, no.”

But it didn’t matter how hard I cried; Haley’s life was now on a timer. Within forty minutes, she’d likely be dead.

“We have to save her, Max,” I said frantically.

Max nodded. “I will do everything I can.” I could see he was shaking from trying to keep his emotions under control. “We have to find my uncle.”

I nodded and then followed Max out of the tower, but when we dropped down into the snow, we could see that the path we would need to take to get to the bottom was completely obstructed by people rushing to get inside the lodge.

“What do we do?” I asked him.

“I guess we just have to wait for them to come to us,” Max said, his voice cracking with emotion.

I dropped down into the snow, stunned and terrified. At least I had told Haley I loved her. She knew that people needed her to fight, to stay alive despite the odds. And all I could do was hope that would be enough.

## *Chapter Thirty-Two*

### **Kevin**

**T**he only thing worse than seeing the avalanche happen was hearing it.

The sound was like a low thunder rumbling as it came down the side of the mountain, and it felt like a fist closed around my heart and squeezed. The sight of it covering people as the snow cascaded and fell was gut-wrenching, and I completely froze in shock.

I flashed back to a time when I'd been caught in one. Henry and I had been skiing with James and Jen. We'd splurged and bought tickets to Switzerland, where we were planning to do some freeride routes in the Alps. It was a once-in-a-lifetime trip that we all couldn't wait to go on. Henry had gone down the slope first, with me on his heels. Jen had followed me, and James was going to go last, but that was when disaster struck.

I didn't even hear it coming at the time, not like the one that had just happened at my resort. One minute I was skiing,

watching Henry near the base of the mountain and trying not to hit some of the rocks that jutted up between the patches of snow.

The next thing I knew, there was snow rushing along beside me and threatening to overtake me. It was mostly next to me rather than around me, so I managed to ski out of the way to dodge it.

That was when I saw her.

The snow that had broken free of the mountain had done so right as Jen had begun her run, and it had swept her up in the cascade. I watched in horror as she slid down the mountain beside me, her skiing poles raised in the air as a signal for help. I tried to follow her, but the avalanche stopped me for at least a minute.

When it finally came to rest, I skied to her as fast as I could. Her backpack had come with some inflatable safety balloons which were inflated to show me where her back was so I didn't accidentally skewer her. I pulled the shovel attachments from my backpack and began to dig her out.

"Jen!" I called out to her.

"I'm okay," she shouted. "But I can't move. Please hurry."

I looked around at the other two to make sure they were okay. Henry was at the bottom trying to get back to us to help, but I waved him away. I would have her free by the time he got up to me, and James hadn't even begun his run when it happened.

It took me nearly five minutes to dig her out, and when I did, what little skin she had exposed was bright red from cold. That had ended our day early, but no one was truly hurt.

I knew, without a doubt, people had been hurt in *this* avalanche.

I looked frantically around and, thankfully, saw Anna up at the top, looking down in horror at the sliding snow, Max at her side.

“Kev!” Henry yelled from next to me. “Move!”

He grabbed my arm and yanked, pulling me away from the judges’ station, where the avalanche looked like it was headed. We ran until we were far enough away from the trajectory, then stopped to turn and watch what happened next.

The judges’ station was spared, thankfully, but the recovery area for the athletes was completely covered.

“No...” I breathed.

“Anna!” Henry yelled, rushing toward the place which was now just a blanket of white with the occasional limb or ski pole sticking up from the snow.

“Henry, stop!” I yelled as a cacophony of panicked voices rose around us. With the avalanche finished, everyone began to rush in to start rescue efforts. “Anna’s not there.”

“What do you mean?” Henry asked.

I pointed to the top of the mountain where Anna was clearly freaking out after watching the wave of white cover her friend.

Max was trying to calm her, but I could see he was not faring much better.

“She’s still up there,” I said. “I’ll go get her. You start digging people out.”

Henry hesitated, clearly not loving the idea of leaving his daughter’s rescue to anyone else.

“I can get to the control room of the lifts to make sure she gets down safely.”

“Okay,” he said. “Be fast. People down here are going to need us.”

I nodded and took off at a run toward the control booth. The lifts had been stopped since the avalanche, but I burst into the room and looked at the person working there.

“Turn them on.”

“Sir—”

“There are people stuck at the top, and they’re not going to ski down right after an avalanche.” I didn’t mention that one of them in no way possessed the skills to make that run in the best of conditions, let alone after a catastrophe.

The operator was clearly torn about what the right thing to do here was, but I owned the damned place. So, I pushed him to the side and turned on the control panel to allow the lifts to begin to move again.

“When I reach the top, stop the lift until we get on. Then stop it again when I get to the bottom with them so we can get

off safely. Understand?" I barked. Some people were good in a crisis. This man clearly was not.

I rushed back outside and dove onto the moving lift to ride it up.

The entire ride took less than three minutes, but it felt like hours as I waited to reach the top.

I jumped off the lift and found the snow beneath my feet packed compared to the difficult to maneuver powder which now rested at the bottom of the mountain. I ran, trying not to slip in the areas where dozens of feet had turned snow into ice, until I reached the area where I'd seen Anna.

She was facing away from me, still staring down the mountain in horror.

"Anna!" I called out to her.

"Uncle Kev!" Max shouted, noticing me first.

Anna turned around and saw me.

"Kevin!" she cried, running toward me, nearly falling on a slick spot.

"Careful," I said as she slammed into me. I glanced over her shoulder and saw that we were well out of the line of sight of anyone down below. So, I threw my arms around her. "God... I'm so glad you're okay."

"You too," she said, burying her face in my chest.

I looked at Max, who just rolled his eyes. So he knew. Great. One more person to judge me for this.



But in that moment, I didn't much care for whatever Max thought. I lifted Anna into my arms and kissed her once, hard, glad she was not only alive but perfectly fine, then I put her down. "I would love to stay right here and kiss you all day, but there are people down there who need our help."

"Yes," Max said as he rushed past us, heading toward the chair lift. "And people up here who don't want to vomit."

"Shut up," Anna said, smacking him, but when she looked at me, there was no playfulness in her eyes. I only saw terror there.

I took her hand, and we carefully navigated the terrain until we were back on the lift. I helped her up, then Max and I climbed in on either side of her.

"Please don't go doing anything disgusting while I'm here," Max said as the lift began to move.

"Time and place, Maxwell," I said, reaching around Anna to whack him upside the head. She let out a vaguely hysterical giggle, and suddenly Max got serious.

"She's gonna be okay."

"Haley?" I asked, confirming whom he meant.

"Yeah," Anna said. "She was in the recovery area when it happened. She'd just qualified, too. God, what if she's..."

"She's not," I said, hoping beyond hope that I wasn't lying to her.

“No, she’s not,” Max said, echoing my statement of comfort. “Haley’s smart. She knows how to survive in an avalanche. We’ve talked about it. They still need to get to her quickly, but she’ll fare better than most would in the same situation.”

“Unless she’s unconscious,” Anna said tearfully, holding onto my jacket and staring up at me. I wanted to comfort her, to tell her that everything was going to be just fine, but I didn’t know that. Hell, I didn’t know if *anyone* had survived that, let alone one specific person.

“We’re going to find her,” I said. I didn’t want to make promises I couldn’t keep, but I also knew the difference a little hope could make.

And we were going to need all the hope we could get if we wanted a chance at saving her.

## *Chapter Thirty-Three*

### **Anna**

**W**e could barely get through the throngs of gaping onlookers to reach where the recovery tent had been buried. All of the worst potential outcomes haunted me, and every second Haley was under, was one less second she had to live.

I wanted to cry. I wanted to scream for her and have her tell me where to find her, like some kind of fucked-up Marco Polo shit. But even if it had been quiet enough for her to hear me, I had no idea how deep she was, and if she could signal me in any way.

Past the onlookers, emergency teams were handing out backpacks equipped with rescue tools. A shovel that could be taken apart and reassembled, a bottle of water, a pole to extend to the survivor so that they could guide you to their location. There were also flairs, and some of the bags seemed to have

walkie-talkies attached to let the EMS team communicate with each other.

“We’re here to help,” Kevin said to one of the men dressed in red nearby. “I’m the owner of the resort and the coordinator for this event.”

“Do you have rescue training?” the man asked.

“Only a little, but I have had to dig someone out before.”

I grabbed on to Kevin’s hand to find he was trembling as much as I was. This kind of disaster could mean the end of Brother Bears lodge.

“I remember that winter,” Dad said, coming up alongside me. “That was horrible, but we made it out okay and lived to ski another day. So will Haley,” he said reassuringly.

Max, Dad, Kevin, and I each took a rescue bag and spread out, careful not to disturb the snow too much for fear of packing it down on top of whoever might be in there.

“Does anyone have a list of the competitors that would have been inside?”

“I do,” Kevin shouted, pulling out his phone and making his way over to the emergency worker. I watched as they discussed who was in the snowy death trap, and when Kevin came back over, he looked grim. “All but two skiers and a medic accounted for,” he said.

“But we’re running out of time,” I shouted at him, panic really setting in now. Dad put his hand on my shoulder to try

and calm me, but this only had the effect of making the situation feel more dire.

“The best thing we can do now is start digging. Listen for any voices and go gently. We don't want to spade one of them in the face.” Kevin said.

So, we started digging and digging. Five minutes went by, and then ten until suddenly—

“I've got someone here,” Max shouted. He pulled out his flare and shot it off into the sky, causing medical personnel to rush to him with tools of their own. Max rushed to my side to get out of their way, and I watched in horror as they extracted the girl that had gone after Haley, who screamed bloody murder every time they moved her.

“Looks like we've got a broken neck,” one of the paramedics said over his handheld radio. “And... oh!”

He suddenly began shouting orders at his team members, and they scrambled, digging deep into the snow and pulling free two more people. The medic, and—

“Haley,” I shouted, running toward her before I was stopped by Max.

“You will get in the way of them helping her,” he said gently.

I nodded, refraining from pursuing her further, even when they strapped her to a board to get her up the hill.

“The way they are wrapping her leg,” Max said. “It looks like she might have broken it.”

“No. Haley...”

If she had broken her leg, there could be permanent damage, depending on where and how it was broken. If her leg was forever changed, that would mean no skiing, and no skiing meant no Olympics. I didn't want to be separated from Haley, but I didn't want that to come at the expense of her dreams. She'd spent her whole life training for this. To have it swept out from under her now would be earth-shattering.

Max grabbed my hand and squeezed it, and at least I didn't feel like I was going through this alone. I looked up at his face and saw a tear slide down his cheek. I was half tempted to ask him if he too was watching Haley's dreams crash and burn right before his very eyes.

We all watched in thankful horror as the injured were air-lifted one by one out of their icy prison. Haley was definitely crying, and I'm pretty sure the other girl was too. I couldn't imagine being either of them right now.

Once Haley was gone, Max and I trekked back to my dad and Kevin, who were speaking in hushed tones. Kevin looked sad and focused, and I wondered if he'd used this moment to tell Dad what was going on between us.

When we approached, Kevin's eyes lifted to me, and he seemed to exhale a sigh of relief.

“Anna,” he said, putting out his hand and pulling me into a hug. “I can't begin to imagine what you're going through.”

I wanted to lean up and kiss him, but without any confirmation from him that my dad was now in the loop, I just sort of stood there awkwardly.

“We’re all going to have to keep our fingers crossed for Haley,” Dad said. “An injury like that can be recovered from, but it’s not going to be fun or easy.”

Max nodded. “A good friend of mine had almost the exact same thing happen to him. He didn’t get away so lucky, though. It ended his career right then and there.”

“Can we not?” I asked Max. “I need to stay positive for Haley’s sake.”

Kevin grabbed my hand to reassure me, and I looked at him gratefully.

“What... What in the hell is going on here?”

Kevin and I dropped hands and took a step apart. My dad was staring at the spot where our fingers had been locked with a look of horror and disgust on his face.

“Don’t tell me... Kevin... You son of a bitch.”

Before I knew what was happening, Dad had hauled off and punched Kevin in the nose, knocking him to the ground.

“Dad, no!” I cried, grabbing for my father’s arms as he poised to do it again.

“Tell me he didn’t... I mean, tell me you wouldn’t...”

“I can explain everything,” said a bloody-nosed Kevin from the ground. “But can we please get inside? My balls are about

to freeze off.”

“Maybe they fucking should,” Dad said angrily.

“Dad, let him explain,” I begged. “Please?”

“Fine,” Dad replied. “But no amount of explaining is going to make me change my mind.”

“Then I’d better start from the beginning. So at least if you’re going to hate me, you can hate me for all my crimes.”



## *Chapter Thirty-Four*

### **Kevin**

**A**nna dragged Henry away from me, and he stormed off toward the lodge, his daughter in tow. That was honestly about as well as I'd expected it to go, and when I reached up for Max's hand, he laughed and pulled me up.

"I'm not sure what you were expecting, Kev," he said. "You boned your best friend's twenty-year-younger daughter."

"Shut up, Max," I groaned, holding my nose with my fingers to prevent the blood from getting all over me.

"I'm just saying—"

"I said shut up, Max."

He laughed to himself and followed me to the lodge and back to my suite. I went for the bathroom to wash the blood off, and when I returned, he was holding one of Anna's thongs.

"This doesn't look like your size," he said, grinning.

I sighed heavily, already tired of his teasing. But I knew I deserved it. I had done exactly what he said I did—against my better judgment and all. And now I would be suffering the consequences.

But the truth was that Anna was worth all this headache. She was my dream girl, and it had nothing to do with her age. She was smart, funny, and playful, but also driven and fiercely loyal. All qualities I'd like to think I also possessed, which made us a good match.

“So, what are you gonna do?” Max asked as I snatched the underwear from his hand.

“I have no fucking idea, Maxwell,” I said. “I fucked my best friend’s daughter, then fell in love with her, and now he’s punching me in the nose. Go get me some ice, will you?”

Max nodded and went from the room, leaving me alone to contemplate.

I hoped foolishly that if Henry saw us together, happy and supporting each other that maybe, just maybe he'd give it a pass, or at the bare minimum, ignore it. But the right hook was less than I deserved. I was just thankful that he was still at the lodge. That meant there was a chance we might still get to talk.

I tried to think of ways that I could pose this to Henry. It had been an accident. Neither of us meant to be in the positions we were in when our paths crossed. Hell, I never even thought she'd look at an old man like me. Surely Henry would have to understand that.

Max returned with an enormous ice pack in his hands and handed it to me, still chuckling to himself.

“I saw Henry in the lobby,” he said. “I would bet he was looking for you. Maybe he wants to finish you off.”

“Max, please take your obnoxious blond head somewhere else. I will literally pay you to go worry about your girlfriend anywhere else.”

“Deal,” he said, putting out his hand.

I dug into my pocket and pulled out my wallet, bringing forth a hundred-dollar bill and stuffing it in his breast pocket.

“Pleasure doing business, Uncle Kevin. Can’t wait to speak at your funeral.”

“I regret paying for your education,” I yelled after him as he left.

As if he’d heard me shouting, my phone went off, and I picked it up to see I had a message from Henry.

*Let’s meet for drinks. We need to talk.*

Well, that was fucking ominous.

*Yeah, okay. As long as you promise you’re not gonna punch me again.*

*I won’t, he replied. As long as you can keep from slipping and falling inside my daughter until then.*

I felt my face burn as I read it written so plainly on my screen. For the first time, I really felt like a dirty old man.

*See you in ten, I sent back.*

I changed out of my bloody shirt and threw on a polo instead. Then I bandaged my nose to the best of my ability and headed for the hotel bar.

Henry was sitting there, already nearly done with a martini when I slid in beside him. I could see his knuckles whiten on the bar, and I stiffened, ready to run if need be.

But Henry just turned to me and asked, “Why?”

The truth was, even though I tried to answer that question myself, the only thing I could come up with was that it was love.

“I didn’t mean for it to happen, Henry,” I said. “Anna was just alone a lot while Haley trained, and we ended up spending a lot of very platonic time in each other’s company. But slowly that relationship became not so platonic and... well, you catch my drift.”

Henry took in a deep breath and sighed. “I do. I’ve spoken to Anna, and she essentially told me the same thing.”

Thank God for Anna. I knew that Henry would at least hear what she had to say, even if he didn’t like it. Me, though—he could ignore anything he wanted to from me.

“I’m not happy, Kev. Not gonna lie here.”

“I wouldn’t expect you to,” I replied. “I assumed you would be furious. And you have every right to be. But I need you to understand this isn’t some creepy, perverted old man thing. I really care for Anna. She’s smart and funny and talented.

Honestly, once I got to know her, I couldn't take my eyes off her.”

“Or your hands, apparently,” Henry replied. “Look, here is where I stand on this. I don't like it. Not even a little. If it was up to me, you would be blocked from ever seeing my daughter again. But Anna is an adult woman who can make her own choices. It's not for me to get in the way of a huge mistake. That's how they learn.”

“I deserved that,” I said, hanging my head in shame. “But I do love her.”

I froze. It was the first time I'd said it out loud, and it hadn't even been to Anna herself. What would she say if she found out I'd told her dad before her?

Henry looked up and looked me in the eyes. “I don't like this, but I do know that if Anna insists on being with you, that you will take very good care of her.”

I nodded, liking where this conversation was heading.

“Furthermore, I've made her promise that if you break her heart, I get to cut your balls off.”

“Extremely fair,” I replied. “But... what about us, Henry? Do you think we will ever be okay again?”

Henry was quiet for a minute, then sighed deeply. “I don't know. This felt like a betrayal but... you are like a brother to me. Thirty years of friendship down the drain over love seems ridiculous. I need time.”

I nodded. He was being very reasonable about all of this, and I couldn't have been more grateful.

I stuck out my hand to him, and he took it reluctantly.

“You're a good man, Henry,” I said, so grateful for his response that I almost felt like I could cry.

“I know,” he said, finishing his martini. “So don't abuse my good graces. Got it?”

I agreed and stood. I felt like trying to really have drinks with him might end in disaster, and besides that, I wanted to see Anna and tell her the good news.

I found her in her room, packing up Haley's clothes and belongings. The inexplicable sadness on her face made my heart ache, and I gently rapped on the door to alert her of my presence.

“Hey, sugar,” I said, lingering in the doorway so as not to encroach on her space.

“Oh, so you're allowed to see me now, huh?” she said with a bite.

I'd never seen Anna this miserable. Each word she spoke was like a little razor blade or barbed wire designed to protect her from the hurt.

“I don't need permission from anyone to see you,” I replied, taking a tentative step inside. “May I sit?”

“It's your bed,” Anna said.

“Anna... don't be like that...”

“That wasn’t supposed to happen that way,” she raged. “It was supposed to be awkward but not violent. I’m so angry with my father that I could literally scream.”

I believed her. The tops of her ears were pink without it being cold, and her brow was furrowed so deeply, I wondered if it would merge with her nose.

“Well, don’t throw in the towel yet,” I said. “I just talked to Henry.”

Anna looked up, a tear rolling down her cheek but her face surprised. “He talked with you without punching your lights out?”

“I know,” I replied with a chuckle. “I was just as surprised as you. But yes, we managed to have a civil conversation over drinks.”

“And..?” Anna said abruptly.

“And he said that he didn’t like it, but that you were a grown woman who got to make her own decisions.”

Anna dropped the bag of makeup she was holding, her jaw dropping. I knelt to the floor to pick up the pieces that had fallen out and quietly tucked them back into the vinyl container. Anna stayed frozen for a moment, then she looked down at me as I sat on the floor, knees up.

“He really said that?” she asked.

“He did,” I replied.

“So, we can be together?”

“Only if you want to.”

There was a long silence between us, and then Anna dropped into my lap and showered me with kisses.

“God, this is amazing. I couldn’t have asked for a better response from him. Granted, it would have been good for him to not punch you in the face.” She giggled, and it was the most musical sound I thought I’d ever heard.

“Yes,” I replied, kissing her over and over again. “I would have been very happy to avoid that.”

Anna pulled back slightly to look at me, a suddenly worried look on her face.

“What’s wrong, angel?”

“Well, how are we gonna see each other if I’m in LA and you’re out here?” Her face fell, and it was as if the good news I’d bestowed her hadn’t happened at all.

“I had some thoughts on that,” I told her. “I was thinking... How would you feel about staying here with me for a little while? I know it’s not as glamorous as city life, but I could teach you how to ski better.”

Anna tumbled back, a look of horror on her face. “Kevin. I would love to stay with you. But under no circumstance will I ever take another ski class again.”

A roaring laughter burst forth from me, and she grinned, happy for either the declaration of her hatred for skiing, or perhaps cheered by my joy at finally, truly having her.



“You’ve got a deal,” I said, putting out my hand to take hers. “Now get over here and kiss me.”

Anna put out her hand to shake mine, and I took it, then gave her a huge yank and pulled her into my lap once more. Everything with the world felt right—minus my aching nose—and for the first time in a long time, I was looking ahead to the future.

And having Anna beside me every step of the way

## *Epilogue*

### **Anna**

**T**he road to recovery was long for everyone involved. While the media praised Kevin for his part in the rescue, there was also a giant uproar concerning the safety of the ski slopes. An official investigation of safety was issued, and Kevin was more stressed than ever.

If the review went well, Brother Bears had the potential to be a major news story, but if it failed the safety inspection... well... Let's just say Kevin made a lot of jokes about moving in with me.

Dad slowly warmed up to the idea of me and Kevin being together, and within a few weeks of telling him, he and Kevin were back to their old dynamic. The way Dad described it to me was, "I know he's going to take good care of you, but the problem is I know he's gonna take good care of you."

"Ew, Dad, gross."

“You’re the one who’s dating my best friend,” he replied every time.

Max and Haley were going strong, and from what I heard having the time of their lives playing house while Haley recovered back in LA. Max had moved into our apartment to take care of her while I stayed at the lodge to support Kevin.

“I think I got the better part of the deal,” Kevin liked to say on a regular basis. Usually that was either right after I’d served him breakfast or right before I took my clothes off.

The Italian place Kevin had taken me to had learned my name, and we had a special table together. I did in fact get to eat some of the food, and when I did, I could understand why Kev ate here all the time.

About a month after the disaster, Haley got her cast off, and she and Max flew out to visit. Max immediately hit the slopes, but Haley was still wary.

We were sitting in Haley and Max’s suite drinking hot chocolate when she revealed to me the extent of the damage to her.

“I have months, if not years of physical therapy ahead of me,” she sighed. “I have no idea how I’m gonna be up to snuff for competition any time soon.”

I put a loving hand on her back and rubbed it. “Haley, I would never doubt your ability to make amazing things happen in record time. I’ve seen you do it, remember?”

Haley nodded and took another sip of her hot cocoa.

“So how’s it going, living with Max?” I asked.

“Not horrible,” she said. “We’re two very independent people, and I think that lends itself to a peaceful space. I’m not needy, he’s not needy... It’s a win-win situation.”

It was odd how an ideal situation for one person could be a nightmare for someone else. In contrast to Haley and Max, Kevin and I were nearly inseparable. We spent morning to night together, and he’d even started calling it *our lodge*.

“How in the world do the two of you have sex with all of?”—I waved my hand to indicate her injury—“that going on?”

Haley got a huge smile on her face and sipped her drink. “Wouldn’t you like to know?” she said slyly.

“Well obviously yes, that’s why I asked.”

Haley made a gesture as if to say her lips were zipped, and I rolled my eyes.

“What about you and Kevin?” Haley asked. “Still as exciting now that you have your dad’s permission?”

“Absolutely,” I said, swooning.

Kevin and my sex life was phenomenal. We’d toyed around some more with having him control me and a little with me controlling him. We were so obsessed that we usually fucked about three times a day. And not just in a bed like normal people. No, we kept it creative with classics like the desk and the breakfast room.

A knock came on the door, and Haley invited the intruder in. It was Max, face red and grinning from ear to ear.

“I don’t care what anyone says. Those slopes are amazing.”

“No one is questioning whether they’re amazing,” I told him. “Only whether they are safe.”

Max gave a dismissive gesture, and Haley giggled. He went to her and kissed her deeply, then grabbed a towel. “I’m gonna get a shower,” he said, peeling off his shirt and tossing it. “Haley, as always you are welcome to join...”

Haley looked from him to me and then back to him longingly.

“Don’t worry,” I laughed, standing. “I’ll go. But you better get done with whatever you’re gonna do in there in time for dinner.”

Haley grinned and leaned in for a hug. “You’re the best friend ever.”

I left her and Max to their own devices and went down to Kevin’s office to get some coffee. He and I had little matching cups in there, and it made me smile every time I drank out of them.

I had thought Kevin was out on the slopes with some of the inspectors, but I found him sitting at his desk, looking over some papers.

“I thought you had a meeting,” I asked.

“It got done early,” he said. “I didn’t want to interrupt you and Haley, though.”

“Well, Haley certainly didn’t mind when Max showed up and wanted to bang in the shower.”

Kevin shuddered. “Is this what it’s like being your dad? Thinking about my nephew ‘banging’ anyone makes me a little queasy.”

I laughed and rolled my eyes. “I’m sure it’s something like that.”

Kevin stared at me lovingly, then beckoned me to him. “One last check tomorrow and we should know the fate of our lodge.”

“I love it when you say that,” I said, sitting in his lap. I wrapped my arms around his neck and leaned in to kiss him. He tucked his hand behind my head and tangled his fingers in my hair as he returned the kiss, pulling me tightly against him.

“And I…” Kevin started when we pulled apart, “love you, Anna.”

I blinked at him twice before smiling like I was a kid at a birthday party. “I love you too, Kevin,” I said. This was the first time he’d said it, and I couldn’t have been more ready to hear it. There had been a lot of times I’d almost said it and back-tracked.

“I wanna show you something,” he said to me, standing and causing me to slide off him.

“Is it the underside of your sheets?” I asked, twirling his tie in my fingers.

“Maybe later,” he said. “This is something more special.”

I nodded and took his hand, following him out of his office and to the elevator. It was nice to be able to hold his hand publicly. None of the staff gave us odd looks, and there was no fear of my father finding out.

Inside the elevator, he leaned back against the wall, and I pressed up against him as he pushed one of the buttons to take me wherever he was intent on showing me. Kevin groaned softly, and I ran my hands over his chest.

“I’m trying to be romantic,” he said, grabbing my wrist lovingly as I attempted to slide it down the front of his pants.

“What, sex isn’t romantic anymore?”

Kevin rolled his eyes, and the door opened.

I turned around to see the top floor ballroom, a line of rose petals leading out to the balcony that Dad had shown me.

“What’s this?” I asked Kevin, my heart beating hard in my chest.

“You’ll see,” Kevin said, smiling nervously. He gestured to the balcony, and I went, wondering if he was about to do what I thought he was about to do.

When we got outside, we looked out over the slopes, where there was still construction going on. I smiled, remembering that night out here with Dad.

“I don’t know if you know this, but—”

“Dad and you brought beers out here? I know.”

Kevin looked surprised. “Okay... I won't ask how you know that, but let me finish my story.”

I nodded, my fingers trembling in anticipation.

“Your dad and I used to sneak out here to drink beer, and after we met Jen, she would tag along. We spent so many evenings up here laughing and joking, just filling our young hearts with joy and life. And I would have never thought that those nights would lead to this moment.”

Kevin rifled around for something in his pocket, pulling out a small box and showing it to me.

“Kevin...” I gasped.

“You’re a smart girl, Anna. You know what this is, and you know what I’m about to ask you. At my age, you know yourself well enough, and you know the world well enough to know that when you find something that feels real, it probably is. And because the world is so full of fake, you have to capture every bit of real you can find.”

I could feel tears coming to my eyes, and I looked up to prevent them from dripping down my face.

“Now I know you’re only twenty-five, and at twenty-five, you have a million prospects ahead of you. So, I will in no way blame you if you want to go out in the world and see what you can find. But just know...” Kevin’s voice cracked, and he



paused. “Just know that I want you, right now, just as you are.”

I couldn't stop the tears from falling now, and I didn't want to. I nodded yes to him, and he gasped with happiness.

“Is that a yes you understand or a yes you want to marry me?”

I nearly choked on the snot that was beginning to run down my throat and laughed. “It means I'll marry you, you idiot.”

Kevin opened the box and pulled out a ring that looked like something a celebrity would wear. It had a center stone with a halo, and a band of tiny diamonds around the finger. He slid it on me, and I jumped into his arms.

“Thank you, Anna,” he said. “You've made me the happiest man in the world. And before you ask...” He grinned. “Yes, I did get your dad's permission.”

I kissed him deeply, and he returned my affection, grabbing my thighs to hold me in place where my legs were wrapped around him.

“Now can we go visit the underside of our bedsheets?”

Kevin bit his lip and looked down at me. “You fucking bet we will.”



Kevin led me back to his suite—*our* suite—and pulled me tightly into his arms when the door closed behind us.

“You’re everything I ever hoped for, Anna,” he said, sighing into my hair. “I never thought I would meet someone who would fall so perfectly into my life and feel like they’d been the missing piece all along.”

“I know what you mean,” I said, pressing my back into him, putting my hands over his and leaning my head back onto his shoulder. “I barely expected to find a fling for the week when I came here, let alone to find my soul mate.”

“Soul mate, huh?” he said, his hands beginning to rub across my body, one going to my sternum and sliding upward to the top of my chest, and the other spanning the width of my hips. “You believe in that kind of thing?”

“You don’t?”

“I don’t know,” he said. “Until I met you, I would have said no. But now...”

“But now?” I asked, smiling coyly looking at my ring, though he couldn’t see it from behind me.

“Now... I don’t know.”

“Hmm...” I said.

“What?”

“Nothing,” I said. “Just debating whether or not it bothers me if my *fiancé* is into superstitious mumbo jumbo.”

He sputtered. “But you said—”

“I’m kidding,” I said, laughing and spinning in his arms to face him. I put my hands on either side of his face, and he smiled down at me.

“I adore you,” he said.

“Yeah?” I said. “Well, that’s good, because otherwise *this*”—I held up my ring—“would be pretty awkward.”

“Why, you…” He leaned forward to kiss me, and his hands quickly went from the middle of my back to my ass, pressing my hips tightly against his. A swooping feeling in my lower belly was accompanied by a tingling between my legs in anticipation of what I knew was to come.

I could feel him already getting hard through his jeans, and I ground against him, needing more contact. He spun me, pressing me into the wall, and slipped his hands up under my shirt to pull it off over my head, exposing my bra, which he removed just as quickly.

“In a hurry?” I asked as he gripped my breast, his thumb toying with my hardened nipple.

“Not at all,” he said, kissing the side of my neck. “In fact…” He scooped me into his arms and carried me to the bathroom. “I was thinking we could get a bath together first.”

“A bath?” I asked, confused because I thought we were going to get right down to it.

“Yeah,” Kevin said, setting me down on the edge of the oversized soaking bath and starting the tap to let it warm up. “I don’t know. Call me a sap, but I always thought that taking a

bath together sounded... just really intimate.” He paused and looked at my face. “Unless you don’t want to.”

I smiled and reached a hand into the water, which was warm enough to create a bit of steam in the otherwise chilly bathroom. It felt nice on my skin, and I turned back to Kevin.

“I want to.”

He smiled and knelt in front of me, unlacing my boots and pulling them off one at a time, followed by my socks, and then my leggings. He saved my lacy thong for last. I knew how much he loved me in those, so I always wore them now.

I sat completely bare, waiting for him to undress himself, but he didn’t. Instead, he lifted me again and put me into the water, which enveloped me in its gentle warmth.

“Oh...” I said as it covered my legs. “That feels amazing.”

“Good,” Kevin said, rolling up the sleeves of his sweater and kneeling beside the tub. “I want you to be completely relaxed.” He took a washcloth and dipped it in the water, then ran the hot, wet cloth over the skin of my shoulders, letting it drip down and eliciting another moan from me.

He continued to run the cloth over my body, warming my chilled skin. Once I was thoroughly warmed, he stood and removed his own clothes. I watched him closely as he did. It would never cease to amaze me what good shape he was in and how incredibly attracted to him I was every single time I saw him.

He motioned for me to move forward, and I did so he could climb in behind me, legs on either side of mine. I could feel him pressing into my back, and some of my own slick wetness seeped out into the water.

He lathered up the cloth with some of my favorite body wash and began to gently scrub my skin, washing me. I hadn't understood what he meant when he'd said it, but there was something exceptionally intimate about feeling him naked against me and touching me with no intention other than caring for me.

He washed my entire body, even my feet, spending extra time on my breasts and making sure that my nipples were thoroughly stimulated. But he saved between my legs for last. He didn't use the washcloth for this part. Instead, he used his hand, and that was when he began to use his fingers on me.

"What's this?" he asked, feeling my juices on his fingers and sliding through them to run his middle finger in a circle around my clit. "You left me something sweet here, didn't you?"

"Yes," I gasped.

"Yes, what?"

"Yes, sir," I replied, knowing exactly what he wanted.

"Good girl," he said. He stroked and teased me until I was panting and writhing beneath his touch.

"Kevin..." I breathed, putting my arm behind me to wrap it around his neck. "God, yes..."

“Are you ready to go to the bed?” he asked.

“Yes,” I said quickly. “Yes. I need you. Now.”

“Why wait, then?”

Kevin lifted me slightly to pull me onto his lap. He reached between us, grabbing his cock, and angled it so that it was positioned right at my entrance.

“Are you ready?” he asked, always concerned with my right to say no or to change my mind.

I never did.

“Yes,” I said, arching my back and trying to lower myself down onto him, but he stopped me.

“Wait,” he said. “Be patient.”

He slid his cock forward and ran it over my clit. The sensation was incredible, and once again, I felt the need to have him inside of me.

Thankfully, that was when he decided to let me have what I wanted. He lowered me down on top of his length, and I felt it slide all the way in, filling me to the brim.

“Oh, yeah...” I moaned.

“That’s right, baby. Just hold still. I’ll take care of you.”

He began to thrust up into me, holding my hips in place as he did. He hit my sweet spot over and over until I felt the familiar tightening in my lower belly right before I came, clenching around him and holding him tightly inside of me.

“That’s my good girl,” he said.

“Thank you,” I whined as my orgasm stretched on.

“You... are... welcome... baby...”

Each time he pressed into me hard, I let out a tiny cry of ecstasy, and it wasn't long before he was wrapping his arms around me.

“*Now* we can go to the bed.”

He slid me off of him and stood, grabbing two towels. He wrapped one around himself and held the other out like you see handmaids do to their princesses in old movies, except he wasn't looking away modestly. He was staring with an appreciation I thought I would be embarrassed by, but I never was. Every time he gave me that look, I wanted to throw my panties at him.

He dried me off, head to toe, then wrapped me in the towel to make sure I was warm before guiding me back to our room, as if I didn't know where to go. I didn't mind, though. He was always great with small, romantic gestures. When we got to our room, he guided me to the bed, then immediately dropped to his knees beside the bed and gently pulled my legs apart before pressing his face in between them.

His tongue was something I could never get enough of. He knew exactly how to move and speed and slow it for maximum pleasure, and he used every single trick he knew every time to make sure I—

“Oohhh...” I moaned.

He slipped two fingers inside of me, and I was no longer teetering on the edge of an orgasm but having one.

“Yes... yes...”

“Good girl, Anna. I want every orgasm to be for me from now on.”

My brain exploded with stars and sunlight, and Kevin pulled me close as I writhed. Perhaps it was the culmination of everything up until now, but this felt like the best sex we’d ever had.

Kevin kissed me over and over, and we moved up the bed together in tandem as he held me. Within moments, he was inside me, making love to me like it was the end of the world.

“You are the best thing that has ever happened to me,” he breathed in my ear.

“And you for me,” I replied.

It was funny, but this type of sex felt much more like a spiritual connection than a physical one. Because while yes, Kevin was inside me, it felt like our bodies had melded, and we were connecting at the highest level possible.

When Kevin came, he didn’t make noise. In fact, we’d both gone silent, relishing in the sound of each other’s breathing and heartbeats. I only knew he was climaxing when his grip on my waist got tighter, and he shuddered before collapsing on top of me.

“I love you, Anna,” he sighed into my ear.



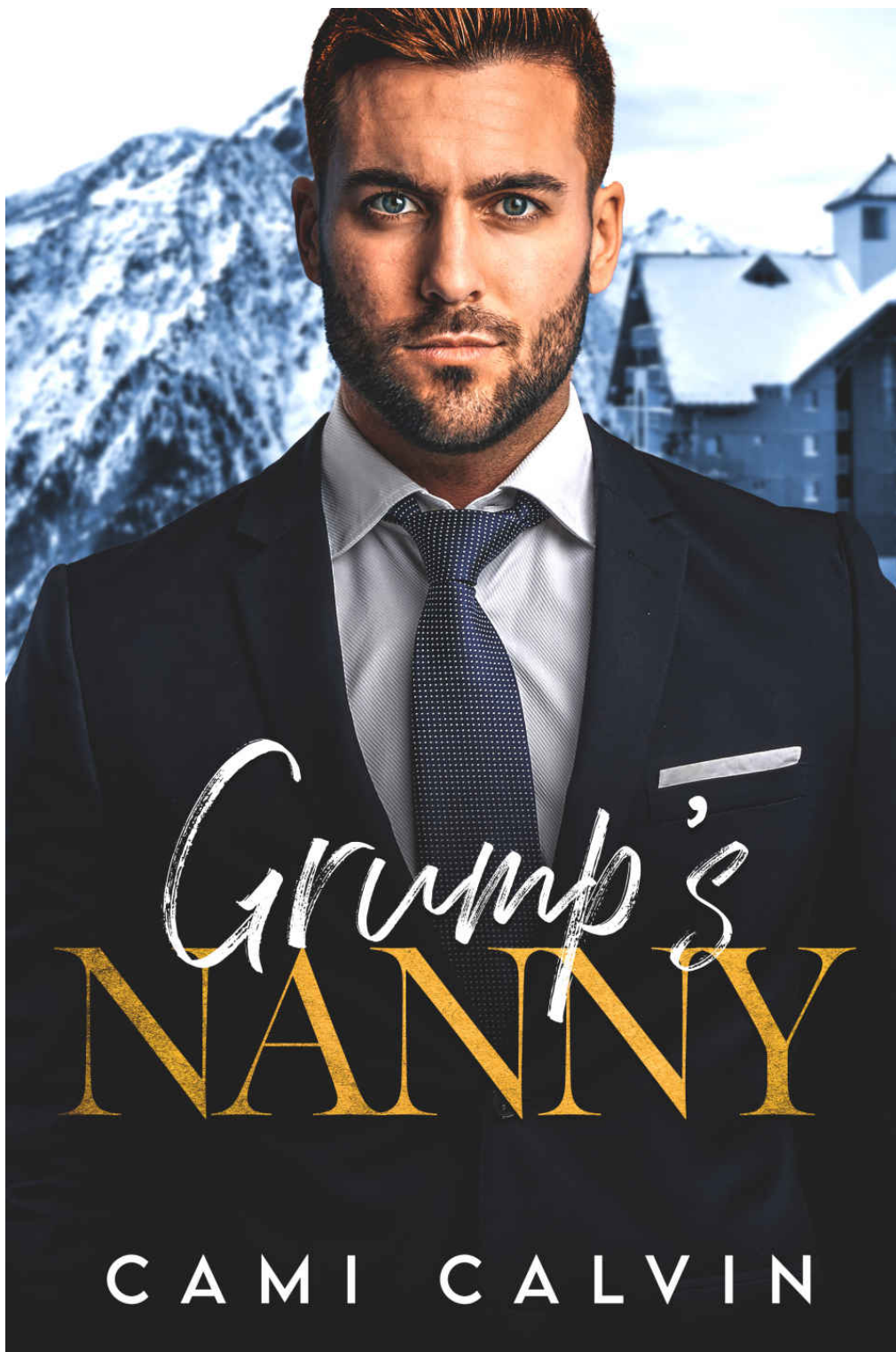
“I love you too, Kevin.”

I could hear him snoring pretty quickly, but I lay awake, staring at the ceiling—and my ring of course—for another hour or so. It was wild how life could sometimes hand you something you’re not expecting, and yet it turns out to be exactly what you need.

I didn’t know how our story would end, hopefully in a happily ever after. But I did know this—

Kevin would be right by my side every step of the way.

**THE END**



*Grump's*

NANNY

CAMI CALVIN

## *Chapter One*

Haley

“Hello, Haley. I’m Doctor Harzel. I’m a trauma specialist who works with a lot of PTSD clients. So, what brings you to my virtual office?”

I couldn’t believe I was sitting here, staring at my screen, talking to a shrink. My dad was a military type who didn’t believe in “quack doctors,” as he called them.

“Shrinks are for whack jobs and murderers,” he would say.

But I needed help getting past the elephant in the room that everyone could see but wouldn’t talk about. I never personally saw anything wrong with talking to someone about the things that were going on in your life. I never found as much relief anywhere as I did when talking to my best friend, Anna. Wouldn’t a therapist just be the same idea?

Speaking of Anna, it was her boyfriend, Kevin, who’d insisted that he would pay for the trauma specialist if I just

tried it. He was a billionaire and loved to spoil Anna, which seemed to extend to me as her friend.

“What’s the harm in giving it a try?” he asked. And when I didn’t have a good answer, Anna jumped in.

“Come on, Hales. Just try it. Maybe it will help.”

She looked so hopeful, and Kevin seemed to be challenging me to say no, so here I was, sitting in a Zoom call with a woman who looked like someone’s friendly aunt.

I waffled for a second on how to present my situation. It felt very first world and kind of bullshit. But I promised I’d try, and supposedly Dr. Harzel was one of the best.

“I’m here... uh... because I almost died in an avalanche while skiing,” I said awkwardly.

“Oh my,” she replied, looking down to scribble something on a pad. “That sounds terrifying. How did you end up in an avalanche?”

Here was the part I was least looking forward to revealing. “I’m an Olympic qualifier in skiing.”

“Wow. That’s so interesting. And it says here you’ve been having some issues getting back on the slopes?”

Wait a second. If she already knew, why did she ask me?

“Yeah...” I replied hesitantly. “And that’s gonna be a problem if I actually want to compete in the Olympics.”

“Yeah,” she said, scribbling away. “Sounds like it.”

Then she stared at me, and I stared at her. What was I supposed to say now? Was this gonna go how it did on TV where the therapist just stared at you until you solved all your own problems?

“Well, listen, Haley, I think I can help you. Aversion therapy works for lots of people. But let me warn you, if you’re looking for someone to coddle you or baby you, that’s not me. I want you to get better as fast as possible, and sometimes that’s hard work. Do you understand?”

I understood all right, and I liked that better than anything else she’d said so far. Her no-nonsense attitude made sense to me. I was even getting a little excited about it because I’d been expecting some mushy gushy “And how did that make you *feel?*” kind of bullshit. But this felt like she might actually be able to help. Like, for real.

“Yeah, I do,” I replied. “I’m in.”

“Great,” she said back. “Then let’s meet in a few days, and we can come up with a treatment plan, okay?”

I nodded, and she smiled at me.

“Don’t worry,” she said. “It’s not gonna be all that bad. I’m not gonna let you miss out on your dreams, though.”

I appreciated that she felt that way even though I didn’t say it. And I quickly clicked the disconnect button once, then twice to really hang up the call.

“Well, she sounded nice,” Anna said as she flipped through a magazine on my bed. I was currently staying as a long-term

guest at her boyfriend, Kevin Young's, ski resort. I didn't mind so much because my boyfriend Max had come back with me to get back into teaching skiing after my surgery and major recovery in LA. But Montana was dull with gray skies and lots of snow up as high as we were.

"She was," I replied. "I still don't know how she intends to fix me, but I guess I'll give it a whirl."

I used my crutches to get to my feet from the desk I was sitting at and hobbled over to my best friend, sitting down next to her.

*"A hundred and one ways to please your man,"* Anna read in a silly voice. "Do you think even a single one of these works?"

I shrugged. "Maybe. You'd know better than me."

She squinted at me, smiling. "How do you figure?"

I rolled my eyes. "Cause Max has been too afraid to have sex with me while I had my cast on."

Anna sat up, looking scandalized. "But you have it off now. Surely that will change."

I shrugged. "Maybe. Technically it's not fully healed, so who knows what excuses he will find to baby me. I thought it would be nice, but honestly, I'm so tired of being treated like some porcelain doll by everyone."

"Do you want me to tip you over so you feel less breakable?" Anna asked.

I burst out laughing. “No way,” I said. “I probably really would break.”

Anna pretended like she was gonna shove me until I punched her in the boob.

“Ow, hey,” she said. “Those are sore from...” Then she blushed and went back to the magazine.

“Sore from what, Anna?” I asked, grinning like the Cheshire cat. “Sore from...what?”

She gave me a scathing look. “You know what,” she said. “Sorry about your love life.”

My phone buzzed, and it was a text from the counseling center that Dr. Harzel was a part of. It quoted to me their weekly rates, and I nearly seized out from the numbers.

“Good, God,” I said. “Guess that’s the end of therapy for me.”

Anna looked up with a confused expression. “What do you mean?”

“I mean I can’t afford to pay two hundred and fifty dollars a week for therapy. I’ll just stuff away my feelings like a normal person,” I explained.

Anna shook her head. “No, you won’t. Kevin said he would—”

“Kevin is your boyfriend, Anna. Not mine. I can’t take anything else from him. I feel so uncomfortable with the amount he’s given me already just because I’m your friend.”

“Well, isn’t that the point of friends?” Anna argued. “To help hook you up with stuff you need?”

I sighed and shook my head. “I can probably get a job or something. You’re right, I really need counseling.”

Anna’s face brightened, and she started bouncing on the bed. “I know the perfect job for you, Hales. Kevin has a friend that owns a resort across town—”

“I told you, Anna, I’m not taking any more charity.”

“It’s not charity,” she insisted. “I was gonna say he has three little kids who are in desperate need of a nanny.”

“Nanny?” I repeated.

“Yes,” replied Anna. “It’s someone who watches children...”

I gave her a scathing look back. “Okay smartass. But how does this help me... Oh...”

Anna nodded. If I worked as a nanny, I would have not only a place to stay, but enough money to pay for my own therapy and a place to train.

“You’re a genius, Anna,” I said, hugging her tightly.

“Thank you, I know.”

“Did you know I used to nanny back in LA?”

“Well duh,” she said. “We did live together.”

Fair enough. We had lived together since college and into our adulthood. We pretty much knew everything about each other.



Anna went to town on her phone, texting at the speed of light, and within minutes, it dinged with a reply to whatever she'd been doing.

"I'm sending you his number," she said. "His name is James. He's a widower so he can come off kind of gruff, but I've met him, and he's a real softie."

I nodded, receiving his number from her almost immediately. I'd never worked for a single dad before at all, let alone a widower. Would it be different reporting to the man of the house rather than his wife? And what would the kids be like if he was this tough guy? I'd had my fair share of bratty kids, but this might be something totally different.

"Thanks," I said to Anna after a minute. "I'll give him a call."

"No problem," Anna replied, looking at her phone once more. "Now if you will excuse me, I have something pressing to address."

"You mean you're about to have something pressing through your dress," I said, indicating the blue sweater dress she was wearing.

"Tomato, Tomaaato," she said, waving to me as she left the room.

I couldn't lie; I was a little jealous of the turbulently erotic relationship she'd developed with her dad's best friend turned her man. They were going at it like rabbits multiple times a

day. Meanwhile, I was lucky if I saw Max once a day since he'd packed his schedule so tight.

Suddenly, someone knocked on my door. Speak of the devil.

"Come in," I said, knowing my blond and beautiful boyfriend was about to come in. Sure enough, Max practically bounced into the room, still wearing his ski clothes. I watched as clumps of snow fell off into the carpet and melted on the spot. "Maxwell," I said. "Come on, dude."

Max looked to where I was pointing before bending down to kiss me. "Sorry, sweetheart. I was just excited to tell you my good news."

"Oh yeah?" I said, watching as more snow slid down his body. "And what's that?"

He practically exploded as he said, "I got named regional ski instructor of the year!"

I wasn't sure if that was impressive or not, but if Max was happy about it, so was I. "Oh my God, no way!" I said. "How?"

Max shook his head in wonder. "I have no idea. You have to have someone nominate you, so maybe Uncle Kevin, but he swears it wasn't him, so probably a client."

I reached out my hand to him. "That's amazing, honey."

He nodded, kissing me again.

The feeling of his chilly lips on my neck was electric, and it put a very devious idea in my head.

“I think we should celebrate,” I said, taking hold of one of his hands.

“How?” he asked.

“Oh...” I pressed his palm against one of my breasts and heard him inhale as his chilly hands made my nipple spring to life.

“Haley...” he said in a warning tone that lacked any conviction. “You’re still healing.”

I squeezed his hand to clasp it around my breast and shook my head. “Since when does a girl need two working legs to give a blow job?” I asked.

I watched as Max “sprang to life.” His eyes said that he was having the internal struggle of the century, and I thought for a minute that he might refuse.

“Well...” he said, pulling off his coat, gloves, and boots. “I suppose that’s true...”

He took a step forward to where I was still perched on the bed and arched his hips toward me, offering the chance to unleash him myself. I gave him a wicked grin and did indeed.

I tugged the zipper of his snow pants down so slowly until I could see the black bulge that was his long underwear covering his hard-on. I licked my lips, thanking the powers that be that he was being agreeable today. Then I reached forth and ran my palm over the quickly hardening flesh.

Max moaned with pleasure as I leaned forward and pressed my mouth to the black cloth, wetting the entire surface area

where his cock was buried beneath. He tangled his fingers in my hair and gently pushed forward against me, giving me a ripple of my own pleasure.

I reached forward and slid my hand into the convenience slit at the front of him, going beneath his underwear until I could feel the soft flesh engorged with blood in my hand.

“Seems like you might have missed this as much as I did,” I said with a seductive whisper. Max nodded, tilting his head back, his eyes closing.

I tugged his erection forth, exposing it to the slight chill of the room. I saw a thick drip slide down the underside of it and knew I needed to taste it.

I leaned forward, mouth wide open, the pain of my leg forgotten, and took as much of his length in my mouth as I could manage. I groaned deeply as the salty essence rubbed into my tongue, and once again Max arched into me.

I pulled back long enough to say, “Like that, baby?”

Max nodded, and I took him in once more.

Some girls hated giving blow jobs, but I didn't. It was like a game of control, and I held all the cards. Which may have been why it took me barely any time at all to make him climax, deep inside my throat.

“Oh God, Haley,” he said as his orgasm finally subsided. “Remind me why I've been keeping my hands off you.”

I wiped my mouth and laughed. “You stupidly believe I'm a glass angel.”

He chuckled and played with my hair. “Tell me you will at least let me return the favor.”

My heart began to race at the implication, and I spread my legs to welcome him. “Well, it only seems fair...”

## *Chapter Two*

James

“\_\_\_\_\_ And in that regard—”

Despite my attempts to stay focused, the ambient noise of my suite was grating on me. There was a toy playing happy birthday in the room over, and I could hear little feet scurrying around, along with giggles mixed with harsh tones, a recipe for disaster, I knew, but there wasn't much I could do about it. How the hell was I supposed to concentrate on selling my investors on a huge addition to the resort if I couldn't focus?

“—And in that regard—” I tried again, attempting and failing to remember what the fuck I was talking about. I shuffled through my notes just as I heard a slap and then a scream from one of my children, which caused me to turn my head and open my mouth, ready to yell at whoever had done it, but I thought better of it and turned back to the call, closing my mouth.

My investors stared at me through Zoom, and I attempted to shrug it off, hoping they might have children of their own and understand. “Kids, eh?”

They did not look amused, and why should they? For someone who had assets worth over a billion dollars, surely James Warner could afford to hire a competent nanny.

Indeed, James Warner—me—could hire a competent nanny. Unfortunately, there was the matter of the demon children she would be charged with. Demon children who had my last name.

“If you will excuse me for a minute,” I said, bowing in a way that indicated I knew how unprofessional this looked.

I ducked out of the room and into the playroom, where my oldest, Leann, was trying to force a toy spoon into my youngest, Katie’s, mouth. Katie was definitely not having it and had tried to bite her sister. My son, Ben, was in the corner hitting the walls with his pair of four hundred dollar lightsabers we’d gotten him at Disney World.

This could be a condom ad.

“Kiddos,” I said in my best dad voice. “I need you to be quiet for five more minutes. Can you do that for me?”

As if in a direct act of defiance, Katie screamed as loud as she could.

“Hurry up, Warner,” I heard from the other room. “We don’t have all day.”

Fuck. How was I supposed to be a parent when I didn't feel like a parent? I loved my kids, but my late wife had definitely wanted them more. Now that she was gone, it was all trial and error for me.

“Five minutes. Please, guys.”

I rushed back to the office and plastered on my best business smile. “Sorry about that.” I picked up my notecards and finally found my place again. “As you can see—”

“Revenge of the pooter monster!”

I swear to God time stopped, and I thought about how much trouble I would be in if I tackled my seven-year-old to the ground. But I didn't have nearly enough time to act as Ben ran around me, farting as loudly as he could.

“We will check in with you another day, Warner.”

“Gentlemen, please. He's just a kid.”

“Get a damned nanny like a civilized human,” said one of the wrinkly old bastards. I didn't bother to tell him I'd hired several, all of whom had run from my house screaming like they were being chased by Michael Myers.

The call ended, and I nearly cried. Working in the tourism industry was hard enough with your friends being your competitors, let alone having your own spawn sabotage you.

I rounded on Ben. “Are you kidding me?” I shouted, the volume a little louder than I meant it to be. Ben burst into tears, throwing one of the aforementioned laser swords at me and running away to his room.



I slumped down into my office chair, putting my head in my hands. This meeting was really important, and I'd been preparing for it for months, only to have it sabotaged by three children under ten. I never missed my wife as much as I did in these moments. She would have known what to do.

I got up out of my chair and resisted the urge to Don Draper my day with some gin. I walked slowly to the playroom to find my daughters looking up at me with guilty faces.

Apparently, they had given up on playing "baby" and had moved on to "fresco painters." All over the walls were giant hand smudges of color, and while I usually encouraged their creativity, this nearly broke me.

"Do we paint on the walls?" I asked them, barely keeping my cool.

They both shook their head no, vacant expressions really selling their remorse.

"So why are we painting the walls with our hands, girls?"

Leann shrugged, and Katie tried to hide her hands behind her back. I sighed and grabbed them both by the elbows, leading them to the bathroom.

Carefully I washed their arms from elbow to fingertip and rinsed a few splotches of stray paint from their hair. Then I helped them change their clothes and sat them down at the kitchen table with a snack.

"Please stay here," I begged them. "We can go get ice cream if you stay here while Daddy gets Benny. Okay?"

The girls nodded in unison and I went hunting down my son.

I found him hiding in the laundry basket underneath the clothes. I had to give it to Ben; he saw the world in a very unique way.

“Hey, buddy,” I said, crouching down next to where I saw his little nose uncovered and a foot sticking out. “What are you doing in there?”

“Hiding,” he replied.

“Hiding from who?” I asked, wondering if this was an imaginary friend thing or if he was about to tell me that a little dead girl was visiting him at night.

“You,” he replied.

I would have preferred the ghost.

“Why are you hiding from me?” I asked.

“Cause you’re mean,” he screamed, sitting up in the basket, clean clothes going everywhere. “You’re the mean daddy monster, and I’m gonna vanquish you.”

Honestly, it was a fair assessment, whether I liked it or not. Could I claim insurance on an attack by a seven-year-old?

“Come here,” I said, grabbing him by the arm and lifting him to hug him.

It wasn’t as easy as it once was. I remember when he used to fit in the palm of my hand, and we would call him Ben Bean because he was so tiny. Even as a little guy, he wasn’t too hard

to lift. But now he was all limbs, and he was tall, taller than most of the kids in his class.

“I’m sorry I yelled at you, Benny,” I said. “You know Daddy loves you, right?”

Ben, being the shit stirrer that he was, shook his head no.

“What would convince you that Daddy loves you?” I asked, opening myself up to a whole new can of worms.

Ben got a very sneaky look on his face before turning it into a puppy dog pout. “A Nintendo Switch with Pokémon.”

He couldn’t have said cake?

“Ben, you had a Switch with Pokémon, and you broke it, remember?”

Ben nodded. “But if you love me, you would get me another one, right?”

This kid should run for Congress with the mental gymnastics he was running on me. “We can talk about it, okay? Now let’s get ready for dinner.”

I was just on the precipice of feeding the maniacs when my phone rang, and I instinctively picked up. I didn’t recognize the number, but what if it was one of the investors?

“Hello,” I said, only half-focused.

“Hi, is this James Warner?” It was a lovely female voice. Younger sounding, but polite enough that she must have been an adult.

“Yes,” I replied. “Who is this?”

The line was quiet for a moment, then she spoke again. “My name is Haley Birmingham. I’m a friend of Anna’s. Kevin’s... uh...girlfriend?”

She sounded extremely unsure of herself, and I almost laughed. “Okay, yes?”

“I was told you were looking for a nanny,” she said. “And I was wondering if I could forward you my resume?”

Was this my lucky day? Was karma bringing me a nanny in exchange for me not having RKO’d my child into outer space?

“Can you cook?” I asked.

“What?”

“Can you cook?” I repeated.

“Kind of,” she said.

“Any criminal history?”

“No. I’m an Olympic qualifier, though. Not sure if that matters.”

Wow. Impressive. She was right to tell me because whether or not she was qualified to be a nanny, I imagined that she would be active with the kids.

“You’re hired,” I said. “When can you start?”

“What?”

I laughed at her surprise. “Do you respond to everything like that?”

There was another long pause, and I could practically hear her embarrassment. “No.”

“Well good, cause we will have a lot to talk about when you come over tomorrow at 9 a.m. Does that work for you?”

“Yes,” she said, replying enthusiastically. “That works great.”

“Wonderful,” I said back. “See you then.”

I’d have to remember to tell Anna thank you because, at this moment, she could have told me her pay requirements were a hundred dollars an hour and I’d ask her who to make the check out to.

I turned back to my kids, who had miraculously eaten, and smiled at them. “Guess what?” I said, hoping my enthusiasm would make them excited too. “You’re getting a new nanny.”

All at once, it was a chorus of booing and fart noises, and I could tell my strategy had failed.

“We don’t want another nanny,” said Leann. “Nannies smell.”

“This one won’t smell,” I said to her as her brother and sister cheered her on. “She’s a lot younger than the last one.”

“There’s no point,” Leann said, standing on her chair. “She won’t last any longer than the others.”

I began to take deep breaths as I tried to remember that these were my precious angels.

“We will see,” I said. “And you will all be as good as you can, right?”

All three cherubs stared at me with blank expressions.

Fantastic, I thought. I was really getting through to them.

## *Chapter Three*

Haley

“I’m gonna miss you, Hales,” Anna said as we walked into the resort, each of us carting one of my suitcases. I was off the crutches, but my still healing leg was in an air cast. It let me walk on my own, but man, was it clumsy. “This is our first time not living together in our entire adult lives. You sure you don’t want to just let Kevin—”

“No,” I said, interrupting her. “I told you. I can’t accept his charity. I need to take care of my own shit.”

“Okay,” Anna said, her voice resigned but pleasant. “Well, I guess let’s find James and get you settled in.”

We walked to the concierge desk, where a young woman about our age was typing away on her computer.

“Excuse me,” I said pleasantly. She looked up and smiled. “Hi. I’m looking for James Warner. My name is Haley. Haley Birmingham.”

“I’ll give him a call and let him know you’re here,” she said, motioning to a seating area nearby. Anna and I went over to wait for James, who took almost no time at all to find us.

The sound of the children heralded his arrival. The youngest was crying about something, while the older two had some kind of argument which was resulting in the older of the two hitting the younger one—the only boy—whose face went bright red as he swung back at his sister.

Oh, boy.

James, who was on his phone while trying to half-heartedly pull his kids apart, looked exhausted and frustrated. He was younger than Kevin, but it seemed that the stress of owning the resort while raising three kids on his own had worn him down.

He approached and offered a relieved smile to Anna, who stood and gave him a friendly handshake.

“Anna,” he said. “I can’t thank you enough.” He turned to me. “I assume you’re Haley?” I nodded, and he sighed. “Good. I apparently have an emergency I have to deal with, so this is perfect timing.”

I reached out to shake his hand as well, but he was so frazzled he didn’t seem to notice. Instead, he put a key and a folder in my hand, along with a set of instructions.

“Here’s the key and directions to the suite and the instructions for watching them. I’m sorry I don’t have the time



to get you properly oriented to the job and responsibilities, but we can always go over it later if you have any questions.”

I nodded, taking the things and feeling ever so slightly hesitant at the interaction. The kids seemed to be a real handful, which I was no stranger to, but to be going in blind was rough.

However, the second James walked away, the youngest, who'd been crying, looked up and noticed Anna.

“Annie!” she cried and rushed into her arms.

Anna laughed and hugged her back. “Hi, Katie,” she said. “This is my friend Haley. She’s gonna be your new nanny.” The oldest girl scoffed and rolled her eyes, and Anna shot her a look. “Leann, that’s not a great way to introduce yourself.”

“Sorry,” she said without an ounce of remorse.

I was about to introduce myself to the boy, whose name I didn’t know yet when a rancid odor hit my nose.

“Oh,” I said, trying to be discreet about it, but not knowing what might have caused it. “Anna, do you—”

“Ben...” she said, giving him a suspicious glare.

The boy, Ben, broke into laughter and turned around, ripping a loud fart at us.

Great. So, we had Grumpy, Gassy, and Weepy, the three little dwarves I was now responsible for.

Anna took Katie by the hand and said, “Why don’t we show Haley up to where you guys live so we can get her unpacked?”

Katie looked at me shyly with a little wave, then we all began the walk up to the suite where I'd be living from now on.

It was beautiful inside. The resort had a more modern feel than Kevin's, and this suite was no different. Everything was crisp colors and clean lines, even the play area. Of course, that was the way it was obviously intended to be. Truth be told, there were toys all over the floor and couch, and an easel with fingerpaints open and tipped sideways on the tray.

The only thing that didn't seem to match the décor was the wall behind the easel, which was covered in dried fingerpaint. I wondered if that was allowed or if the art décor choice was that of the children or of their father.

"Oh, boy..." I mumbled, and Anna nodded in agreement.

"Guys," Anna said. "Why don't you all play some games or play with your toys while I help Haley get unpacked?"

Leann didn't need any convincing. She sat down and grabbed a video game controller before Anna even finished speaking. Ben and Katie began to dig through the toys as I turned and went with Anna into the guest room.

It was a good size, complete with its own bathroom. It only took a few minutes for Anna and I to get me completely unpacked, and once we were done, I looked at her.

"Well," I said. "I guess I'd better get to work. I get the feeling it's gonna be a tough one."

“No kidding,” Anna said. “I don’t remember them being this... rambunctious.”

“That’s one way of putting it,” I said with a laugh.

She gave me a big hug and said, “You’ve got this. You’re going to do great.”

“Thanks,” I replied, hugging her back.

We went back out to the living room, and immediately Ben ran up to me.

“Miss Haley?” he said in a voice that seemed far too sweet.

“Yes, Ben?” I said, bending down to get on his level.

“I wanted to show you something,” he said, motioning for me to come even closer.

Against my better judgment, I did, and he held up a little container. I gave him a questioning look but took it anyway. I pulled the lid back, and—

“Oh, my God!” I shrieked as a bunch of spring-loaded snakes shot out at my face, much to the delight of the little boy, who proceeded to cackle with glee.

“I like this one,” he announced to the other two before looking at me. “I think we’re gonna have fun.”

Nothing like a little kid playing a prank on you and deciding falling for it makes him like you to make you feel on edge about what you’ve gotten yourself into.

Anna watched the whole thing with hesitation.

“You sure you don’t want me to stay?” she asked.

“No,” I said. “I can handle it. I think we’re going to get along just fine once I know exactly what it is I’m supposed to be doing with them.”

“You know best, Mega Nanny,” Anna said, giving me one more hug. She was about to turn to leave when Katie rushed forward and gave her another hug.

“Why can’t you be my nanny?” she asked, a slight whimper to her voice.

“Because,” Anna said sweetly, “I’m very busy right now, and Miss Haley is a good friend of mine who’s gonna take really good care of you.”

Leann gave another noise of dissent, while Katie looked at me from the side, eyeing me suspiciously.

“If you say so,” she said, letting go of Anna and walking over to her fingerpaints, watching me as she went like I was going to tackle her to the ground if she took her eyes off me for too long.

Leann was still seated in front of a video game, and Ben had walked over to join her, grabbing a second controller.

“No, Ben!” Leann cried out. “I’m playing now!”

“We can set it to two players,” he argued. “Come on, Lee, I want to play too!”

“You can wait your turn,” she shot back. “Tomorrow you can play.”

“Tomorrow?” he shrieked.

“Guys,” I said, standing between them and the TV. “If you can’t play nice, there will be no video games at all.”

If looks could kill, I’d have dropped dead with the way Leann was glaring at me. Ben, on the other hand, looked smug and stuck his tongue out at his sister.

“Hey,” I said. “None of that. Now, are you sharing or not?”

Leann continued to give me the evil eye as she changed the setting to two players and moved to the side so Ben could sit with her.

“Good choice,” I said, moving to sit at the table nearby so I could open up the folder James had given me with the information I needed to watch the kids.

Leann was nine and in the fourth grade. She liked art and video games, as well as playing in the snow. Ben was seven and in second grade and was a total prankster. Apparently, he loved magic, but the paper warned me to be careful of his tricks since sometimes they ended in the aforementioned pranks. Katie was five and in kindergarten. *Very quiet, slow to warm up but trusts quickly once she does. She loves to fingerpaint, and is usually pretty well-behaved unless she gets caught up with trouble from one of the other two.*

There was a schedule of school days and after-school activities. They didn’t have much. In fact, the only thing I could see on their afternoon schedules was a list of extra schoolwork they were supposed to complete for a tutoring program they were enrolled in to give them a head start on

their education. The instructions clearly said no playtime until they finished with their work.

I looked down at the schedule for today, and it showed that they should have been working on math lessons until five, and it was only three-thirty.

“Uh, guys?” I said, turning to them. None of them answered at first, so I walked into the room and stood in front of the TV again.

“Aw, come on,” Ben whined. “I was winning.”

“You guys are supposed to be doing your math work, and I think you know that.”

Katie blushed and looked away, but Leann was cool as a cucumber.

“We finished it already,” she said, not even breaking eye contact. “We went quick today because Daddy said we needed to be ready for the new nanny.”

I waffled for a moment. Unfortunately, this was my first day, and I had no way of knowing if she was telling the truth or not since I hadn’t been there earlier. And since the work was, according to the sheet, online, I couldn’t even properly check to see if Leann was full of shit.

“Okay,” I said, resigning myself to whatever fate would come about as a result of this. “You kids have fun and behave. I’m going to be right there reading through the rest of the papers your dad left me.”

I'd been in enough families as a nanny to know when a battle was worth fighting and when it wasn't. If I had no proof that they were lying, there was little I could do, and nothing I should do. I knew better than to punish or scold a child who was innocent, and I would rather let the naughty child off the hook than cause emotional harm to one who was being good.

I did as I said and went back to the papers, skimming them for the kids' medical information in case there was anything I needed to know for preparing their food, like allergies. There was nothing, and it was all pretty straightforward—especially the part where I was the latest in a long list of nannies who had all quit.

I pulled out my phone while the kids were distracted and typed out a text to Max.

*Good god, what have I gotten myself into?*

## *Chapter Four*

James

**S**ome days managing a hotel could make you feel like you were the king of the world, and then other days—days like today—it could make you feel like the ringleader of a three-ring circus.

I was called down to the lobby by my front-end manager to address a situation straight out of the hotelier’s playbook of nightmare scenarios. A VIP guest had booked our master suite for the same days that a newlywed couple had. There was literally no good choice here.

“Hi there,” I said to the two parties and my manager, Kyle, as I approached. “I’m James Warner, the owner. What’s seem to be the problem?”

Of course, I’d had Kyle brief me before I ever left my office, but I wanted to see if either group ratted themselves out as assholes. It wasn’t a good strategy for determining how to handle this, but it was a strategy.



“Hi there,” said a pretty young woman with a mini veil on her head. “We booked the master suite about six months ago for our wedding and honeymoon. But your worker here says that it has already been rented out to this man.” She indicated a middle-aged man wearing sunglasses indoors. He looked extremely put out by all this and was on his cell phone complaining already.

Excellent.

“Sir, I don’t mean to interrupt your important phone call, but if I could have your attention—” I motioned to the couple who were looking heartbroken. “I’m going to give the master suite to the newlyweds, and I will be happy to not only find you our next best room, but compensate you for the inconvenience.”

The man looked at me like I was speaking French. “Do you know who I am?”

I looked at the check-in log and shook my head. “No, I’m sorry. The name isn’t familiar.”

“I’m from one of the hottest boy bands in the world. I don’t stay anywhere that’s not VIP.”

I nodded with my most considerate management face. “I totally understand your concern here. The problem is they had it booked first.”

“Then you should fire the person who double-booked us.”

I could feel my temper rising. “Unfortunately, I cannot. You see, the reservation you made was through a website that is a

third party. I do not have the authority to fire any of its employees.” He looked like his head was going to explode. “Moreover, it’s likely that it wasn’t a person at all but rather a computer.”

My front desk clerk was visibly trying not to burst out laughing, and I gave him aside-eye warning.

“So, what in the hell are you gonna do to fix this?” he asked.

I gave a warm smile to the newlyweds. “Well first, I’m gonna get this lovely couple checked into their room. Kendra,” I said to a desk clerk. “Can you take care of that for me?”

Kendra nodded. “I can help you down here, folks.”

The bride and groom timidly headed for her, trying to avoid eye contact with Mr. Boy Band.

“Now for you, my friend—” I said. “I can recommend the next best ski lodge in this area. Brother Bears is great. Good luck.”

I knew I was doing Kevin dirty by shifting this jackass off on him, but I was finished dealing with his shit.

VIP looked at me like I’d taken a shit on his shoe and actually gasped as I walked away. I wanted to check on Haley and see if she’d run away screaming yet.

When I got to the top where the penthouse was, I could hear my children giggling. I hadn’t realized that schoolwork these days was so amusing—but to each their own.

When I walked in the door, I came face to face with my five-year-old finger painting, and across the room, I could see Leann still sitting in front of the television playing video games.

A loud pop came from my left, and I found Ben smacking his magic wand across the wall, his little face scrunched up in frustration.

But all three were dead still when they saw me come in. Like little tiny, human-shaped deer caught in headlights.

“Where is Haley?” I asked them, and all three pointed to the kitchen. I quickly ducked around the entryway and power walked in that direction.

Haley looked up at me with a smile when I walked in, but it quickly faded when she saw the expression on my face.

“Um... Hello. I'm Haley B-”

“Do you have a problem with your eyes?”

“What?”

I knew I was being a dick, but after that situation, with Justin Timberlunk I was low on patience. “Do you have a problem with your eyes? Because not a single one of my children is doing their homework, and you're not even in the same room as them. What the hell am I paying you for if not to watch them?”

Haley's face blanched, and I instantly felt terrible, but there was nothing I could do about it at that moment.

“I’m... I’m sorry,” she said.

I should have apologized right then and there, but my Irish heritage made me stubborn. And I was not about to show my soft underbelly that easily.

Instead, I rounded on the kids. “You know better. Get to your schoolwork.” I turned back to Haley, who looked like she might actually cry, and straightened my shoulders. “I don’t have time to babysit you babysitting them. Please do better.”

I didn’t wait for a response. Instead, I turned and walked out of the room to go find solace in my office.

I buried myself in paperwork for the rest of the day, trying not to think about the incident. I’d been far too short with her, far too critical. It was her first day, and I hadn’t even taken the time to help get her set up and to explain how my kids could be. She went in completely blind. But I’d been an absolute ass and had possibly ruined this before she ever had a chance to even settle in.

If the kids didn’t drive her away, there was a real danger I might.

## *Chapter Five*

Haley

I couldn't believe I'd actually let them get one over on me so quickly, and I was super embarrassed by the way James had handled it. He'd dressed me down in front of the kids, which was the last thing a new nanny needs. I needed him to be supportive and show the kids that I was an authority figure. Instead, he showed them that I was subject to his commands and that I didn't have any power of my own. No wonder all the other nannies had quit. The kids had no respect for them because he didn't.

It was like the classic situation of a parent cursing and then telling the kids it's not okay to say bad words. The second an adult makes something okay in front of kids—that's it.

"I'm so sorry..." I tried to say as he turned his back on me and left. But he likely didn't hear me in his rush to do whatever it was he did all day. I turned to the kids, who were looking a little afraid and a little curious.

*As well they should be*, I thought to myself. The little shits had gotten me in trouble my first day before I'd even had a chance to really see the place. At least I knew what kind of man I'd be working for. But I'd worked for worse. Hollywood moms are seriously problematic and such control freaks. You can never get paid enough to nanny for the semi-famous.

"You heard your dad," I said to them as they waited. "Let's sit at the table and get on that homework, guys."

At first, the kids didn't move, still gawking at me like I was some animal at the circus. But the minute I took a step forward, they all scrambled up and grabbed their school bags.

I had to admit that helping three kids with different schoolwork was a challenge. Not that I couldn't handle it, but it did make me a little disoriented. Leann was working on social studies while Ben was learning long division. Meanwhile, Katie was singing her ABCs so loudly that I had to whisper out loud to think.

I was fine. The first days were always a little chaotic. We'd be singing at an Austrian music festival in no time just like the Sound of Music family.

The mood changed, though, when Leann spoke. "My daddy yelled at you."

Great. I always loved when kids wanted me to explain why their parents were assholes.

"He wasn't yelling," I said. "He was just in a hurry."

“No,” she replied, still drawing on her map. “He was yelling. He does it all the time.”

*Yikes, I thought to myself. If the kids are already airing Dad’s dirty laundry this early in the game, I wonder what they tell people they really know.*

“Your dad has a stressful job,” I said to her. It was the best reply I could think of. “Maybe he just needs a little extra love. You could give him a hug when he gets home.”

Leann nodded, and Katie looked up, clapping her hands. “I want to give him a hug too.”

Finally, I smiled for the first time since I’d arrived. “I’m sure your dad will let each of you hug him. What about you, Ben?”

Ben looked up at me like I’d said the most annoying thing he’d ever heard. “I don’t care.”

I would never admit it to them, but I loved when little kids had grownup-sized attitudes, and it took everything in me not to burst out laughing. “Oh, okay then,” I said. “No pressure.”

Ben nodded as if to agree with me and returned to his math.

“Look, if you guys get this stuff done fast, we can all play a game together,” I said.

“But I want to play my video game,” Leann said, crossing her little arms across her chest. “My daddy lets me.”

“Nuh-uh,” I said, waving my finger. “I’m not falling for that. We will all play a game together because you guys lied to

me and got me in trouble.”

“I *knew* Daddy was yelling at you,” said Leann with glee.

Damnit. I just played myself right into that. Leann was a clever little fox that I would have to watch out for. Now I had to double down and make sure she knew I was the one in charge, and that while her dad might be my boss, I was still the one calling the shots when he wasn't around.

“Look,” I said, crossing my arms and giving them a no-nonsense look. “We're gonna play a game together once we are done with our homework. Then we will get a snack, and then... well I don't know what, but we will decide then.”

The kids then went silent, actually investing their attention into what they were doing.

“First one done gets to pick the game,” I said, trying to show them that I could have fun too. Katie was the only one who seemed even a little interested in this.

“Can it be *Chutes and Ladders*?” she asked in a sweet, engaging voice.

“Sure,” I said, looking at the paper where she was practicing her letters. “Hope you other two want to play *Chutes and Ladders* cause Katie is definitely gonna win.”

The other two significantly picked up their pace at that.

By the time it was all said and done, Katie did indeed win, so I sat on the floor with the kids, playing *Chutes and Ladders* and trying my darndest not to crush them.



“Did you go to college?” Leann asked.

“Yeah, I did,” I replied. “Why?”

“Did you get one of those stupid liberal arts degrees?” she asked.

I nearly choked on the diet soda I was sipping on. “Where in the world did you hear that phrase?” I asked.

Leann shrugged, and that was the moment I decided Leann was a puzzle I wanted to figure out.

“If you have a degree, why are you a nanny?” she asked.

“That’s a long story,” I said, chuckling. “Do you know what skiing is?”

“We live in a ski lodge. Duh,” Ben said.

The attitude was killing me. I could tell even now that these were good kids, no matter how hard they might be trying to convince me otherwise.

“Well, I am a professional skier, or sort of. I have been skiing my whole life, and I do competitions.”

“Are you good?” Leann asked a little petulantly.

“I am,” I said. “But my last competition, when I was trying to get into the Olympics—” Having to explain all this in kid-friendly terms was harder than I’d thought it would be. “Well, during that competition a big bunch of snow slid down the mountain to the bottom where I was, and it broke my leg.”

I found myself being theatrical for the children’s benefit and to my surprise, they seemed really engaged.

“So, they had to get helicopters, and people came to rescue me. My best friend dug me out of the snow, but my leg was snapped.”

At this, the girls screamed, and Ben got a huge grin on his face, saying, “Gross.”

“It was so gross,” I said, leaning in for effect. “So now I’m a nanny to pay my doctor bills while I get better.”

“That makes sense,” Leann said, nodding.

After I got the kids fed and to bed, I went to the room that I had understood was going to be mine. It was absolutely huge, with an adjoining bathroom totally decked out in marble fixtures.

“Jesus...” I gasped aloud. It was beautiful. It made the apartment I had shared with Anna look like a dump. In the center of the enormous room was a clawfoot tub like you see in movies about New York City. James be damned. I’d put up with any bad attitude to enjoy this kind of lifestyle.

Besides, the kids weren’t all that bad. Leann was shockingly smart, and Ben had such a personality.

Now, all it would take was for me to get through to my new boss.

## *Chapter Six*

James

“**T**hanks, Kendra,” I said to my front desk clerk as she finished helping me with the paperwork needed after the incident earlier. “I appreciate you staying late to help me take care of this.”

She smiled at me from across my desk and handed me the last of the forms. “Don’t even worry about it. You can thank me on my paycheck.”

I laughed and shook my head. “I suppose I will.” I turned and headed toward the stairs to go up to my suite as Kendra went in the opposite direction toward the employee parking lot.

I trudged my way up the steps and down the hall, not taking the quickest route. I wanted the extra time before I got back to my apartment to unwind just a little more.

I'd been pretty harsh with Haley earlier when I'd found her in the kitchen. And doing so in front of the kids probably didn't make things any easier for her for the rest of the day. I owed her an apology, and it was going to take me a few extra minutes to work up to it.

When I finally got to my suite, I stood outside the door for a minute, took a deep breath, and opened it. The place was pretty quiet except for a small rustling sound coming from the kitchen.

I followed the noise and entered the room to find Haley rummaging through the pantry and cabinets. She had on some pajama bottoms and a tank top that perfectly accentuated her body, including the hardened nipples I could see poking through the thin fabric of her top. She didn't notice me at first, and I took a moment to watch her, feeling a bit like a creep but unable to help myself as her bottoms slipped down on one side, revealing her hip and sending a jolt through my lower abdomen.

I felt myself start to get hard, but I was able to get myself under control before it became an obvious thing. The last thing I needed to do after being so rude earlier was to show up with a hard-on and freak her out.

Adjusting myself and stuffing away the thoughts I was having, I entered the kitchen.

"Hi," I said, and she jumped about five feet in the air and turned to me with a hand on her chest.

"God," she said, breathing heavily. "You scared me."

“Sorry,” I said with a hint of a smile. “Are you okay? It wasn’t intentional.”

Once her breathing was under control, she gave me a look, then crossed her arms. “I’m fine. Thanks.”

I guess I deserved that. I was pretty shitty to her before. I looked at what she had out on the counter, and it was obviously some snack foods.

“Are you hungry?” I asked, not even considering that I hadn’t exactly given her a rundown of the suite so she knew where things were and what she had access to.

“Yeah,” she said, blushing and looking at the food she’d pulled out. “I’m sorry for scrounging. I just didn’t know what exactly I could have.”

I walked into the kitchen and looked past her into the pantry, then opened the fridge.

“Well,” I said, “I’d say you’re welcome to anything you’d like. You do live here now, and you’re always welcome to bring in your own food if there’s something special you want, but what you find in here is as much yours as it is ours.”

“Wow,” she said with an apprehensively appreciative look. “Thanks. That’s really generous of you.”

The way she said it, it seemed safe to assume not many of her previous nanny jobs had offered the same courtesy.

“But for tonight, I’m starving, too.” I pulled a pack of American cheese out of the fridge, then grabbed a loaf of hearty bread from the pantry. “Do you like grilled cheese? I

know it's pretty basic, but it's easy to make, and I feel like we've both had a long day."

She looked at the food I held and considered it for a moment before nodding.

"Great," I said. "Have a seat." I motioned toward the bar on the other side of the kitchen island, where two stools were set up.

She slid onto one of the seats and watched as I slathered butter onto the bread and put the sandwiches on the stovetop. They began to sizzle immediately, and the smell filled the air, making my mouth water. I hadn't realized how hungry I was.

"That smells amazing," Haley said, sniffing as the scent wafted in her direction.

"Good," I said. "Because it's one of about five things I can actually cook, so I'm glad it doesn't smell like shit."

She giggled, and I had to turn away to keep my eyes from drifting to the way her tits bounced beneath her shirt when she did.

Once the sandwiches were done, I plated them and set one in front of Haley before taking the seat beside her.

"Bon appetite," I said, raising up half of my sandwich as if I was toasting to her, which earned another giggle, but then she sighed.

"Look," she said after she swallowed her first bite. "I wanted to apologize for earlier. I shouldn't have let the kids trick me, and—"

I interrupted her with a wave of my hand. “You owe me no apology,” I said. “I was too harsh. I had a bad day, and I took it out on you. I’m sorry for that.”

“I appreciate your apology,” she said, offering me a smile. “And thanks for understanding. The first day at a new nanny job isn’t easy, especially when the kids are as cooped up as yours.”

What? What did she say?

“What do you mean cooped up?” I asked, unsure what her point was.

“Well,” she said slowly before taking another bite and chewing it while she considered her words. “I mean, you’ve got three young kids, and they spend all their time inside your suite when they aren’t at school. They don’t have any extracurriculars, and they don’t have any time outside, really. They said they’ve never even been skiing, and they live at a ski resort.”

“What is your point?” I asked briskly. I could feel my anger bubbling up again as the clear criticism of my parenting came through.

“My point,” she said, her face showing a bit of nervousness at my tone, but her voice resolute, “is that your kids need a chance to be kids. They don’t have that right now. It’s probably why they struggle to behave. They’re at ages where they want to test their limits, and they don’t have any productive or age-appropriate ways of doing that at the moment.”

“And what exactly would you consider an ‘age-appropriate or productive’ way of my children being allowed to misbehave?” I demanded.

“I didn’t say to misbehave,” she said, clearly backtracking but trying to keep her momentum. Whatever she was trying to get across, she clearly felt it was worth being on my bad side again. “What I said was that they need an outlet. They need something active, something that lets them stretch their legs and their brains. Leann is so smart, and Ben has so much energy.”

“You think I don’t know my own kids?” I asked, my tone turning dangerous. “I know exactly how smart they are. Exactly how energetic they are. I hired you to take care of those things and to nurture them.”

“But the structure you’re currently using doesn’t work,” she said. “If it did, you wouldn’t have hired so many nannies. The kids are driving them away because they have nowhere else for that pent-up energy and need for attention to come out.”

“So, what are you proposing?” I said angrily, all pretense of being civil going out the window. I’d felt bad about snapping at her before, but it seemed like maybe she needed a dose of reality and humility. “That I change the way things have always been done with my own children because a competition skier decided that I wasn’t doing a good enough job with my kids?”

“I didn’t say that,” she shot back. “I was only saying—”



“That I’m not doing a good enough job,” I finished for her. “That I need someone like you to teach me some kind of Hallmark movie lesson about my kids. I don’t. What I need is a nanny who’s going to follow my instructions and take care of my kids and make sure they do what they’re supposed to and when. If that’s not you, you can pack and leave. I was hoping not to have to look for another new nanny again this soon, but I suppose it’s up to you if that’s what I need to do.”

Without another word, I put my plate in the sink to be taken care of in the morning, then went to the master bedroom and closed the door behind me.

I stood against the wood door for a few minutes, listening. I heard Haley give a sniff, then put her own plate with mine, followed by footsteps heading toward her room.

Fuck.

I’d lost my temper twice today, and it was even more shameful the second time because I’d heard how upset it had made her. I hadn’t wanted to make the poor girl cry. I’d been doing the best I could since my wife died, and sometimes it was hard to think about anyone else having a valid opinion on my own kids.

But now I was stuck in the position of keeping to the status quo. Because the last thing I could or would want to do was to admit when I was wrong.

And I’d been very, very wrong.

## *Chapter Seven*

Haley

“**B**aby, I know you can do it,” Max said reassuringly.  
“How?” I asked. “I don’t even know if I can do it.”

I stood poised at the ski lift, chair after chair passing us by. I’d been standing like this for a half hour, my heart pounding and my brain sending my muscles the urge to run—if I could.

For the life of me, I couldn’t understand why the crunch of the snow and the wetness in the air made my throat close up with nervousness. I was sweating profusely, and I hadn’t done a single ounce of physical activity yet.

Getting my feet into the boots had been hard enough. The pain that came with equipping a formed shoe to my once shattered leg was agonizing, only made worse by my sky-high heart rate. I wanted to scream, to cry, to never put on a pair of

skis again. This was my worst nightmare, and it had once been all I lived for.

I could still remember those minutes beneath the snow, the oxygen getting thinner as I desperately tried to clear a space for me to breathe. They always tell you not to panic, that you will waste your air faster, but I challenge anyone not to panic when you have a fuck ton of snow crushing your body.

I remember the sound of the helicopter landing nearby and hearing Anna call out my name. I also remember thinking she was gonna be too late because it had already stopped being cold beneath the downfall, a sign that I was close to death.

The rules were simple:

Under twenty minutes, you're likely to survive.

Under thirty minutes, you're going to need serious hospitalization.

Anything above that was typically death.

I remember wondering how long it had been. What was likely minutes felt like hours, and when I was retrieved, I was so relieved that I spent the next few hours sobbing—totally independent of my broken leg.

When I realized the injuries I'd sustained, I almost wished I'd died under that snow because in seconds, my Olympic qualifying run turned into the thing that could end my Olympic career for good. I was absolutely devastated.

“Haley,” the doctor had said. “There is no evidence that you cannot rehabilitate and get back to skiing.”

“But it won't be the same,” I insisted. “I won't be the same.”

And I was right. I had anticipated the pain—I hadn't anticipated the panic.

When Max and I first returned from LA, after my physical therapist had officially released me from his immediate care, I thought I'd just jump back onto the slopes and resume my old life. But the minute my toes went into those boots, I felt like I couldn't breathe. Like the weight of that snow came down on me once again, and I nearly broke a window for throwing the shoe across the room so hard.

Little by little, Max had managed to coax me into the gear and onto the snow. But I had yet to master the ski lift, never mind actually skiing itself.

Max grabbed my hands and walked around me to face me. “Haley, you are so strong. We aren't gonna ski; we're just gonna take a ride on the lift. It will be like a roller coaster.”

It sounded reasonable to the intelligent and logical side of my brain, but the roaring in my chest was screaming, “DANGER, DANGER, DANGER!”

“But what if it collapses while we're on it?” I asked, eyeing the next seat passing us by.

“The ski lifts?” Max asked.

“Yeah.”

“Haley...”

He didn't sound distinctly annoyed, but I knew anyone's patience would run thin at a certain point.

"Can't we just hang out in the lodge today?"

Max's face fell a little, and I felt the wave of disappointment. "We can, of course. But how are you gonna get back into fighting shape if we can't even get you on the ski lift?"

"I guess I don't," I said with a little more bite than intended.

"Haley..."

"It's fine. I'm done skiing. I just have to accept that I will never get on snow again without wanting to throw up."

Max didn't seem to know what to say to that, so he took my hand, and we walked back to the ski lodge utterly defeated.

Anna was in the lobby when we entered, and she waved at me, then looked at Max, who must have indicated to her that I was upset because she held up a finger to the employee she'd been talking to and came over.

"What's wrong?" she asked.

"I'm broken forever, and there's nothing I can do about it," I replied.

Anna sighed. "Maybe it's time for you to have a second appointment with Doctor Harzel."

"Oh yes," I said. "That's exactly what I need right now. Another bill to pay."

I felt like crying. I felt like running as far away from the resort and the slopes as I could.

“Why don’t you two go relax in the hot tubs?” Anna suggested. “Nearly none of them are being used at this time of the day.

This did manage to garner a smile from me. Anna had gone from former college girl, floating through life trying to find her purpose, to now being Kevin’s little co-owner. It was precious.

“Thanks, Madam Manager,” I said, hugging her. “I think we will. Max, do you have the time?”

“For you,” he replied, “I will make the time.”

I gave him a friendly smile, and we headed to his room, where I’d left a bag of stuff, including my swimsuit.

Turned out, a dip in the hot tub was exactly what I needed to calm my anxiety. The hot water pulsing against my skin felt like a massage, and having Max beside me, feeling our skin touch was heaven.

“Happier?” he asked me.

“Much,” I replied. “Thanks.”

He nodded, an encouraging smile on his face. “I know you’ll get back out there, my girl. But you are gonna have to challenge yourself a little to do that.”

I stared into the eddying waters and sighed. “I know.”

Max took my hand and pulled me into his lap, burying his face against my collarbone and neck. He placed several small kisses there, and I felt my pulse spike for a totally different reason.

“Max...” I whined. “People will see.”

“Hardly,” he replied. “Besides, there’s a fairly decent chance I will end up cleaning this tub. I might as well get to enjoy it to its full extent.”

I thought I knew what he meant, but just to clarify, I wiggled my hips a little and raised my brows. Max nodded, and my body surged to life.

After what had been an agonizing dry spell, we were going to finally have sex.

Max got up and closed the opaque door so that we would be almost fully concealed from prying eyes. Then he took off his swim trunks, got back in and pulled me tight against him.

I could feel his pulse quicken too, and I bit my lip in eager anticipation.

Max’s hand went to my breast, squeezing it, and he sighed.

“You have the best tits in the world, Hales,” he said. Then he pulled me toward him, pushing down one side of my bikini top so he could take a nipple into his mouth. I gasped when he did, feeling like his lips had been missing from my body for far too long.

Almost immediately, I felt him stiffen against me, and I began to grind my hips down onto him. It felt so good to have

him there, between my thighs once more.

Max changed tactics once he felt me moving and trailed his hand down my body to the space between my thighs. Ripping of my bathing suit bottoms, he threw them to the side of the hot tub.

I was wet in seconds, completely separately from the hot moisture that was dripping down my brow. A little moan escaped me, and I pressed into his touch.

Max bit his lip, watching my face. Then he slid one of his big, long digits inside me.

It was a testament to how long I'd been without it that the moment he pressed against the delicate flesh, I felt myself internally climax. Max was incredible with his fingers, the seductiveness of it contrasting with his boyish good looks and wide-eyed need to please. He was the kind of man you just felt like you could corrupt, and until my accident, I was doing my damndest.

“God, I want you so bad, Haley,” he said, his hard cock pressing into my leg. “Let me have you, now.”

I pulled back and looked at him, surprised. “You sure you’re not worried you’ll break me?” I asked.

Max gave me a deadpanned look but shook his head. “I’m sure the heat and water will make it okay.”

“Why, Maxwell,” I said, reaching down to take his length in my hand. “Someone might think you planned this.”



He grinned. I had been totally joking, but that grin told me he and Anna had been colluding. “With my best friend, Max? How dare you?”

He took his hands and wedged them against the small of my back. “I’m sure I’ll find some way to make it up to you.”

I slid forward, positioning him at my opening then back again, taking the length of him inside me.

Max didn’t have some monster cock, but he had enough, and it was thick. More importantly, he knew how to use it. So many men believed that you could just have a big dick and that was enough. Done and dusted. But being good in bed is way more about technique than size.

The minute I felt him all the way in, I damn near lost my mind. It was like there had been a void and it was finally being filled.

Max put his hands on my ass, squeezing firmly and rocking my hips in a way that felt like he was using my body to pleasure himself. I would have thought he was if his eyes hadn’t been locked on to mine, his bottom lip between his teeth.

“Fuck you’re tight,” he said. “All those months of hand jobs made me forget, I guess.”

“Shh,” I said to him. “Less talking, more fucking.”

Max nodded and began to thrust up into me with a pounding rhythm that sent waves and waves of pleasure through me. I

heard my own voice jump an octave, and within moments, our little cubicle sounded like there was a porno being shot there.

“Yes,” I panted. “Yes. Harder. Give it to me.”

Max shifted up so he could use the side of the tub as leverage, which gave him a little more gravity, which meant the thrusts were doubly powerful.

“Yeah, baby,” he said in that gorgeous baritone voice of his. “Yeah... give me that pussy.”

I leaned back away from him, giving his cock the perfect angle to slam into my G-spot, and slam it did. Orgasm after orgasm went over me until I was panting in desperation.

“I can’t stop coming,” I whined.

“Good,” he said, and I could tell he was getting close.

“Touch me,” I begged.

Max put his hand between us and began to rub my clit with focus and pressure. Small circles that turned into big circles, over and over again.

“You gonna come for me baby?” he asked. “You gonna come hard on my cock?”

“Yes,” I gasped. My voice went up even higher. “Yes!”

Max thrust three more times, and in unison, we both climaxed. I could feel his cum pulse into me and my insides tighten around him with each new burst.

“Fuck...” Max sighed as he began to come down. “Shit, I missed that.”

“Me too,” I admitted. “We are wildly sexually compatible.”

Max nodded. “And maybe, just maybe, that will give you the motivation you need to get back out on those slopes.”

I sighed, my body crashing against him with exhaustion. “We will see,” I said. But I knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that I would definitely need to see my therapist again first.

## *Chapter Eight*

James

**L**ast night had been a nightmare.

I'd gotten bold and decided to go out on a date, and boy was that a mistake.

I'd met the girl on a dating app, and on the outside, she looked perfect. Harvard grad, blond hair, enormous boobs, and the prettiest face I'd ever seen. But when we met up, it was a different story.

I picked her up at her house at six, and we went to dinner at a little local Italian place.. It was one of my favorites, recommended by my friend Zane, another resort owner in the area. She was smokin' hot, and the way the blue dress she was wearing clung to her curves made me nearly come in my pants.

Safe to say it had been a while.

“Hi,” she’d said. “I’m Kelsey.” She put out her hand, and I shook it.

“It’s great to meet you, Kelsey,” I said. “You look stunning.”

Kelsey giggled and played with her hair. “Thank you,” she said. “You too.”

I felt my pulse go nuts and not in my neck or wrist. No, it came from somewhere much farther south.

“Should we go get some food?” I asked, and Kelsey nodded yes.

Dinner was fantastic. Great food, even better conversation. She asked about how long I’d been a resort owner, and I asked her about attending Harvard.

“It’s really not any different from most colleges, to be honest,” she said.

“Yeah,” I replied. “But most colleges aren't as hard to get into.”

She shrugged. “I just think people put way too much weight on the name and don’t spend enough time exploring the programs or administration.”

God she was smart. I thought I might have been falling in love right there.

And if that wasn’t enough, what happened next may have been.

When we got back in the car, Kelsey asked if there was somewhere private we could go. She said she felt like we'd really made a connection. "And I'm horny as fuck for you," she said.

She didn't have to say it twice because I was off like a rocket, heading for the nearest hotel. It's not like I could take her back to my place.

The minute we were in the hotel room, we began to tear each other's clothes off, and I was pleasantly surprised to find Kelsey wasn't wearing any underwear.

"If you'd just reached under the table," she panted, "you would have known sooner."

I peeled off her bra to reveal a pair of perfect tits, very likely constructed by a doctor but very natural looking, with these two perky nipples that were just long enough for me to get a good suck on them.

While I did, Kelsey had reached into my underwear and begun to stroke me slowly, torturously.

"Woah," she said, gasping a little at the end. "Big boy. I can't wait to have you inside me, Stud."

It was true. My penis was definitely big. Most men would have tried to downplay it, but it was one of my few features I was relatively proud of. "Think you can handle it?" I said through teeth that were latched on to one of those glorious nipples.

“Or die trying,” Kelsey said, pulling my length out and dipping her head to suck on it.

My God could that girl suck. I almost considered asking her if she was a professional, but I worried that might finish this before it had gotten properly started.

“Pull my hair,” she begged, and with a little hesitation, I did just that.

Each time I thrust deep into her mouth, she moaned louder, and I looked down to find her fingering her dripping pussy.

By the time she climbed on top of me, my thick cock stretching her cute little hole to capacity, I was nearly there.

“Yes, Daddy,” she said. “Give it to me.”

I wasn’t sure how I felt about “Daddy,” but I did, in fact, intend to give it to her.

Up and down she bounced, and I could feel that unbearable hardness creeping up with the tightening of my balls pressing gently into my hot spot.

“Yes, Daddy,” she said again. “Give it to me. Fill me with that billionaire daddy cum.”

I felt myself climax as I properly heard what she had said and pulled my cock out so fast you’d think her pussy was on fire.

Kelsey and I hadn’t discussed finances. That meant she either knew who I was or had done her research.

“You’re on the pill, right?” I asked her, hoping that she wasn’t being stupid. That I hadn’t been stupid.

But Kelsey grinned and shook her head. “I wanted you to breed me, Daddy.”

What?

Did she mean what I thought she did?

I backed away quickly. “Are you telling me this whole date was a ruse to get me to knock you up?” I asked.

“What do you care?” she said, her voice suddenly changing from bubbling champagne to relaxed and sarcastic. “You’re fucking loaded. Besides, I need to pay off my student loans.”

I scrambled for my clothes as she sat naked on the bed. “You have to be fucking kidding me,” I said, swearing off dating forever. I went to the table in the entryway and grabbed my car keys, then pulled open the door to the five hundred dollar a night hotel room. “Enjoy the room,” I said coldly. “You can expect to hear from my lawyer.”

I didn’t intend, of course, to get my lawyer involved. Not unless she showed up with a baby.

*God, James, I thought to myself. How could you be so stupid?*

When I got home, I was emotionally exhausted and couldn’t have been happier to see Haley asleep on the couch, Katie in her arms also passed out.



I really hadn't been fair to her. It was no wonder she hadn't talked to me since her first day. She was so... normal. I went to her side and gently nudged her.

"Hey," I whispered, and she opened her eyes sleepily. "Why don't you take tomorrow off? I just had a nightmare date, and I want to hang out with some sane people—my kids."

Haley looked at me warily and nodded, sliding her arm out from under my youngest's head. "Well good night, then," she said.

"Good night," I replied, making a mental note to get tested for STDs this week.

I picked up Katie and took her to her bed, tucking her in and giving her a kiss good night on the forehead. "Sleep well, princess."

I stared at her for a minute, the spitting image of her mother. I decided in that instant that I would just be happy for the time Jane and I had and forget going on dates. It was too risky, and I had everything I needed right here.



The next day, Haley must have slipped out before I even woke up because she was gone when I went to ask her if the grocery order had come. I was gonna make the kids pancakes for breakfast but needed milk.

I made my way to the kitchen, opening up the fridge and finding it fully stocked. “Excellent,” I said softly.

But not softly enough because the gang appeared in the hall almost immediately.

“Good morning, Daddy,” Leann said. And I involuntarily shuddered at the nickname. I hoped to God that I’d be able to get past that. It killed me to be triggered by one of my kids.

“Good morning, kiddos,” I said with a smile I only half felt. “You guys want some pancakes?”

The kids cheered, reasonably at first, then raucously as they decided to outdo each other’s volume.

“Okay...” I said. “Calm down. Have a seat and I’ll get you some orange juice.”

The kids nodded happily and for once, did as they were told. Haley must be having a good influence on them because I could never get them to do that.

I pulled the fresh orange juice from the fridge and offered each of them a cup of it. Ben, who had an odd relationship with food, decided that at first he didn’t want any but then wanted two cups after seeing his sisters enjoying it.

Pancakes were served up for everyone, including me, and I sat down to find out how their weeks were going.

“How’s school?” I asked them.

I always felt like a terrible parent when I neglected to ask them at dinner, but usually my mind was so full of the day I

could hardly remember my own name.

“Boring,” Ben said.

“It’s fine,” Leann replied. “We got a class lizard.”

I raised an eyebrow at her. “Oh really?” I asked. “And did you guys name the lizard?”

Leann nodded. “He’s called Pikachu.”

I failed to see the correlation between the mouse-inspired Pokémon and a reptile, but fourth graders were always trying to find themselves and figure out their place in the world. Who was I to say any different?

“We made paper airplanes,” Katie chimed in. Katie was only a half day at her kindergarten right now, but they seemed to be packing a lot into that half day. “Mine flew the farthest. It went zoom across the grass.”

“That’s amazing, sweetie,” I said to her, petting her soft blond hair. “You had to be really proud of yourself.”

She nodded and proceeded to stick half of a pancake in her mouth. I would have corrected her, but honestly the mood was so good, I didn’t want to start any negativity.

“How do you guys like Haley?” I asked.

“She’s nice,” Ben said.

“Yeah, I like her,” Katie added.

My eyes turned to my oldest, who was downright full of opinions—totally like her father—and would certainly have something to say.

“Leann?”

“We will see,” she said with a very mysterious air.

I couldn’t help but laugh. “What in the world does that mean, Lee?”

“It means,” she said, stirring the syrup around on her plate, “that I haven’t completed my investigation.”

“Investigation, huh?” I said, now completely enthralled by her. She was definitely her mother’s daughter. She didn’t get wit like that from me.

Leann nodded. “Can I be excused?” she asked.

“Yeah,” I said. “Put your plate in the sink.”

“Did you hear that Haley is a Lympian?” Katie asked.

“Olympian,” I corrected. “And yeah, I guess I did know that. Though she’s not an Olympian quite yet. She just won the race. That means she gets to go.”

“Ohh...” Katie said, her little brain clearly trying to understand what in the world all that meant. “Is she gonna go away?”

I thought about it for a moment. I supposed if Haley rehabilitated and got back to a racing speed that was comparable to her qualifier, then yes, she would leave. I found a little ache in my stomach at the idea of losing the first nanny that the kids had gotten along with.

“We will just have to give her a good reason to come back, won’t we?” I said to the two younger kids. They nodded and

finished their breakfast, leaving me with the question–

How much longer *did* we have Haley?

## *Chapter Nine*

Haley

“I hear what you’re saying,” I told Dr. Harzel. “But I was out there, standing beside the ski lift. I couldn’t even think about getting on, let alone actually skiing.”

Dr. Harzel gave me a friendly smile, and it made me want to punch her. I wondered if she had ever been through something horrifying enough to need this kind of assistance.

“The thing we need to figure out, Haley, is what you’re so afraid of—”

“Death,” I said loudly. “Death is what I’m so afraid of. The feeling of the snow slowly crushing me. Of hearing people talking only feet away and having no way to tell them I am there. The cold, the way the minutes slowly ticked by. These are all the things I’m afraid of.”

Dr. Harzel went wild scribbling on her pad of paper, and it went quiet between us. I suddenly felt raw and exposed, and I

longed to end the call and crawl under a rock.

“I appreciate your honesty,” she finally said. “This gives us a great place to start.”

“Start?” I asked her.

She nodded and then flipped through some papers. “I can get you in next week at the same time.”

“Dr. Harzel,” I said, trying to stay calm, “I’m not trying to be rude here, but I don’t have a lot of time to get better. My qualifier is for this coming season. How the hell am I supposed to be better by then if we aren’t taking more drastic measures?”

The doctor folded her hands and looked at me hard through the camera. “Haley, I appreciate your urgency, but by your own admission, you’re having trouble even getting on the ski lift. Are you ready to take on a slope?”

The thought of it alone chilled me to the bone. There was literally nothing I’d rather do less than ski right now.

“My recommendation is that we continue with the exposure therapy. Do you think Max will continue to help you?”

I nodded, wishing she’d said anything else. “There’s no hypnosis or anything that would help me without getting on the snow first?”

Harzel looked at her watch. “I could prescribe you some anxiety meds, but no, you will have to actually get on the course to get back into the swing of things.”

My stomach turned over, and I nodded, feeling like someone had told me that I would have to cut off my arm to get better. Hell, I might have preferred that.

“Just get geared up and push yourself down on your rear. Allow yourself to be aware of the way the snow feels on your body, the way the wind feels in your hair, etc. I have full confidence that you can do it. I will see you next week at the same time.”

I nodded, feeling less than confident about my progression. I wasn't an idiot; I didn't think it would be easy. But after three weeks, I'd thought it would at least be a little better. At this rate, I might be ready to go to the Olympics in about fifty years.

I flopped backwards onto my bed and stared at the ceiling, bits of my blond hair falling in my face. I couldn't be bothered to move them, though. I was too damn depressed to do anything right now.

*Beep. Beep. Beep.*

Great. That was my alarm telling me it was time to go to work. The last thing I wanted to do was see James or his kids, who loved to give me a hard time.

But it was the only way I had to pay for my therapy, so work I must.

I got up and pulled on a blue sweater with little snowflake details across the chest. Then I rifled around my dirty laundry



and pulled out a pair of jeans that I'd only worn for a little while. I wasn't willing to dirty more laundry for work.

I emerged from my room, pulling my hair into a high pony, and was almost immediately greeted by James.

"Good morning," he said much more warmly than he had yet. "I hope your room is working out for you."

I nodded. "Yeah, it's great. I really appreciate all you did to make it look homey."

James smiled, and I felt something odd in my stomach. For the first time, I realized that James was really hot for an old guy who was a dad.

"It was my pleasure," he said. "I really appreciate all that you're doing for my kids."

"They're good kids," I said awkwardly.

"Here," he said, reaching into his pocket. "This is your first paycheck. Let me know if that is sufficient to cover costs."

"Thanks," I said, unsure if I was supposed to open it here in front of him or not.

But James got up and went to the front door, grabbing his wallet and keys as he walked past the kitchen island. "Hope you guys have a good day," he said.

"Thanks," I replied. "I'm sure we will."

As soon as he was gone, I got to work making the kids their food. It would be cereal for today since they needed to get to

school. Then I packed their lunches and stacked them on the counter before going to Leann's room to wake her up.

"Hey, kiddo," I said, shaking her shoulder lightly. "Time to get up for school."

Lee rolled over and whined. "I don't feel good. I don't think I should go."

"Leann," I said, trying not to smile. "That's what you told me yesterday."

Leann seemed to think for a moment, then nodded. "Oh yeah," she said. "Never mind then. I'm up."

She had such an amazing personality. I wished I had been that spunky when I was her age. Maybe I wouldn't have gotten bullied as much.

"You have ten minutes, and then you need to be in the kitchen for breakfast. Do you want an apple or an orange in your lunch?"

"Both," she said. God this was becoming so typical Leann. You gave her choice A and choice B, and she would always try to make a choice C.

"Fine," I said, figuring extra fruit wouldn't hurt. "If you really think you will eat both."

Leann nodded. "I love fruit," she said.

"Me too," I replied, leaving her room to get the other two kids up.

The other two were *much* easier to rouse, and each of them chose *one* fruit for their lunch. Ben did fall back asleep for a few minutes, but got up when I called him for breakfast.

Their ride was here exactly on time, and I walked them down to the lodge entrance to say goodbye. Once they were gone, I knew I had work to do on myself. And it was gonna be so much more complicated than apples or oranges.



The snow was falling lightly as I waited for Max on the bunny slopes, and a flake fell right on my nose. I crossed my eyes to watch it melt and remembered how much I used to love the way snow felt. Now it reminded me of suffocating.

I dug my hands into the thick liquid powder beneath me, wanting that love to come back so badly that it physically hurt. But after a few seconds of cold moisture, I felt my heart begin to pound. Then my breathing seemed to catch in my chest, and I was forced to gasp for air.

“Hey,” Max said, coming up from behind me, sliding across the snow and pulling me into his arms. “Baby. Hey. What’s wrong?”

I started crying, my heart feeling like it was gonna explode with fear and worry and sadness. “I want to ski again,” I cried. “I want to love the snow and feel the rush of beating a record. But I can’t. And I never will again.”

Max held me tightly in a way that really did feel reassuring. “I’m here for you,” he said. “I would never let you go through this alone, Hales.”

I felt my pulse slow, and the tightness in my throat released, and I knew Dr. Harzel was right. If I was ever gonna get better, I was gonna have to take that first step.

“Max?” I said, looking up at him. I could still feel the wetness on my cheeks from my tears. Max leaned in to wipe them before they could freeze.

“Hmm?” he asked.

“Can you help me get up? Maybe we can go down this slope together, hand in hand?”

Max’s eyes got wide, and he nodded excitedly. “I’ll even keep my skis off so I can walk beside you.”

I gave him a weak smile, and he lifted me from the ground onto my feet.

I began to slide a little immediately, and I clutched his arm for dear life. As if any bit of movement was gonna land me under six feet of snow again. But he walked forward with me, and pretty soon, the feeling of the snow beneath my skis felt as natural as my own face in the mirror.

“Max,” I whimpered excitedly, “I’m doing it.” I was ignoring the ache in my knee that would only be resolved with more physical training and rebuilding the muscles.

“Yeah, you are,” Max said with an odd smile. “That’s my girl.”

I stopped my skis faster than I was ready to, causing me to wobble a little. “What’s that look?” I asked.

Max shook his head, his expression changing at once. “What look?”

I raised my eyebrow at the suspicious behavior but decided to let it go in favor of skiing more, and by the time we were done, I was going down the kid slopes all by myself. God it was a rush. How had I ever wanted to stay away from this?

“I’m really proud of you,” Max said as we walked back to the lodge and up to the penthouse. “You overcame your fear and did it in a spectacular way.”

I unlocked the door to the penthouse and brought him inside. James hadn’t strictly said I wasn’t allowed to have any guests. Why would he care? The kids were still in school anyway.

“Take your boots off,” I said, directing him to the door mat. “I don’t want to have to mop up snow.”

Max laughed and did as he was told, then followed me to the living room, where we cuddled up on the sofa and watched some historic ski runs. It was a silly nerdy hobby, but we loved to critique them like we were the commentators. No one ever got a perfect score.

“Yes, it had style,” I said in response to Max’s rating. “But did you see that form? Poor girl is gonna throw her back out just trying to stand up straight.”

Max laughed. “It’s just a different style than yours, Hales. It’s not bad, just different.”

It was then that I heard the front door open twenty minutes earlier than it was supposed to. Max and I weren’t making out or anything, but our bodies were definitely tangled together in a way that looked a little suspicious.

Having the kids show up early was bad enough because Leann was definitely a little tattle-tale. But what I couldn’t have predicted was that it would be even worse.

Just as Max and I pulled ourselves apart, James walked into the living room, the sounds of the kids getting unpacked from school not far behind him.

He gave me a confused look, then an understanding one. He narrowed his eyes at Max. “You’re Kevin’s nephew, right?”

Max nodded and stood, holding out his hand. “Yeah,” he said. “My mom is his sister.”

“You’re Laurie’s kid?” he asked, genuinely seeming interested. “You do look a lot like her.”

Max laughed and nodded. It seemed Max might have saved the day and my job by being Kevin's nephew. I took a deep breath, searching James’s face for any lingering signs of irritation.

When I caught his eye, James gave me a neutral expression. Thank God. It seemed like I might be the first nanny in all of history who wouldn’t be fired for having her boyfriend over unexpectedly.

“Well, I’ve got to get going,” Max said, turning to me. “Don’t judge these other skiers too harshly without me.”

I giggled. “Get out of here,” I said, laughing.

I noticed James watching us, studying us even. And as Max left, he turned to me as if to ask a question, then changed his mind and walked away.

“Hi, Haley,” rang out Katie’s cheerful voice.

“Hey, Katie,” I said, still watching James walk away. “Show me what you have for homework today.”

## *Chapter Ten*

James

**H**osting the annual Ski Lodge Owners party was not what I had planned on doing with my night, but here I was, playing the hero once more because Ted had decided to take his family on a last-minute trip.

I usually liked being the guy that people came to for last-minute changes, but with work being so busy and Haley still adjusting to stuff around the house, it wasn't as easy as just sending my kids to a sitter.

I was anxiously pacing the penthouse kitchen when Haley walked out of her bedroom.

“You okay?” she asked. “You seem...”

“Nervous, frazzled, stressed?”

“Something like that,” she replied. “Is there anything I can do to help?”



I could think of about a million things she could do to help, some of them absolutely unmentionable, but none that I would openly share. “I don’t suppose you want to go to a party tomorrow, do you? Under duress, I’m agreeing to host a cocktail party, and I need to make it look like I’m more popular than I am.”

Haley looked like she was expecting anything other than that and was caught off guard.

“Uh...” she replied. “I don’t know if I have anything to wear.”

“Even better,” I said, thinking about the opportunities that buying a dress for her could present. I’d been horny as all hell for the past week, and picturing Haley in some low-cut, skin-tight dress was giving me a semi. “Let me pay for you to go shopping. And you can bring a friend to the party if you like,” I said.

She seemed to think about it for a second, then nodded. “Yeah. That would be fun, thanks.”

“You’re welcome. You’re doing me a favor honestly. Kevin used to be my ‘date’ for all the things like this, but now he’s got Anna, and I’ve been replaced.” I realized almost immediately how bitter that came off. I was happy for Kevin, but he’d been my wingman since we both bought our resorts in the same year. We both spent all the money we’d made as competition skiers and made a name for ourselves.

Haley looked at me like I was a little crazy, and to be honest, if I was in her position, I would probably think the

same.

“So... what time am I supposed to show up?” she asked.  
“And you’re sure it’s okay for me to bring a friend?”

“Absolutely,” I replied. “And be here around six. I mean... You live here. Obviously, you’ll be here. I—”

“You mean be ready by six. Got it.”

What was it about her that made me so damn nervous? It wasn’t that she was beautiful—which she was—and it wasn’t that she was particularly intimidating. It must have been the last-minute changes that had me rambling like a fucking idiot.

Haley turned to leave, pulling her phone out of her pocket. Presumably, she was about to text a friend to attend the party with her. I wondered if it would be Max.

I weirdly hoped not.

The afternoon was filled with phone calls to caterers and alcohol distributors, and then I had to go to the gray lounge and make sure it was properly decorated. It wasn’t that I didn’t trust anyone else to do a good job; it was that I wanted to have final approval before anyone else saw work with my name on it.

That wasn’t the same thing... right?

I couldn’t have been more relieved to find out that my typical event planner, the one that I utilized for all resort-related events, was in today and that she had some contacts that were fantastic at coming through with late-hour plans.

“And the florist is absolutely a god with greenery.”

“That’s all fine, Susan, but I need to know when it will be done.”

“Three o’clock,” she said, smiling proudly. “Is that fast enough for you?”

I nodded. “This is why you are the absolute best there is.”

Susan pretended to be embarrassed and waved her hand as if to shoo away my compliment. “You’re too kind, James. Honestly, I’m just happy I can help.”

When I finally got done with arrangements, I texted Haley to find out how dress shopping was going. I realized at some point between the balloon arch and champagne that I hadn’t held up on my end to pay for the dress.

*Hope this is sufficient - J*

How much did a dress cost? It had been so long since I’d paid any attention to women's fashion that I truly had no idea. I sent her \$1500 via Apple Pay and hoped that would be sufficient.

Once that was done, I resolved to take a nap. I didn’t usually subscribe to the concept of adult naps—there was always far too much to do to even consider it. But this afternoon, I was tired, and the kids were with their grandmother, so I decided to indulge.

God, it felt good to hit the pillows. Sometimes I underestimated how much stress I put myself under, always telling myself *next year* I would take it easy. I silently patted

myself on the back now for relaxing, as if this made up for the six months this year I'd already worked without a day off.

I undid my tie from where I lay, pulling it off and tossing it across the room. I'd have to shower and change after this anyway. Then I turned over onto my side and took a deep breath, trying to calm my mind for sleep.

Only another thought got there first.

Haley in a low-cut dress.

As hard as I might, I could not make my brain stop playing the image over and over again, one I hadn't even seen—only imagined.

I pictured her toned body in something red. Something that clung to those delicious curves.

*No... no... bad James. Do not be such a cliché.* Wanting to fuck the nanny was hardly an original concept.

All the same, I tugged my belt open and unzipped my dress slacks, running my hand down my stomach and beneath the waistband of my trousers. I was stiff as a board already.

Because the truth was, as much as I hated to admit it, I'd wanted Haley since the first day I met her. She was strong, beautiful, smart, and an Olympic contender, for fuck's sake. But she also didn't take my crap, which I respected.

Respected enough to now reduce her to the most primitive form of who she was and make her into material for my “spank bank.”

I would have been disgusted with myself if it wasn't for the fact that I was so horny at this point I was seeing double.

I wrapped my hand tightly around my hardened shaft and stroked it, my legs trembling as I did. Outside of the encounter with the rich baby daddy chaser, I hadn't been coming.

At all.

I was usually exhausted by the time I got home, and masturbation seemed all too pointless versus getting my four to five hours of sleep.

But now...

I pictured Haley here, in my room, standing in the clinging red dress that *I'd* bought her.

"Jamie," she said with a giggle. "This dress isn't gonna take itself off."

No one had called me Jamie since my wife died. I was man enough to admit I missed it.

In my mind, I went to Haley and ran my hands over her body before grabbing the zipper and pulling it down to reveal her bare back. I could see down to her panties, which were lacy and white, a beautiful contrast against her bronzed Californian skin.

"You're so beautiful," I whispered to her, placing several deep kisses along her neck. I relished in the tiny squeals and moans I got out of her.

"You're so silly," she said to me.

Then she turned, the dress falling to the floor and revealing her gorgeous body and breasts that could drive a man insane.

I stroked harder, my lips mumbling her name over and over again. Every time I brought my closed fist down, it would make the zipper on my pants *ting* against the buttons, and somehow the rhythmic noise became as erotic as the rest of it.

Imaginary Haley ran her hands over her own body, then stepped forward and did the same to mine. “Well?” she said, her nipples practically staring at me. “Are you gonna do what you promised?”

“And what did I promise, beautiful?”

“You promised that you would let me sit on your face.”

I hadn’t realized I wanted that until this dream version of Haley said it, but God yes, that was exactly what I needed.

“How rude of me to keep you waiting, my dear,” I said. I flopped into the bed, lay down on my back, and motioned for her to come to me. She of course did, sitting down on my chest and allowing me to pull her forward onto my face.

God, she tasted like heaven. Or I imagined she did since this was as close as I’d ever get to having my nanny where I’d like her. What a dirty old man.

I could feel my climax getting closer, and I panicked, trying and failing to think of anything else besides what Haley’s thighs would feel like around my face. How she would smell as her juices dripped down my cheeks.

I moaned out loud and couldn't be more grateful that my kids were elsewhere as I started to stroke harder and faster, slowly losing my will to give a shit about the content of my fantasy.

"Yes, baby," I said out loud as dream Haley slid off my face and down to my cock.

"Let me suck you off," she said to me. "You look so stressed. Seems like you could use a little relief."

I watched as she took my cock in both her hands and leaned forward to take it into her mouth.

"Fuck!" I said out loud as thick, shiny ropes of cum burst out of me with such intensity that I sat up, clutching my throbbing dick.

The fantasy vanished from my mind as fast as it had begun, and I felt a little embarrassed about how deeply visceral that had become for me. I was a businessman who had a family and a really great reputation. To be reduced to something as base as wanting to get it on with the babysitter felt... a little pedestrian.

My watch beeped, and I realized I'd missed out on my chance to have a nap. I would need to get showered now and decide which tux to wear. This was ultimately too bad because the relief of orgasm had left me utterly wiped and devoid of any kind of desire to *be* the businessman I prided myself on being.

I groaned aloud and rolled out of the bed, the sticky, white cum cooling on my belly. I hated the feeling enough that I jogged to the bathroom and jumped into the shower immediately, not even bothering to let the water warm properly.

Tonight was going to be a real test of Haley's ability to fit in with the rest of the family and perhaps secure her position in my employment long-term. It would be nice to finally have a nanny who stayed around long enough that they would help on trips and other special occasions too.

The water did finally warm, and I rinsed away the shame of what I'd fantasized over, but the realization that I wanted her wouldn't leave my mind. And I really needed to figure out why.



## *Chapter Eleven*

Haley

I pulled on a pair of boots that would be easy enough to take off in a fitting room as I got ready to go shopping with Anna. I hadn't exactly brought a plethora of dresses with me to my physical therapy "retreat," and James had offered to pay for me to buy one, and I'm not one to turn down free shopping.

As I finished getting dressed, I called Max. "Hey," he answered cheerfully.

"Hey," I said back, smiling even though he couldn't see it. It was good to hear his voice. After spending almost every day together since my accident, I had really gotten used to his presence, which made the last couple weeks, when I hadn't seen much of him, a little difficult. "How are things over at Brother Bears?"

"The usual," he said, though I thought there was something off about the way he said it that made me question whether

there was something more to it. “How about over there? Getting settled in any better?”

“I guess,” I said, holding a dress up in front of myself in the mirror before tossing it onto a pile with a couple others.

“You sound kind of unsure. Everything okay?” he asked.

“Um... I think so,” I replied. “James invited me to some party he’s having.”

“Oh?”

I could hear a symphony’s worth of jealous notes in that one single syllable, and it made me laugh. “It’s not like that,” I said. “He said I could bring a guest, so I was calling to see if you wanted to come. It’s tomorrow night. You in?”

“Hell, yeah!” Max said, and the genuine delight in his voice made me giggle. It was one of the things I liked most about him—his enthusiasm for life and ability to see the good in most situations. “What kind of dress code are we talking? Is it a little more casual, or is it ‘Ask Uncle Kevin for a new tux’ level formal?”

“Somewhere in the middle?” I said with a laugh. “It’s a cocktail party, so probably—”

“Dress shirt, tie, slacks, and loafers. Got it,” he said.

“You know the drill.”

“Any particular colors I should aim for?”

I loved how Max had enough experience with big events like this that he understood what was expected, especially in

regards to making sure he coordinated with his date.

“I don’t know yet, to be honest,” I said as I pulled my hair up into a high ponytail. “Anna’s coming to get me in, like, fifteen minutes, and we’re going shopping. Apparently, I’m getting a dress as a bonus. James offered to pay for it since I don’t have anything to wear.”

“That’s nice of him,” Max said, that same tone coming back.

“Do I need to convince you that I’m all yours?” I asked, lowering my voice in a hopefully sultry way.

There was a pause on the end where I could practically hear Max having to adjust his pants. Good. It worked.

“What exactly did you have in mind?” he asked.

“I don’t know,” I said, taking my top back off and aiming my camera at my tits. They were one of my best features, if I did say so myself, and I knew that Max had a similar opinion. I sent the picture to him and waited.

“Hales?” he said when I was silent for a moment. “What are—hang on, I have a... oh...”

“Something wrong?” I asked.

“Not a single... damn... thing...” he said slowly, his voice strained just slightly, and I knew him well enough to know he was already unzipping his pants and reaching into them.

“No?” I said innocently. I typed out a message that said, *Hey big boy. Wanna chat with me instead of your lame-ass*

*girlfriend? I've got about fifteen minutes to play...* Then I followed it up by saying, "Well, I should probably let you go then."

"Oh, yeah," he said, the tension in his voice visceral and raw. "Yeah, we should.... Hang up..." I could hear his breathing speeding up and getting shallow, and I knew he'd already gone to work on himself. Seconds later, I got a message from him saying, *Hell yes. You got more for me?*

I laughed out loud and heard him chuckle back at me. We loved this game—roleplaying like we were other people. It was fun and just a little bit spicy—something to keep things fresh.

"Well, okay then. I'll text you later."

"No rush," he said, and I knew that to mean, *Please, text back immediately.*

We hung up, and I immediately began to fondle my nipple with one hand while typing out a message to Max with the other.

*That depends. You got something for me first?*

I tugged at the hard nub of skin and let out a soft moan. I was already wet, just from the anticipation of seeing what he'd send me.

He didn't disappoint. Within seconds, I was staring at his hand, which was wrapped firmly around his rock-hard cock, complete with a thick, pearly drip coming out of the tip. My moan turned into a whine as I let my hand drift toward my center, pulling down my leggings and panties as I went.

*Impressive. What do you plan to do with that?*

I took a picture of my hand as I let my fingers slip between my folds to gently rub my swollen bud, putting it on display for the camera.

*Well, for starters... I'd stroke it while I put my face between your legs to taste you.*

Fuck, he was good at this. Even when we would do this just from other sides of the resort, he could get me going well enough to have me running to his room to jump on top of him.

*That is a good start, I replied. What next?*

I was pressing and sliding my finger through my own wetness, feeling the arousal rising as my pulse began to beat so hard I could feel it in my clit. I lay back on my bed, still with a hand holding the phone in front of my face so I could see what Max had to say next.

*I'd make sure you came—hard. Then I'd do it again and again until you were begging me to stop and just fuck you.*

“Shit,” I said aloud before biting my own lip against the ecstasy. Max knew all of my weak spots and exactly how to exploit them. He knew how to get me off with little more than a word.

*Tempting... tell me more...*

He must have already been typing because the reply came almost as soon as I hit send.

*I guess that depends on what YOU would do.*

I slipped two fingers inside myself, pressing against the sensitive soft spot within me, then noticed the time. I had ten minutes before Anna would be here. I was going to need to hurry this along. Not that it had ever been an issue with me and Max before. If I had to guess, he was already more than halfway there.

*I would get on my knees and take you all the way into my throat. I'd suck on you until you were seconds from coming, then I'd stop and play with myself for you, make you watch but not touch. I'd tell you to stroke yourself slowly, not fast enough to get you there, but enough to keep you hard so I could mount you after I came again.*

There was a long pause before the three little dots showed me he was typing again.

*Fuck, baby... you're so good at this.*

I didn't want the game to end yet, though, because I wasn't quite ready to finish.

*At riding you? Yes. I am.*

He replied instantly.

*Yes, that's what I meant. And that's why I would grab you by the hips and slam you down on my cock over and over, getting as deep as I could.*

I moaned loudly, knowing I was the only one home, then sent back, *I'm really close, Max.*

*Wanna come together?* he asked.

*Yes. Now?*

*Now.*

I came in an explosion of ecstasy, my fingers still pressing and circling my throbbing bud.

I lay there panting until I got a text from Max with a picture of the result of his own orgasm followed rapidly by Anna knocking. I scrambled to get myself cleaned up, then answered the door.

“Hey. Ready to go?” she asked.

“You bet,” I replied, hoping I wasn’t still completely flushed from climaxing so hard.

I was very eagerly excited to go to the party when I woke up in the morning. I even had a pep in my step as I woke the kids and got their breakfast ready before school.

“You’re happy today,” Leann said suspiciously.

This girl was going to be the death of me.

“I’m happy every day I get to spend with you,” I said in a sickly - sweet tone.

“Yeah, right,” she said.

I opened my mouth to try to argue with her but decided that fighting with a nine-year-old was just not worth my time.

I got them off to school, then came back to the suite. The kitchen was fully cleaned up from breakfast when my phone went off. I looked at it to see a message from Max, and my face lit up, then fell again as I saw his message.

*Hey, baby. I'm not going to be able to make the party tonight. I have a late meeting that I just found out about. It's a weird time difference thing. I'll call you tomorrow though.*

He ended the message with a heart emoji, which I was sure was meant to soften the blow, but it didn't. I sat down on one of the stools at the breakfast bar and stared at my phone. That wasn't like him at all to cancel last minute and definitely not like him to be so flippant about it, not offering to call and explain or anything.

I spent the rest of the day moving at a snail's pace, going through the motions of the day and trying to keep my head on my work, but it was hard. I was torn now about going to the party since I wouldn't have my date with me. The only reason I was even still considering it was that I knew Anna would be there, so I wouldn't be totally alone.

I figured getting ready would help me feel a bit more like going, so I did my hair and makeup but didn't put on my dress until I finally just decided to suck it up and try to have fun.

When I arrived at the blue room—a banquet lounge—I felt a little apprehensive about entering. All of these people were not only more powerful and wealthier than me, but most likely a decent amount older. Oh well, at least I'd have Anna.

“Haley!” I heard from behind me, and I turned to see her standing there. She and Kevin must have just arrived because their cheeks were flushed from the cold. Well, either that or they'd snuck off somewhere, which would be completely in character for them.



“Hey,” I said, glad she was there. I gave her a hug, then looked at Kevin. “Looking good, Kev.”

He tugged at his tie in a way that was both awkward and cocky, and Anna laughed, patting him on the chest. He leaned down to kiss her, and I could see the way his fingers dug into her hip as he did.

Great. Third wheel time.

We hung out for a while longer, but as the night went on and champagne flowed freely, they both got more and more handsy.

And it made me feel even more alone than if they hadn't been there at all.

## *Chapter Twelve*

James

**F**or something so last minute, I seemed to have pulled it off tremendously. All of the guests showed, and all of the caterers were on time. Honestly, it was so easy I wondered if I should always host.

But then my senses came back to me.

Kevin and Anna were among the first to arrive and I walked toward them when I noticed them talking to a curvy blonde in a navy-blue cocktail dress. She was a knockout from the backside, and I wondered if I could get them to introduce me.

But as Anna and Kevin turned to each other, diving into a deep kiss, the blonde turned away to take a long drink of her champagne.

It was Haley.

Holy... Shit...

I barely had time to register her gorgeous visage though, before Mark Caper, a representative for Nike Ski sponsorships, touched me on the shoulder and stopped me.

“Hey,” he said with a winning smile. “Great party.”

I nodded in thanks, trying not to lose sight of the gorgeous siren who had thoroughly bewitched me. But when Mark shifted his weight, she was gone.

“Have you thought any more about the sponsorship offer?” he asked.

“Huh?” I replied, only half aware of what he was saying. “Oh, uh... I still have to run it by my board, Mark,” I said with a faux chuckle.

Mark had been hammering me about adding on a “Nike wing” of the lodge so that they could build a shop in it. I was the top-rated ski lodge in the area, beating out all my friends in profits and hospitality ratings. It was something I knew really burned Kevin’s ass and gave me a little chuckle.

I had considered it, but hadn’t taken it to my board yet. You see, one thing people constantly talked about was the homey feel of the resort, and I’m not sure blatant capitalism had a place in that.

On the other hand, it would make me a cool hundred thousand a year, and that was just to host a Nike store. That didn’t include my cut of the profits.

“Well, get on that, James,” Mark said with a laugh, his cheeks nearly glowing from drunken redness. “It’s time for

both of us to get paid.”

He patted me on the back once more, a little harder than I think he intended, then walked away. Presumably, he'd spotted his next victim as he approached my friend, Zane.

“God, that guy is a leech,” someone said from behind me.

I turned to find one of my rivals, Harry Sutton, sipping something brown on the rocks. He was the youngest of us local resort owners but had a shit-ton of potential that I, for one, was eager to see play out.

“Mark's all right,” I said, taking a step back so we were standing side by side. “He's just doing his job like the rest of us. And he does have a point. That deal would make me a lot of money. I just have to decide if money is my top priority.”

Harry nodded. “That's fair, I suppose. My father was totally uninterested, I can tell you that.”

Harry's father was the one who made all the financial decisions for the resort. Harry was simply the good-looking kid who was the face of the place.

“Well, your father is a good man who runs a dream, not a business.”

“What does that mean?” Harry asked.

It was then that I spotted Haley again, her breasts looking like they'd been created by a doctor in that dress.

“I'll tell you when you're older,” I replied playfully. Then I walked away from Harry and toward Haley, doing my best not

to be the creepy older man who couldn't take his eyes off her.

Regardless of the fact that it was true.

Fuck.

Now was the worst possible time to get hard and yet, here I was. Haley looked like a goddess in her tight-fitting, plunging neckline navy dress, and I was gawking at her like I was a teenage boy at his first school dance.

I moved around a pair of partygoers and approached her, trying to regain my cool before I spoke.

Haley caught sight of me, and gave me a smile. "Hey, need me to do anything?" she asked sweetly.

I could think of about a million and one things I'd like her to do, me being at the top of the list. But I shook my head, patting her on the shoulder. Her skin was unbelievably soft and smelled like plumeria.

"I think I've got everything covered," I said looking around. For the first time tonight, I could feel the drinks I'd already had. "I just want you to enjoy the party. You work as hard as anyone else to make this lodge run."

Haley cocked her head and smiled with confusion. "But I just babysit your kids."

"Believe me when I say that alone keeps the operation running. If I had to be worrying about my kids being safe, nothing would ever get done. Even more so if I had to worry that my home was being destroyed."

Haley giggled and I beamed with pride. I had said something to make this vivacious, talented girl laugh. Fuck me, I was smitten.

“Can I get you a drink?” I asked, noticing her champagne flute was empty.

“Only if you’re paying,” she replied. “I didn’t have anywhere to store my wallet.”

Haley ran her hands over her sleek curves which the satin dress only accentuated. There wouldn’t have been room for a house fly in that thing, let alone money—not that she needed it.

“I can see that,” I said with a laugh that echoed all the way down to my cock. I was hoping that if I kept her engaged in conversation, she wouldn’t glance down at the embarrassing bulge in my pants.

“Why, Mister Warner,” she said. “Whatever would bring you to be looking at my dress so closely, let alone the fit.”

Was she flirting with me? Had I finally lost my mind and started hallucinating?

“How about we get you that drink. I assume you like cocktails?” I asked.

Haley nodded and opened her mouth as if she was going to say something snarky back, then stopped. “Yeah... a cocktail would be great. I don’t suppose you know how to make a Long Island Iced Tea, do you?”

“Do I know how to make a Long Island? Do I know how to make a Long Island?” I chuckled, remembering my days in college where that was my go-to cocktail at parties. But it took no more than a minute to remember exactly how long ago that was. “Actually, *do* I remember how to make a Long Island?”

Haley laughed and took my hand, leading me to the bar where she stepped behind it.

“In addition to nannying in LA, I worked—very briefly—as a bartender.” She grabbed the supplies for her requested drink and began to make it for me. “Vodka, rum, triple sec, tequila, gin, and lemon.”

“Ah yes, now I remember,” I said, nodding. She was insanely sexy like this, and I wondered where someone like her had been the last few years.

*In college, you creep,* I thought to myself.

Haley poured two highball glasses full and walked around the bar to hand me one. “There you go, sir.”

I took the drink, which had been expertly poured, and held up the glass in Haley’s direction.

“To your health,” I said with a gentle smile.

“To your health,” she said back. “I can only imagine a party like this will cost enough that you will suffer from a heart attack before the week is out. Should I arrange for a caregiver?”

I couldn’t help but laugh at the dry humor of it all. She was funny.

“That’s all right,” I said. “I’ll have you around, right?”

It might have just been my imagination, but I was pretty sure Haley blushed.

“Of course,” she said with a shy smile.

Suddenly the room was empty and it was just her and me. Time seemed to move in slow motion as her long eyelashes obscured her soft blue eyes and I felt my heart beat in double time. Was this all really happening? The first woman I have feelings for after becoming a widower is my nanny?

“James!”

I snapped out of my daydream and returned to the reality of the situation. Dozens of my closest “friends” were around me and Haley was now talking to Anna once more as Kevin clapped his hand on the back of my shoulder.

“Please tell me you’re not eye-fucking your sitter,” Kev said with a tipsy chuckle.

“Certainly not,” I said in a purposely less than convincing tone, taking a long drink from the cocktail Haley had made me.

“She’s cute,” Kevin replied. “A bit too much of a mouth on her for my taste, but Anna loves her.”

I nodded, not really taking in what Kevin was talking about and wholly focused on the fact that Haley kept looking at me while talking to her best friend. She even gestured to me at one point and the two girls laughed in unison.



“That can’t be good, right?” I asked my fellow resort owner.

“Not sure,” he replied. “But Anna looks way too sexy to be clothed. I think we’re gonna head out.”

“Great,” I replied with a flat affect. “Leave me with my whiskey and thirteen-year-old-worthy crush.”

Then Kevin rounded on me rather seriously and I stopped grinning or swooning.

“This is not a situation for the lighthearted, James. I almost lost my best friend in the whole world because I couldn’t keep my hands off his daughter—a woman young enough to be mine. Just make sure you know what you’re doing.”

“Kevin,” I said calmly, “she’s sleeping with your nephew. They’re an official thing if I’m understanding correctly. You don’t have to worry about—”

“Just be sure this is what you want before you move in.”

With that, Kevin walked away, leaving me confused and bewildered. Kevin didn’t seem to give a shit that I was lusting over his grown nephew’s girlfriend which led me to wonder if there was trouble in paradise.

After all, she hadn’t brought him to the party. And any man who would skip out on parading the gorgeous creature in front of me around a room packed with influential people must not be as committed as he might seem.

After Kevin and Anna departed, I got up the courage to approach Haley once more and ask her for a dance. There weren’t many people taking advantage of the huge dance floor,

but Jane and I had taken some ballroom dancing classes two weeks before she'd been diagnosed and I was eager to show off a little if Haley would have me as a partner.

For dancing, that is.

"Hey," I said, swaggering to where she stood.

"Hey, yourself," she replied. "Is there a particular reason you're walking like you're wearing a diaper?"

Good lord I was out of practice with this shit.

"I was trying to look cool so I could come over here and ask if you'd be willing to share a dance with this old man."

At first, Haley looked at me like I'd sprouted an extra head, crossing her arms and looking at me curiously.

Then she asked, "What did you have in mind?"

As if orchestrated by cupid himself, Michael Bubl 's "Sway" began to play and Haley shrugged with a grin, presenting her hand to me.

I took it in mine and wrapped my other around her back, feeling for her shoulder blade to make sure I was not only in the right spot, but to prevent myself from "accidentally" slipping lower.

If there's one thing I can say for my dancing, it's that, while I needed the instructions and lessons to learn the types of dances, the style aspect of it came easily. Once I learned the mechanics, adding in things like turns or a sway of the hips was like riding a bicycle.

Haley seemed slightly surprised as I moved my body in time with the music, leading her through the classic box step of a rumba, a bit rigid at first, but then slowly loosening my body so that my own fluidity seemed to radiate to her, and by the middle of the song, I had her turning, dipping, and stepping out for various moves that were actually somewhat advanced.

I was surprised at her skill, and eventually I asked her, “Where did you learn to rumba?” There was no way she could have pulled off some of those moves as seamlessly as she had without some level of instruction.

“I took a ballroom dance class in college,” she said. “My partner was a guy Anna was dating at the time, and he ended up being a total creep. Tried to use ‘extra practice’ as an excuse to spend time with me. He grabbed my ass exactly once before I kicked him in the balls and walked out of the studio.”

I winced, just as every man does at the mention of that particular violent act, and chuckled. “Poor guy.”

“Poor guy is right,” she said as I lifted her arm and she spun beneath it before coming back to center, where I was very careful about my hand placement. “He could barely dance at our next lesson. Though I can’t claim full credit for that. Anna low-blowed him too, once I told her what happened, and I think she might have kicked even harder than I did.”

The song came to its crescendo as she finished her story, and I ended the dance with a dip that left her nearly horizontal.

We were both slightly out of breath, and I stared at her for a moment, even as the next song—a perfect one for a hustle—came on, and we stood up.

## *Chapter Thirteen*

Haley

I should have known I was getting tipsy by the third or fourth drink, but all of the glitz and glamor of the room, and the people in it, were intoxicating in their own way, especially after James came to talk to me. I'd been ready to go to bed, but he'd surprised me with what ended up being some pretty good conversation about skiing, something I never tired of talking about.

The room was completely empty before I even realized it. I was no less than six drinks deep and feeling distinctly relaxed and unfettered.

“When did everyone leave?” I asked. I hadn't even noticed it happening.

“Slowly over the last hour,” he said, chuckling. “You may have had enough.” He reached for my now empty glass with a glint in his eye, and I pulled it away in a mock gesture of defiance, and we both laughed.

“Do you need help cleaning up?” I asked, hoping he’d say no, because between my current intoxication level, the party dress, and shoes I wore, I couldn’t imagine cleaning up. The second I thought about the shoes, however, I kicked them off and was met with the immediate relief that comes with taking off something that was uncomfortable, even if you didn’t realize it was uncomfortable before.

“No,” he said, standing up from where he’d been sitting and giving a little stretch. “I have a cleanup crew coming in the morning. We don’t have to worry about it tonight.”

“Oh,” I said. “That’s good. I’m beat.” I looked down at my watch and, once my eyes focused, groaned. “I didn’t realize how late it was. I have to pick the kids up for school in like six hours.”

“Oh, right. Guess you’d better get to bed. Can I walk you home?” James said with a bit of an amused smile.

“But...” I said, trying to piece it together in my slow-moving mind. “But we live together.”

“Therein lies the joke,” he said, reaching for my hand. His cheeks were rosy, and it was clear that he was feeling pretty much the same way I was when it came to the influence of the unlimited libations which had been served. “Come on.”

I didn’t even think about it when I slipped my hand into his. It felt nice, and I’d been feeling really alone tonight until he’d come to talk to me. It felt like we were becoming, well, maybe not friends, but certainly friendly, which was nice in this kind

of employer-employee relationship, where you lived together and worked with their family.

We walked down the stairs, me with my shoes in my hand, until we got to our suite. He opened the door with an exaggerated bow, and I returned the gesture with a goofy curtsy. We both laughed and went inside, and he locked the door behind us.

He walked directly to the couch and flopped down, kicking his shoes off and moaning. “God, that feels good,” he said, putting his hands behind his head in a gesture of relaxation.

“I bet,” I said, detouring on my way to my bedroom to sit on the couch beside him. I tossed my shoes down beside me and crossed my legs, very aware, despite the booze, that to not do so would expose more than I wanted to my employer. “I just got to go to the party and I feel wiped out. You had to host—you must be fucking exhausted.”

“I think that may be the first time I’ve heard you swear,” he said.

I hadn’t even realized I did, and I clapped a hand over my mouth, horrified that I’d embarrassed myself in front of him. “I’m so sorry.”

“Don’t be,” he replied. “It’s nice to see you being fucking relaxed. Real.”

“Thanks,” I said, sinking back into the soft couch with a small laugh.

There was a silence where we both looked at each other, then away, taking turns doing it. I could feel something electric passing between us and had to convince myself it was just the liquor buzzing in my veins.

After a while, the fatigue of the night and the drowsiness brought on by drinking had me closing my eyes and leaning my head back. I must have dozed off, because I snapped my eyes open and realized I was leaning on James's shoulder, and his arm, which had been behind his head, was now around my back, and his own eyes were closed. We'd obviously fallen asleep like that, but the minute I moved and sat up, his eyes popped open and, after a moment of disorientation, focused on me. He yawned, bringing his arms back to his own sides as I leaned slightly away from him, not wanting to make a big deal about it but wanting to put a more appropriate distance between us.

"So..." I said, looking for anything to say that might help me excuse myself, but James got there first.

"You know, I meant to ask you earlier," he said. "What did Katie mean when she said you were going to the 'Lympics?'" He used the childlike version of the words she'd said, ones I was hoping to not have to explain, but was obviously going to have to.

"I guess..." I said, hunting for any excuse but the truth, feeling embarrassed that I was a competition skier of Olympic quality who was scared of the slopes. "I guess she meant that I'm going to the Olympics. At least, I hope I am."



“You hope you are?” he asked, leaning forward and turning to the side to look at me with a studious expression. It was unnerving how those bright green eyes seemed to see right through me, as though all my secrets were on display for him, including the slight wetness I felt building between my legs at his proximity and the forbidden nature of it. “What do you mean? Like you plan to qualify when the next round of events comes around?”

“No,” I said slowly, my cheeks burning. “I mean I already qualified. I’m going to the Olympics. Maybe.”

His eyebrows shot up, an impressed look taking the place of the piercing one. “Why maybe? If you qualified, you should be on the team. No?” he asked, trying to figure it out.

“Um...” God, I didn’t want to relive this right now, not when I already felt so vulnerable and on display. But I didn’t have much of a choice unless I just rudely got up and went to bed. “I, uh... I’m a little out of practice.” It was true and managed to avoid the fact that I was absolutely terrified of getting back on the slopes.

“No shame in that,” he said with a shrug and a shake of his head. “It happens to the best of us. Hell, in my glory days, sometimes I’d go months without hitting the slopes and hate myself when I finally strapped back up. That leg burn is second to none.”

“Yeah, ha ha...” I laughed as convincingly as I could. He had no idea the kind of pain I was in most of the time from the bolts in my leg, let alone the psychological pain that crippled

me every time I got out on a pair of skis. “I can definitely feel that right now. I’m just... a little gun-shy about getting back out there.”

“Well,” he said, grinning at me, “with the shape you’re in, I’m sure you’ll get back to it in no time.”

The way he was looking at me had my heart pounding in my chest. His face was only about a foot and a half from mine, and there was an invisible current passing back and forth between us, seeming like it was drawing me closer... closer...

“I, um...” I cleared my throat and back away. Even if I wanted to do this, I was with Max, who I really cared about. Who was good to me. I couldn’t just ignore what we had in favor of whatever this weird but thrilling electric current was between me and James. “I have to get to bed. I have to be up in just a few hours to get the kids up and ready for school.”

“Right,” he said, shaking his head like he was trying to clear it. “The kids.” He pulled his arm back from around me and sat up a little straighter. “Well, I guess, goodnight. And, uh, thanks for the dance. You really saved me from what was threatening to be a very dull night.”

I had to agree that the dance had been incredible. I thought back to the way he moved me across the dance floor, the way he held me just close enough to feel his body heat, but not close enough to touch. The way he spun me and dipped me so that I was looking up into his incredible green eyes under the gingery hair that flopped over his forehead. The way his strong jaw flexed as he smiled at me.

I was surprised I was even able to pull off some of those moves with my lingering injuries, but it had been easier than I expected and, to be honest, it was fun. It made me realize just how many of my issues with skiing were completely psychological.

You know. All of them.

“Yeah. It was fun,” I said, trying to fight the urge I had to lean in and kiss him, especially when I saw his eyes dart to my lips as he licked his own. The very sight of it sent a thrill through me, and it took me far longer than I cared to admit to actually pull myself away. “Goodnight.” I stood quickly and rushed to my room, determined not to look back and failing right in my doorway. I glanced around the edge of the door, and I wasn’t sure if I was surprised or not to see James watching me go. Even more so, I wasn’t sure if I was happy about it or not.

Once inside my room with the door shut, I peeled off my dress and put it on a hanger, then sank onto my bed. The room was spinning slightly, and it occurred to me how very drunk I actually was.

That must have been the reason for the tension, for that chemistry I was trying so hard to pretend wasn’t there. It was just two intoxicated people who let the booze tell them what they were feeling, even if it was completely unrealistic for them to be feeling that way.

I looked at my phone for the first time in hours and saw a text from Max:

*Hope you're having a blast at the party. I have some big news. Lunch tomorrow at your resort?*

I replied: *Sure*, without even wondering what his news could be. I really was a little wasted.

I took a shower, scrubbing my skin like I was trying to wash off the guilt of nearly kissing James and failing. My skin was all but raw by the time I gave up and got out of the shower.

At least I was exfoliated.

I pulled on a pair of pajamas and lay back down, but then realized I was absolutely starving. I'd had a lot to drink, but had forgotten to eat amidst the conversation and dancing.

I got out of my bed and walked toward the kitchen to get myself a snack, when I thought I heard my name. I looked around, but didn't see anyone. After a little snack of a banana with peanut butter on it—a favorite of mine—I turned back to go to my room, when I heard my name again.

The kids weren't home, so there was only one option for where I'd heard it from. I went to James's door and opened it, wondering why he was calling out to me, and why he was doing it so quietly.

And with what I saw, the only response I had was, "What the hell?"

## *Chapter Fourteen*

James

I should have kissed her.

I wanted to kiss her more than I think I'd ever wanted to kiss a woman, and I chickened out because clearly her relationship status was hazy at best. I didn't want to be that guy who swooped in on her when she was vulnerable.

I loosened my tie as I walked through the dark penthouse to the master bedroom. I was tired, too tired for someone who was barely forty. The last-minute party had clearly taken more of a toll on me than I initially thought, and I was certain the copious alcohol hadn't helped much.

As I stepped inside the dark, masculine-decorated bedroom, it hit me just how long I'd been sleeping in this room alone. Not just in a practical sense, but there was a time when Jane and I had actually put our jobs at risk because we couldn't stop fucking.

*You could have had that tonight if you'd been brave enough,* said an annoying voice in my head that would have definitely fallen into the category of devil on my shoulder rather than angel.

“But I’m not that guy,” I hissed into the dark as I stripped down to my underwear. But God, did I wish I could be. I flopped backward into my king-sized bed and my skin tingled as the satin grazed my bare skin. I never told anyone but I had a huge sensory kink. Leather, lace, satin, silk. Anything that felt good on my skin.

So, it was no wonder that between the bed and my thoughts regarding Haley, I felt a stirring south of my bellybutton.

Here I was, once again, alone and living out my cliché fantasy of having that perfect, athletic body here in my bed, naked.

My hands slid down the front of my underwear, one hand toying with my barely aroused cock and the other caressing my balls. I heard my breath quicken in the silence and the sound of it sent a rush of blood straight to my waking length.

I closed my eyes and imagined that instead of being here alone, my hands were not on myself, but sitting gently on Haley’s hips where she sat on top of me.

She was naked, her firm body and large, soft breasts visible only in the moonlight that shone off the snow and into my bedroom. I wasn’t inside her, not yet, anyway. If I had Haley here, with me, like this, I was going to draw it out as long as I could.

Of course, in reality, she was likely sleeping in the room down the hall from mine, but I was ready to pretend otherwise for the sake of sorting through my fantasy.

At first, we weren't doing anything particularly erotic, just sitting together, our skin pressed against each other and her glorious figure turning me on at a rate that my own beating heart could barely keep up with.

"The party was amazing," she said in a sultry voice.

"It was all right," I replied. "You were a rockstar though. I couldn't have been more proud of you, Mrs. Warner."

In the absolute black of my room my eyes shot open, unaware that her being my wife was part of the fantasy. It made sense, of course, she did all the things my wife used to do. But having it sneak up on me like that was unnerving.

I fell back into the fantasy with a sharp tug on my cock, and I shuddered as the pull extended up my belly and down across the rest of my genitalia.

"I couldn't have been more proud of you, Mrs. Warner," I repeated, running my hands across her lower back, squeezing the feminine curves at her sides.

Haley giggled and I moved my slender, strong hands to her ribs, my fingers pausing before digging into them with vigor. She shrieked, begging me to stop as she laughed.

"But your laugh is so sexy," I said, chuckling along with her.

"Please," she whined. "I don't like it."

“Okay, okay,” I said, pulling her body against mine flat, loving the way I could feel her nipples harden against my toned chest. “You’re just so cute it makes me want to eat you.”

As my eyes adjusted to the dark, I could see Haley get a wicked grin on her face. “I’m sure that could be arranged...”

In real time, I jumped up from my bed and strode, now naked, across the vaguely moonlit room to a special drawer with a lock on it where I kept all my sex toys. Some people may have thought that marital aids as they called them, were “girly,” or “unsexy.” But when you were single for as long as I was, you learned to get creative when you tried for that release.

I pulled out a silicone cock ring that vibrated, and quickly strapped that onto myself. The tension of the ring on my cock was exquisite and pairing that with a Tenga sleeve would produce a good replica of what Haley might feel like.

I lay back down on my bed, legs hanging over the edge, and—as sometimes occurs in such situations—when I closed my eyes we were now positioned here instead of at the head of the bed. I pushed the button to start the vibrating and the fantasy recommenced.

I was pulling Haley’s downy soft mound into my face, feeling the already achieved wetness drip onto my chin as I did. There was nothing sexier to me than having a face full of pussy and Haley’s was delicious.

I used my tongue to prod the delicate opening that hid all her finer workings and managed to spread it open enough to



rub the underside of her clit with my tongue. She immediately shuddered, and let out a soft little moan.

I looked up and could see her gorgeous, delicious breasts hanging above me, making my cock twitch. What I wouldn't have given to be able to have her tits and pussy in my mouth at the same time.

I pulled away from my soft, curled landing and gasped for air.

“Play with your nipples for me, baby,” I said, the command sounding a little too much like a moan for my taste. I liked to be in control of the situation which meant no begging, only commanding.

Haley didn't need to be asked twice. Her beautiful hands went straight for the bountiful flesh and began to work her nipples as masterfully as I would have done. At one time, even drawing them up to her face to lick her own nipples.

I groaned into the sensitive wet folds and doubled down on my efforts to make her come all over my face. A good orgasm for your female partner was always the start to great sex.

I ran my tongue the length of her slit and pushed it into her hole as deeply as I could. It covered my tongue with the salty-sweet fluids her body generated as lubrication and I nearly blew my load right then.

In the real world, I had to slow my stroking, I was getting too close, too fast.

I could always tell when I needed to slow down because the fantasies would transform into chaos, into depravity. I had stopped myself one second after my brain poked at the idea of trailing my tongue past her pussy to other cavernous locations.

Back in the vision that mercifully only lived inside my head, Haley was rocking back and forth, her pussy flooding my face with a deluge of her juices and I did my best to lap up every single bit.

“I need you,” I said, gasping from beneath her. “I need you on my cock, right this fucking second.”

Haley didn't reply, but rather slid down my face, across my chest, and smoothly onto my throbbing length. I sat up to follow her motion so we could be eye to eye, and she immediately took my face in her hands, kissing me deeply so that she could taste herself.

She groaned against my mouth and I slowly rocked my hips, pressing into her unfathomably tight hole.

“Shit, Haley,” I gasped. “You're fucking tight.”

“Well, I am a virgin,” she replied.

Yeah. I'm one of those guys. Sue me.

I slowly drove myself deeper inside her, and she moaned with each additional inch of me. I watched with delight as I could see my cock head bulging in her stomach, and my mind ran with that.

Suddenly, Haley was pregnant, her tits even bigger and her belly adorably pressed between us.

It made sense. She was my wife, after all. And When Jane was pregnant with Leann, I'd developed a bit of a breeder kink. The idea of knocking up my wife was usually all it had taken me to finish on any day of the week. The prospect of claiming her body so thoroughly that my cock changed our lives forever. The idea that men would see us walking together, her fantastic rack and typically hard nipples almost always on display, and know that I had been inside her...

My hands went to Haley's ass as I plunged all the way in, hitting the fleshy wall in her depths. I pried her cheeks apart, using my index finger to rub her cute little asshole as I watched her tits bounce against her baby bump.

"God..." I moaned. You look... fantastic."

Haley put her hands on her belly, looking down and then looking hungrily at me. "I'm convinced you keep knocking me up because you know how horny I get."

Yes. That was the other thing. Jane was insatiable when she was with child. I had more sex while she was pregnant than I did most of the year when she wasn't.

"Maybe," I said, thrusting harder, the air in my lungs expelling with such force that an animalistic grunt escaped me. "Maybe I just like knowing that your babies will have my eyes."

"And your hair," she whispered in ecstasy. "Your gorgeous, sunset hair."

I chuckled at this part. Rarely in my life as a ginger, did anyone fawn over my locks. But in my fantasy world, Haley was obsessed.

I shifted, holding Haley's ass tight around the back and laying her down beneath me. Seeing her splayed out like that, all mine, made my dick drip.

Haley whimpered as I appreciated the beauty beneath me.

"I feel so empty when you do this, Jamie. I need you inside of me or I start to ache."

I was certainly not one to deny my wife anything, so I grabbed a firm hold of my cock and pushed it into her once more.

In my darkened bedroom alone, I flipped my body over, wedging my sleeve between two pillows so I could fuck it, hands free. It was a little trick I'd figured out as a teenager and been doing it ever since.

One, two, three hard thrusts deep into the stand-in for my lover and I could see a glisten on the pillow case.

Meanwhile, I was moving inside Haley like both of our lives depended on it and she was screaming out my name over and over again.

"Yes, Jamie. Harder," she cried, her body starting to shake beneath me.

I could feel my climax barreling toward me with no hope of stopping it and I leaned in to bite down on her beautiful,

perfect shoulder as I shifted from man to animal. Pure, carnal need coursing through me.

I felt my cock erupt with the best orgasm I'd had in years, and I softly said her name under my breath in quick, needy whines.

“Haley... Haley...”

“What the hell?!”

I turned, stark naked, cock still dripping, and found myself staring at the girl of my dreams, very un-pregnant and very un-mine.

“Were you just saying my name?” Haley asked, looking a little afraid and very unsure.

“I... I...”

She crossed her arms and pursed those gorgeous lips which still bore remnants of the lipstick she'd worn to the party.

Haley's eyes grew wide as her gaze trailed down to my throbbing dick in my hand, covered in cum and still mostly hard. I might have been imagining it out of a need to not feel so embarrassed, but I could have sworn she bit her lip for a second.

“Well?” she demanded.

“Yes,” I said, grabbing my underwear and standing to put them on. “I'm sorry it was very disrespectful. You looked so beautiful tonight and I ended up here, alone and...”

I realized there was no excuse I could give here that would make this sound better.

Haley stared at me, halfway between an embarrassed blush and a frown. “That’s super weird, Mr. Warner. For the love of God, don’t do that again.”

Mr. Warner. Of course, that was what I would always be to her. That old man who employed her.

“Tell you what,” I said, grabbing my bathrobe and sliding it on to cover my body. “If we can forget this ever happened, I will give you a raise and you can have the next three days off as an apology for my shitty judgment call. Will that help?”

Haley sighed deeply. “It’s fine. You don’t have to do all that. It’s just... weird. Especially catching you.”

I noted that her voice trailed a little, like the words had gotten caught in her throat.

“Goodnight, Haley,” I said to her, gesturing to the door.

“Yeah...” she replied. “Goodnight. Remind me not to go wandering for any more nighttime snacks.”

I gave a fake laugh and closed the door behind her, then face-planted into my pillows with a sigh.

Which was when I realized I hadn’t yet cleaned up.

## Chapter Fifteen

Haley

“I’m sorry, what?” I said, looking across the table at Max, who looked both sad and guilty, and I wanted to throw my water in his face just to wipe that expression off of it.

Earlier that morning, I’d avoided James as I got the kids ready for school and then out the door. I had zero desire to talk about or even acknowledge what I’d walked in on the night before. A part of me hoped that it had just been a drunken nightmare—though, if I was honest, the size of his cock was a lot more like a dream than a nightmare.

*No, I thought to myself as my mind drifted to it again. Bad Haley. No fantasizing about the boss.*

But that worked about as well as you’d think it would. I couldn’t stop imagining what might have happened if I’d walked in there a minute or two earlier, before he’d finished. He had been thinking about me in my dress at the party. The

party where we'd danced and talked and drank together. The dress I wore as we sat on the couch, a current between us drawing us together like magnets until we'd almost kissed and I had to run to my room to avoid doing something I'd regret.

Although, by the time lunch was over, I wished I'd just fucking done it since it didn't matter anyway.

Max had shown up looking dashing as ever in a cream-colored sweater, his blond hair pushed back away from his blue eyes. I was thrilled to see him, but he seemed nervous and distant.

"So..." he said, looking around the restaurant. "How, uh... how was the party?"

"Fine," I said briskly. I didn't want to talk about the chemistry I'd felt with James, and I felt like I couldn't really avoid it and talk about the party much, since that occupied most of my evening. "It was... fine. I missed you, though."

"Oh," he said, and the way he said it made my gut twist into knots. He didn't seem happy about the idea of me missing him. Of me having fun and drinking without him. We'd never been that clingy couple, but I'd still be happy to know he was thinking about me when he was out with other people.

"Oh?" I repeated. "What's wrong? You said you had some big news."

"I, uh..." He glanced around like he was searching for something to rescue him, but then he sighed and looked directly at me. "I got a job."



“A job?” I asked. “You already have a job.” Why would he need a job when he was a ski instructor at his uncle’s resort?

“Yeah,” he said, rubbing the back of his head, then letting his arm drop. “I applied ages ago, before we even met, but it’s too good of an opportunity to turn down. It’s a great career move for someone like me, and—”

“Wait, wait, wait,” I said, holding up a hand. “Slow down. What’s a good opportunity? What career move?”

“Shit,” he said, not meeting my eyes. “Okay. I guess... I should just tell you.”

“Yes, you should,” I said, crossing my arms. I was starting to get worried, but a sinking feeling in my gut knew what the end result of this conversation was going to be, even if I didn’t know the catalyst yet.

“Like I said, I got a job... at a chalet.”

“A chalet?” I said. “Like a European resort?”

“Not *like* a European resort. It’s at the top chalet in Switzerland,” he told me.

I paused, confusion hitting me over the head to join in with the slight hangover I was still nursing.

“How are you going to work at a chalet when you live here?”

“Hales,” he said slowly, and I realized what he was saying.

Which was how we got to me saying, “I’m sorry, what?” as Max looked at me like a kid who got busted doing something

bad. “You’re moving? Now? When we were just starting to make so much progress with my skiing?”

“You don’t need me for that,” he said quickly. “You’re doing great. I know you’ll be back at the big slopes in no time.”

“What about us, though?” I asked, though I knew what he was going to say before he said it.

“I really like you, Haley,” he said, and I felt my heart sink at the tone. “But... but this is too big of an opportunity to pass up, and with you training for the Olympics and working here... I just don’t think either of us will have the time or energy for long distance. I’m sorry.”

I sat there, mouth agape as I listened to Max break up with me. He was the first boyfriend I’d had in a long time, and the best one by far, and now he was leaving. Not just leaving me, but leaving the whole damn continent.

“So, this is just... over?” I asked.

“We can stay friends,” he said. “I’d love to be able to cheer you on from afar at the Olympics, but I just don’t think a long-distance relationship would be good for either of us right now.”

The rest of the meal went by mostly in silence, and when it was over, I stood up and left without saying goodbye. It was shitty, I knew, given how he had the balls to break up with me in person, unlike how a lot of guys would. I had a guy who broke up with me once by posting it publicly on Facebook.

*Breaking up with Haley. Who wants a piece of my fresh, single meat?*

Gross.

Max was a good guy, and I'd known it all along. I'd felt really lucky to be with him, but there was a nagging in the back of my mind.

*How happy were you if you wanted to kiss James so bad?*

The rest of the day went by in a daze as I absorbed the fact that my relationship with Max was really over. I picked the kids up from school, and I did my best to engage with them, but I could feel how hard I was having to fake it..

Leann immediately went and sat down on the couch and grabbed the Nintendo. Katie started to follow her, but I put a hand on her shoulder. "Uh, uh, uh," I said, waving for Leann to pay attention. As usual, it took her a little too long to finally acknowledge my presence. "No video games until we finish our homework and our extra assignment for the day."

Leann made a high-pitched noise under her breath like she was mimicking what I was saying, and I cleared my throat, only to be met with rolling eyes.

Oh, boy, I did not have the patience for that today.

"Is there something you'd like to say, Leann?" I asked her.

"Nope," she said in a startlingly cheerful voice, but her expression was sarcastic in a way I didn't know a nine-year-old could manage.

“Good,” I said, deciding to let it drop in favor of peace. “Now, everyone to the table and show me what you’re working on.”

I helped the younger kids through their homework, showing Ben how to do multiplication and helping Katie draw the letter “q.”

Once they were done, I pulled out the assignment they had for today.

“Great news, guys,” I said, feeling relieved. “We have a fun assignment today.” I went to the cupboard and pulled out the supplies we needed. “Today, we’re going to fingerpaint! And each of you is going to draw me something different that relates to your day.”

I walked around them as they painted, but Leann kept covering hers, saying I’d have to wait for it to be finished. When they all were finally done, I walked to each of their easels. Katie had drawn me a butterfly she said she saw after lunch when they played outside. She’d used shades of orange along with black.

“Wow, Katie,” I said. “That’s great. Good job!”

She beamed at me, then blew on the picture before reaching up to touch the image.

“It’s still wet,” she complained.

“Don’t worry,” I told her. “We’ll hang it up to dry. Sound good?”

She nodded, then went over to the Nintendo and picked it up.

“Hey!” Leann shouted at her. “That’s not fair! She’s taking first player.”

I looked over at Leann. “Don’t you usually get to be first player?” I asked, knowing full well the answer.

“So?” she demanded, crossing her arms and standing in front of her easel so I still couldn’t see.

“So, that seems pretty fair to me. Do you want to show me what you painted?” I asked, hoping she’d appreciate me going to her next, but she simply glared at me.

“No, thank you,” she said flippantly. It was clear she wanted me to insist, but I wasn’t going to give in.

“Okay,” I said. “If that’s your choice. Ben, you can go next.”

Leann’s mouth dropped open in anger and surprise at me for not going along with whatever script she was running in her head. I barely had a chance to ask Ben what his painting was when I heard Leann shriek, and I turned just in time to see her throw a tub of blue fingerpaint at me.

It hit me in the chest, and didn’t hurt much, but it startled the hell out of me. Not to mention how the blue paint exploded all over me and the living room.

I stood in shock, unable to move. I couldn’t believe that a nine-year-old could be this extreme in her behaviors, but I was wrong.

“Leann,” I said as calmly as I could, “I would like for you to come here, please. Ben, Katie, play your games.”

The younger two kids picked up controllers and started to play some racing game while I pulled Leann aside. I sat her in a chair in the dining room and grabbed a wet rag so I could clean her hands.

“So, do you want to tell me why you got so mad?” I asked. I knew it wasn’t usual for a kid her age to behave like that.

“I wanted to play Nintendo, too,” she said, sniffing.

“Then why wouldn’t you show me the picture?”

She wouldn’t meet my eyes as she said, “Because I painted me punching Kyle Gordon in the face.”

I tried to not snort with laughter, knowing that this was a serious thing, since I’d asked her to paint about her day.

“And why would you paint that? Did you hit him?”

“No,” she said. “But I wanted to.”

“Why?”

Leann began to full on sob, and I used the clean side of the cloth to wipe her face and clear her tears.

“Because he said his mom beat cancer because she was strong and wanted to stay so bad.”

“And why did that bother you so much?”

“Because... why did my mom have to die? Was it because she wasn’t strong, or because she didn’t want to stay?”

I wanted to pull her into a hug, but I was very aware of the blue paint still all over me.

“Because...” I said, trying to choke back my own tears. I was already on the verge of breaking down about Max, and this was just a step beyond that. “Because sometimes, no matter how strong someone is, or no matter how much they want to stay, they can’t. Some people just get too sick, and I’m sorry that happened to your mom. But I promise you, your mom didn’t want to leave you.”

Leann nodded and sniffled.

“Thanks,” she said after a minute more of pulling herself together. “For not yelling at me.”

“Why would I yell at you?” I asked.

“Our old nanny used to yell a lot. She’d send me to my room and tell Ben and Katie how bad I was.”

I had to bite my lip from saying what I really felt about the situation, wanting to condemn the woman for the way she handled a young child. But that didn’t feel appropriate in front of Leann, so I simply said, “You’re welcome,” before giving her my hand to help her to her feet.

We went back to the living room, and I said, “Ben, Katie, we’re going to put the games down for now. Why don’t you both go pick out a book to read while Leann and I clean up the living room.”

“Okay,” Katie said as Leann looked at me. She went to the shelf, and Ben followed.

“Now, Leann,” I said quietly. “Have you ever used the carpet cleaner before?” She shook her head. “That’s okay. I’m going to show you.”

Every second I had to remain calm with her was agony. I had to fight the urge to just cry over my failed relationship, knowing that it hadn’t even failed—it just wasn’t going to continue, and to avoid getting the blue paint all over me onto anything else.

I showed Leann how to fill the tank of the machine with solution and then run it over the rug to wash, then rinse and dry.

“It’s kind of fun,” she said, and I smiled at her as much as I could.

“I’m glad you like it. Maybe that can be a chore you help me with.”

She nodded, and once she was done, I showed her how to empty the dirty tank.

“Okay,” I said, once the room looked good as new. “I need to go clean up. Do you think you can keep an eye on the younger kids for me?”

She looked thrilled to be given the responsibility, and she rushed over to pick out a book for herself. I watched for a minute, glad at least one thing went right today, then went to my room and shut the door.

I stripped out of my paint covered clothes, putting them carefully in my hamper. They wouldn’t stain since the paint



was washable, but I still didn't want it to get everywhere. Then I climbed into my shower, where I sank to the floor, and finally let myself feel the pain of losing someone I really cared about.

## *Chapter Sixteen*

James

**H**aley and I had barely spoken since the incident after the party. I didn't blame her. I was being a total creep, no matter my intentions, and she'd seen me in the throes of my own ecstasy, moaning her name. To be perfectly honest, I was more embarrassed about that than anything.

The day had been long by the time I got home, with several things going wrong all across the resort.. Some pipes had frozen and burst, and the roads were horrendously icy making it near impossible for the plumbers to get out until well after noon.

Then if that wasn't bad enough, some kid trying to do tricks that were way beyond his skill level, had broken his back halfway down a course. We had to get a helicopter in to get him out. I was just thankful that the only cameras there were people's cell phones.

Not that those didn't present their own problems as well.

When the day ended, I was totally beat, and also seeking a truce between Haley and me. I walked through the entrance, taking off my shoes and coat and kicking them both aside as a lovely cinnamon smell filled my nose.

I emerged into the kitchen to find a tri-level serving tray of cinnamon rolls had been set out with fresh treats cooling there. Haley had mentioned being able to cook but certainly not the ability to bake. They smelled and looked phenomenal.

I grabbed one and began to munch, suddenly realizing that this was the first thing I was eating today and walked to the living room where I found all three of my kids reading.

No Haley.

“Daddy!” Katie cried, reaching her arms up for me and casting her book aside.

“Hey, Bug,” I replied. “How was your day?”

“It was good,” she said with a grin. It was then that I noticed a dusting of cinnamon on her chin and a smear of cream cheese frosting on her nose. “We ate cinnamon rolls.” She said sweetly.

“You mean cinnamon rolls, right?”

“Oh yes,” she replied. “Those. Miss Haley helped us make them.”

“Did she now?” I said, eyeballing Ben and Leann. “And where is Haley?”

“I may have spilled a little paint on her and she started to cry and said to read while she had a quick shower,” Leann said. “But she’s been in there seventy-two minutes. Maybe she drowned?”

I could sense that there was more behind the story but wanted to be sure Haley was okay first. I felt my pulse speed up a little. What if she’d fallen and hurt herself? That bathroom was known to have shitty cell service due to the marble.

“I’ll be right back,” I said to the kids. “I want to be sure Haley is okay.”

I jogged down the long hallway to her suite and when I reached it, I tugged on the door handle to find that it was locked.

Thoughts of our uncomfortable encounter raced through my brain and I struggled to try and decide whether I should break in or try to call through the door.

“Haley?” I said loudly. “Haley?”

I got no response, so I took a deep breath and threw my shoulder into the door, breaking it open and stumbling inside. It was a mess in the neatest sense, with everything in a place but none of those places in order. Socks all piled on the armchair, her jeans hanging from her curtain rod.

“Haley?” I called out again, hoping I wouldn’t startle her by being in here.

That was when I heard the water running from the bathroom and the faint sound of someone crying. Tentatively, I moved in that direction, now seeing some steam wafting out of the tiled room as well.

“Haley?”

“Why won’t anyone ever love me?” I heard her sob. “I do everything right and I still can’t make anyone love me.”

Shit.

What kind of personal torture was this? I certainly wasn’t expecting to walk in here and be made to feel like a kid all over again.

But what could she be talking about? Had something actually gone down between her and Max?

I could see from where I stood that she was naked, and yet, nothing in me was aroused. I was concerned, afraid, and desperate to make her feel better. Almost like she was my own kid—or girlfriend.

“Haley?” I said slowly, making sure my shoes made noise as I walked so as not to startle her. “Are you okay?”

Haley seemed to jump a little, and quickly pulled her knees up to her chest to keep herself covered.

I grabbed a towel and put it over my face so she knew I wasn’t staring, especially after the other night.

“No...” she said softly. “I don’t feel like I’m ever gonna be okay again.”

The water continued to splash against the tile in its rhythmic pattering and there was a long silence between us. I hated knowing this girl I cared about was in so much pain and I was simply helpless to do anything for her.

“Max and I broke up,” she said softly. “I really thought he was gonna be the one.”

I walked over to the shower door and turned my back to the glass, sitting on the moist marble beneath it. “May I ask what happened? You two seemed like you were really close.”

“We were,” she blurted, sobbing a little. “He and I were this perfect little skiing couple and he’s been there for me all throughout my recovery. But he took a job coaching at a chalet in Switzerland. He said he didn’t think it was fair to try and put ourselves through a long - distance relationship.”

I was stunned, and kinda wanted to punch Kevin’s nephew. How in the world did he not see what a prize he had? Haley was the perfect woman—especially for someone who loved skiing the way he did. He could have had an Olympian.

In a sick, dark way, I was pleased that this stupid boy had so royally fucked up. My weird little ape brain began to whisper, “Now you have a chance.”

“That’s... fucking awful. I’m sorry. What a fucking loser to walk away from someone so magnificent.”

Unfortunately, this only seemed to have the effect of making her cry harder and I damn near beat my head against the glass for fucking up so magnificently.

“He was such a good guy,” Haley said, voice quivering. “I’ll never find anyone like him again.”

My first inclination was to refute this statement, but as fucked up as it was, the last thing I wanted was to share Haley with some dumbass slope-head who would keep her well occupied and well fucked.

“Things like this happen, Haley. Unfortunately, that is part of life.” I wasn’t sure if I was towing the line between dad, boss, and friend, or whether I had fully crossed it. But her whimpers softened. “The important thing to remember is that this isn’t about you. This is about a young man following his dreams. Just like you’re trying to do.”

Haley sniffled and I could feel her body moving behind me. Perhaps she was nodding or simply shifting the position she was sitting in. Either way, I could feel the warmth of her that was on the other side of the glass move and it was like I’d lost my connection to a phone call.

Damn it, I was falling for her.

Maybe I’d already fallen.

“You’re right,” she said, voice hoarse from crying. “If I really care about Max, I should want him to pursue his dreams, too.”

“Yeah,” I said, happy that something of my nonsensical rambling seemed to be providing some relief for her. “Exactly.”

“If you don’t mind,” she said. “I’d prefer to finish my shower now... alone.”

“Oh,” I quipped, getting to my feet. “Right. Of course. I’ll just leave you to it. Let me know if there is anything I can do to help.”

I strode from the room and was just about to close the door behind me when I heard her voice again.

“Hey James,” she called out.

I looked up to see that through the milky, opaque glass she’d stood up and I could get a vague, obscured view of her washing her hair.

“Thank you,” she said. “I really needed that.”

“Don’t thank me just yet,” I said with sheepish embarrassment. “I might have broken the lock on your door trying to get in here. But don’t worry, I’ll have it fixed right now.”

I withdrew from the bathroom, closing the door behind me and taking a deep breath once I’d exited the steamy stone sauna. I looked around once more at the organized chaos, and smiled a little. That really was Haley. So pulled together and yet moving so fast that things couldn’t help being a little chaotic. She reminded me of a twenty-five-year-old me.

Suddenly I heard a melody drifting from inside the bathroom, and Haley began to sing. It was a lovely, mournful tune that I didn’t recognize, though it sounded pop-y enough to be on the Billboard Hot 100.



Her voice was incredible and sweet, and I began to feel like I was intruding on something even more private than the crying.

“Daddy?”

I turned to see Katie in the doorway examining the broken lock.

“Hey, Bug. What are you doing here?” I went to her side and hoisted her into my arms. She was almost too big to do that and momentarily I regretted that the experience of holding my children was quickly coming to an end.

“I was worried about you,” she said sweetly.

It might have been my imagination, but those words sounded just like Jane when she said them, and I had to do a double take. “That’s really sweet, Bug,” I said. “I’m just fine. How is your book going?”

“I finished it,” she said proudly. “I want to start a new one, but I want to get a book prize for it so I will have to do a reading quiz.”

“Smart girl,” I said. “Don’t ever do anything for nothing.”

She giggled, clearly oblivious to my adult concept, and poked me in the nose. “Can we go play with the iPad now?” she asked.

“Yeah,” I said, nodding. “Sure. Shall we play something together?”

“Oh, Daddy,” she said. “I don’t think you’d be good at any of my games.”

I burst out laughing, carrying her from the room and closing Haley’s door to the best of my ability behind me. “Is that so?” I asked. “I used to be quite the gamer back in the day.”

“Oh!” she said, smiling broadly. “Do you know how to play Frozen Free Fall?”

Not exactly the Mario Kart I was expecting, but certainly something I’d be able to manage. “I’m sure you can teach me,” I replied.

Katie nodded and we went to her room, sitting side by side on her floor with our backs up against the bed. It wasn’t even five minutes until the older two joined us, and pretty soon, we had the game broadcasted to the TV with the whole family participating.

It was so unbelievably joyous, and I could feel Jane’s presence here even if her body was not. I couldn’t remember the last time my children and I had sat down and done something fun like this. It had been too damn long, that’s for sure.

“What are you guys up to?” said a voice from the doorway.

I looked up to see a wet-haired Haley smiling down at us with melancholy.

“We,” I said dramatically, “are beating the kingdom of Arendelle into submission one gem at a time.”

Haley chuckled. “Oh really?” she said. “Can I speak to you for just a moment?”

I nodded and stood. “Don’t you go winning too many rounds without me.”

“We’re gonna win them all,” Ben said.

I gave him a playful mad look and followed Haley into the hallway, shutting the door behind us. “What’s up?” I asked, terrified of what she could say.

Haley brushed a strand of hair off her face and looked up at me with those enormous blue eyes. I could have melted into a puddle under that stare, the sapphire orbs looking through her eyelashes. She still hadn’t responded, and I was a second from asking if everything was okay when she grabbed me by the back of my neck and pulled my face down to hers. She began kissing me like I had the last oxygen in the world in my mouth, and she was starving for air.

My hands went to her waist and I pulled her close to me, deepening the kiss and trying all at once to keep other parts of my body in check.

Thankfully—and regretfully—she pulled back rather quickly and gasped for breath.

“Whoa,” she said. “Did you feel that?”

I had. It was like our lips had been made to softly brush, our tongues created to engage one another. It wasn’t a spark—it was a crash of thunder.

I nodded to Haley and she blushed. “I’m sorry. I hope that was okay. After the other night... well... I guess I assumed you wouldn’t mind.”

I shook my head, dumbfounded like a schoolboy who’d just gotten a glimpse of his pretty teacher’s brassiere. “I didn’t mind at all,” I said. “In fact, I desperately wish my children were not on the other side of that door so I could really make it something.”

Haley looked down shyly, so I reached out and brushed some hair behind her ear.

“Thank you,” she said. “For caring.”

I couldn’t believe she was thanking me for basic human decency, but I think deep down I knew it was more. It was about everything since she’d started working for me.

“It was no trouble at all. You’re an incredible human, Haley. And I can’t help but feel a little... protective of you.”

The tension between us was so thick you could cut it with a knife and I wanted her now. My brain was going a million miles an hour, trying to come up with a way to make this happen without the kids catching us.

But I didn’t have much time to think because the door cracked open and one of Leann’s eyeballs peeked out.

“Are you guys kissing?” she asked ridiculously intuitively. How in the world could she have known?

“Are you guys winning a bunch of games without me?” I asked, hoping that the redirect would be enough.

Leann, always the shit stirrer, giggled deviously and nodded, and I took the opportunity to whip the door away from her and scoop her up, throwing her over my shoulder.

Haley decided to follow us in, and my heart was soaring. Something was changing. Something that mattered.

“Mind if I join in?”

“There’s a seat next to me!” Ben said excitedly.

Haley nodded, “There sure is. Hope you wanted me to take it.”

Haley slid across the floor and into the spot next to Ben. I saw her wince a little, and I could imagine the motion put a little strain on those joints that were still tender.

But watching her sit there, talking to and laughing with the kids, was definitely the highlight of my week. Even more than knowing Max had moved to Switzerland.

Which was certainly a close number two.

## *Chapter Seventeen*

Haley

**I**t had been a week since I had kissed James, and we hadn't talked about it once. In fact, he'd been suspiciously busy over the last week, not coming back until late and leaving early in the morning.

I didn't see Max once between our lunch and when he left the country yesterday, which I only knew was the date of his departure because of Anna. I tried to figure out how I felt about it, but I'd become really numb to it, which I supposed was better than the initial pain I'd felt.

But today was my day off. The kids were having a day with their grandma, and rather than sit inside for one more day, I decided to get out on the slopes.

It was my first time doing it alone since the avalanche. Each time I'd gone out before now, Max or Anna had been with me, coaching me through it. But now, I was on my own and

wouldn't be able to rely on anyone else for support. It was just me and the snow.

"You've got this," I said as I strapped into my boots. I hadn't even gone outside yet, and I was starting to feel a light sheen of sweat forming on my brow from panic. I didn't know how I was going to do this, but I knew I had to try.

I took myself out to the smallest slope the resort had, which was only about fifty feet up and didn't require a lift. I stared up at it, a small slope I would have mastered before I was even Ben's age. But now, it looked like Everest to me.

*Dammit, Haley, I thought to myself. You're a damned Olympic qualifying skier. This is the kids' slope. You can do this.*

Of course, no amount of self-talk could change the sheer terror I felt as I climbed up the slope, looking behind me every step of the way and feeling wave after wave of vertigo hitting me. There was no way it was as high up as it looked... right?

I got to the top where there was a little bench for putting on skis, and I sat down to strap in. It took me a lot longer than usual with my hands shaking so badly. This terror wasn't going to go away so easily, but my therapist would have told me I needed to get on with the program and prove to myself there was nothing to be afraid of.

Except that there was. I knew there was because I'd been trapped in what I was now afraid of.

I squared up with the top of the slope, ready to go down. I could see dozens of tracks already spanning the height of the hill, and I tried to aim for a fresh patch of snow, not wanting any chance of a well-worn area causing me to slip and fall. The last thing I needed was to rebreak my leg, or worse, my mind.

I started slow, continuing to turn the front of the skis in to brake as I went down, but as things went well, I started to feel like I could maybe really do this.

I let out a laugh of delight, but at that moment, a kid zipped by me going twice my speed, and I panicked. I began to slide out of control, and then I was met with such an extreme flash of memory that I lost my footing completely.

Suddenly, I wasn't on this bunny slope. I was on the double black diamond at Brother Bears, zipping down the slope at breakneck speeds. There were a few slick spots, but I'd known how to navigate those almost since I could walk.

I slalomed around the flags and through the trees, avoiding obstacles while maintaining my speed and staying within the lines of the course to avoid penalties. When I finally broke free of the tree line, I could see the finish line far below me, and knew I was in the clear.

When I finally crossed, I looked back up at Anna and Max with a thumbs up I was sure they couldn't see, then went to the tent where they allowed the competitors to warm up and listen to the commentary. According to the announcer, my time had



been the best so far, and I got a few high-fives from other skiers in the tent.

After thanking everyone, I grabbed a cup of hot cocoa and sat down, closing my eyes as the announcer began to talk about the next skier, whose name I recognized. Sondre, a skier I'd met through Max.

Sondre must have been about halfway down when he fell, and they moved on to the next skier. I felt bad for the guy, to have come this far only to wipe out, but it didn't sound like he was hurt bad, which was always a concern when skiing at these kinds of speeds.

Then it was the final skier, someone I didn't know. He had barely started his run when a collective gasp went up from everyone watching, and a few people screamed. At first, I thought maybe he'd fallen, too, but then I heard it.

It started off low, like thunder far off in the distance, the kind that's quiet but you can feel it in your feet. The ground began to vibrate, and it didn't stop. I opened my eyes and sprang to my feet just in time to see the huge sheet of snow breaking away from the mountain and beginning to slide down.

I watched it overtake the skier who had just started his run, then plow through a patch of trees, which seemed to lay sideways under the pressure of the snow.

"Shit," I said under my breath, knowing that there was no way I'd be able to outrun it, at least not in my ski boots. But I

was sure as hell going to try. “Run!” I screamed to everyone else in the tent, and chaos overtook the entire area.

I grabbed one of the balloons they used to mark the tent and my ski pole, knowing that those two things might be the difference between making it and not.

Though when the snow did impact and I felt my leg snap under the pressure, I almost wished it had just killed me.

Instead, I survived, with the handle of my ski pole up by my face. I heard the balloon pop and despair began to sink in, even as the movement slowed and came to a stop. I had no idea how deep in the snow I was, just that it was deep enough for it to be dark. I began to punch at the snow around my face, using the handle of my pole to help clear the space so I could breathe, but I knew there wouldn't be a whole lot of time that the small air supply would last for, and that was assuming the snow didn't crush my lungs first.

I started to hyperventilate, which I knew wasn't going to be any help, but the pain in my leg was so extreme that it took all my willpower not to scream, which would have robbed me of far too much oxygen, not that the heavy breathing was doing much good anyway.

I looked around me, trying to discern anything that might show me a way to get out. I tried to push my pole up through the snow in the hopes that someone might see it and know I was here, tried to see if the balloon had managed to stay above the snow even if it had popped, a marker to show where I was.

But I couldn't tell a damn thing.

It took almost an hour before they managed to find me, and when they did, I began to sob with gratitude that I'd managed to survive, but the break in my leg was a bad one, and they needed to airlift me out. Thankfully, due to a fantastic medical team, my recovery was faster than average, something I couldn't believe.

Partially due to the fact that it meant I had to face my fears that much sooner.

Almost every night since then, I'd had nightmares about it. Nightmares that I was still buried beneath the snow, waiting for someone to come get me, ones where the snow collapsed over my face, and I suffocated, ones where I was slowly crushed to death...

I tumbled over my skis and fell into a pile on the ground, sobbing and curling in on myself. Every single horrible thought and dream I'd had about the avalanche came to the front, and all the coping skills I'd been working on with my therapist went right out the window.

I was ready to give up and wait for the rescue crews to notice me, when I felt a pair of hands on my arms.

Max. He was back. It had to be him. No one else had been so loving to me when I was so scared. I looked up, my face already breaking into a smile, when I saw his face.

And it wasn't Max.

It was James. He'd saved me from my despair, and as that thought occurred to me, I realized that since our kiss, I hadn't

had a single nightmare.

He really had saved me, in more ways than one.

## *Chapter Eighteen*

James

**W**hen that kid fell, the health department got up my ass about ensuring there was no way that the resort could be held responsible for the accident. After the issue at Kevin's place, every one of us had been dreading more things like that happening. Of course, it was me it happened to.

I walked the ridge at dawn with a flashlight, trying to get some sense of how I could increase safety and security for my patrons. Unfortunately, there was not a damn fence in the world that could block out stupidity. The kid had been reckless and oblivious. That had absolutely nothing to do with my resort.

It was peaceful in the cold morning air, and I had time to reflect on all the stuff happening in my life. It was times like this that I missed Jane most. She was like some portal of infinite wisdom who always knew just what to say to inspire

me to take action, but also how to convince me that not everything had to be attacked head on.

I dropped down onto the fresh powdery white, my snow pants making a wheezing noise as I did, and watched the sun rise. This view alone was worth owning the lodge. That and the fact that it was always our dream, Jane and me.

My mind wandered to Haley, and the decision that I knew was weighing on me like a ton of bricks. I needed to either make a move or pull back and let the girl be. I was definitely too old for her, but maybe age didn't matter as much as I thought it did. I would have absolutely taken Haley in an age "appropriate" body as well. It was her spirit that had captured me in a chokehold. The looks were just a shiny packaging.

I lay back, feeling the frosty wetness in my hair and stared up into the pine trees that dotted the mountainside like landmarks. The branches slowly dripped clumps of melting snow to the ground, like the trees were shaking off old realities too.

The sun was coming out and it was time to change.



At noon I met with the health inspector to go over the bogus ideas I'd come up with to reinforce safety guidelines. While I couldn't block out stupid or impulsive, I could restrict who had access to which slopes. Additionally, I would make parents sign a waiver that said any and all mistakes on their

child's part were their responsibility and that they were signing away the right to sue the resort for damages if the child chose not to follow the rules of the lodge.

“Look, James,” she said. “I don't personally think there was a damn thing you could have done to prevent t that kid making an idiot of himself. The parents are one hundred percent to blame. But your coverage is a little weak when it comes to liability. These additional restrictions should set you up to be bulletproof.”

“Thanks, Trish,” I said, patting her on the shoulder and shaking her hand as I led her to the door. She was a nice woman but I was almost never happy to see her. “I appreciate your patience and understanding.”

“Anytime, Boss,” she replied. “Anytime.”

I had my lunch after she departed, and spent the thirty minutes in utter silence with my head in my hand. Being a business owner was stressful, dealing with things that broke my routine, even more so.

After lunch, I headed back out into the sunny chill to check on a lift that was due for a wiring inspection. I'd likely be seeing Trish again before the week was out.

Everywhere around me were happy families enjoying their vacations, and I was this semi-grumpy lodge owner stomping through the snow. It made me realize it had been before Katie was born that we'd taken our last vacation. Come to think of it, that might have been the last time I took more than a day off consecutively. Maybe I was a workaholic like Zane always

said. It certainly kept me from thinking about the potential inevitability that I would never again find someone who likes me for me and not my money and end up dying alone.

I shuddered at the thought I worked so hard to keep out, my brain jumping back to that nightmare date I had with the girl who was desperate to get pregnant by a billionaire. Those were the kind of women who were my prospects. It made sense why so many wealthy men went for women who at least could be trophy wives if they were going to rob them blind anyway.

I was halfway to the furthest lift when I noticed something odd.

A woman was standing at the top of a beginning level run, and while she was dressed like a professional, and held her gear like a professional, she looked like she was trembling with fear.

Then I realized it was Haley.

Thirty seconds later I watched as a kid zipped by her, startling Haley. She visibly panicked and started to slide. Rather than tucking in, she flailed wildly and was clearly headed for a fall.

As fast as I could, I ran toward her, and not a moment too soon.

I hit the ground as I caught up with her, sliding a little myself with the impact. Thank God for my snow pants or there would be some very intense pain going to body parts that weren't built for impact.



Her eyes went wide, presumably realizing it was me, and almost immediately, Haley started to bawl. She curled up her trembling body into mine and I held her.

People skied past, staring, but right now with her in my arms, it felt like we were the only two people in the world. I could feel each heaving breath she took, and the heartbeat in her neck where I brushed back some hair.

“Let’s get you out of here,” I said, leaning in to whisper in her ear.

She nodded and I got to my feet, hoisting her into my arms.

“Hey,” I said shouting to one of my ski guards. “Can you grab those skis and send them to the front desk? They’re worth too much to possibly get stolen.”

Rob nodded as Haley wrapped her arms around my neck, pressing her face into the crevice where my collarbone met my throat. I felt invincible, like I was a superhero and I was about to save her from all her problems. I needed to save her from all her problems despite the fact that I’d never known anyone ever who needed me less.

I jogged, Haley still in my arms, over to the nearest ski lift control booth and put her down so she could climb the ladder. I followed quickly behind her, enjoying the view of her ass thoroughly as I did. The weighted run had the blood pumping through my body with fury.

We tumbled into the heated box, and I closed the trapdoor in the bottom, locking it as fast as I could before crawling over to

where Haley was panting.

Haley leaned back, closing her eyes and smiling softly, a slight chuckle playing on her lips.

“What?” I asked. Haley attempted to wave her hand at me as if it wasn’t necessary, but I wanted to know. “No, what?”

Haley opened her eyes and looked at me, and it was only then that I could see there was a fine, wet shine hanging on her lashes. “I don’t know why I can’t do this,” she said, sniffing. “I have been on the slopes since I was a small child and skiing was my life.”

I reached out a hand to her and she took it. I could palpably feel how badly she needed someone to care right now.

“I get up there and all I see is that moment before I was buried, Those few seconds where I knew my world was gonna change forever.” She began to cry once more. “I was totally helpless against this cruel twist of fate. Right after I’d had the biggest victory of my life. And I can’t help but think, why me?”

I scooted over to her and pulled her into a caring hug. “Is there anything I can do to make this better?” I asked.

Haley shook her head. “That’s the fucked-up part. This is me against myself and I’m not winning.”

I wanted to tell her that I understood the feeling of being at war with yourself. After Jane died, I spent weeks trying to stay alive. The battle was constant, and ultimately it was only my children who saved me.

I could feel Haley's shallow breathing next to me as she calmed, and I pulled her tighter into the hug. Not just for her but for me too.

She looked up at me with a strange gratitude, and I wouldn't have been able to explain that it was me who should have been grateful. She continued to offer me the chance to process Jane's death in so many ways, in such a safe capacity.

"Thanks for listening," she said, placing her hand on my chest. "You're a really special guy, James."

My heart began to pound and I trembled, trying to keep this platonic and thoughtful.

But within seconds my lips were on hers, and my fingers fumbled with her layers of winter clothes. She backed up against the metal wall and I followed on my hands and knees—crawling for what I desired like the animalistic predator I currently felt like I was at this moment.

With her back firmly pressed against the hard surface, I wrapped my arms around her waist, and yanked her into my lap. She too began to remove my layers between us, the kisses increasing with fury.

Haley tasted like pomegranate Chapstick and her personal scent was driving me insane as her soft body pressed into me. My cock was under no one's law now, throbbing furiously against my gray sweats. It strained, pressing into her center, which became even less barricaded as she slipped out of her snow gear and resumed her affection in my lap, simply clothed in her thermal underwear.

Much to my pleasure—and to my rock-hard dick’s dismay—I could see immediately that Haley was braless, her hardened nipples pressing against the material with as much fervor as the swollen thickness in my lap.

Unlike the petite nubs I’d imagined, they were round and grippable, looking more like marbles than the tiny dots I’d imagined them to be. My mouth watered as her hips ground into me.

Our kisses intensified with our tongues dancing around each other and our teeth nibbling at each other’s lips.

“Is this okay?” I asked, pulling back just enough to get her expressed consent.

“Oh, fuck yes,” she said grinding on my cock in a way that was eliciting tiny whines from her. “Shit, you’re fucking massive.”

I trailed my lips down her neck, pulling her shirt away from her shoulder and bit down on it. She yelped in pleasure, her hand shooting down the front of her pants. I bit down harder, holding her in place as she gyrated, rubbing herself out of my line of sight. It was almost too much for my animal brain to handle.

Despite the fact that our bodies were pressed together, my teeth gently dug into her delicious, sweet-smelling skin, and I followed Haley’s lead and gave in to my base need for an orgasm.

I wedged my hand between us, taking my painfully hard length in my hand and starting to stroke it. Haley moaned in reply, grabbing my chin with her free hand and pulling my mouth back to her own so we could devour each other as we pleased ourselves.

It wasn't too long and Haley began to whimper, a quickly spreading wet spot visible on the cream-colored pants she wore. I took my unoccupied hand and tugged her shirt up, revealing those immaculate tits and perfect cherry nipples. Good God, was I a bitch for a great set of nipples.

I dove for her chest, pulling her against me by her waist, and taking one of the delectable buds in my mouth. As someone with a sensory kink, the feeling of the textured flesh, taunt and longing against my tongue was enough to send a thick drip of emission down my cock and over my hand.

Haley began to emit a series of tiny moans that would have been at home in a porno and I thrust into my own hand, wishing beyond anything that my length was inside her, challenging her to accept every inch of thick intensity. The louder Haley became, the more I started to lose my senses, suckling on her arching nipples and fucking my palm like I was a teenager again.

“Oh God,” Haley panted, looking surprised through the blush that covered her cheeks. “I'm gonna come.”

I ran my teeth gently over the purpling nipple, and she cried out, her body shaking wildly against mine, her soft pants flooded with her fluids. The emission she supplied dripped

down onto my thigh and was enough to send my own orgasm into space, thick jets of ejaculate bursting through the fabric of my sweats and oozing out the other side.

“Haley,” I panted like I had a week ago in the dark. “Haley.”

She pulled my whimpering mouth against her chest, cradling it like she was pleased with my efforts. I shifted so my hand, slick with cum, could be pulled free and I wiped the remnants on the inside of my flannel.

Then I pulled Haley flat against my body, clinging to her like she was mine to protect. Perhaps she was now. If I had any say in it, she would be.

“Holy fuck that was intense,” she whispered.

“That was okay, right?” I asked, playing with her hair with my clean hand. She nodded then buried her face into my chest like she never wanted to be separated again. That alone solidified my possessiveness.

“This whole last week I’ve been thinking about that connection,” she said. “Now I can see that it goes deeper than I even thought.”

I nodded. “You’re an incredible girl, Haley,” I said.

“And you’re a good man,” she replied.

We sat there holding each other for another ten minutes before dressing into our snow suits and heading back up to the lodge. I was desperate to push her for knowledge about our status, almost as desperate as I was to take our physical relationship to the next level.

But I knew that more patience would come before that. Desperation was not an attractive quality in anyone, let alone a man, and I couldn't ask for any of that without sounding like I was desperate.

“So, I was thinking,” I said as we walked through the lobby. “I may want to pay you for another job.”

I had been formulating this plan I had for weeks. Something I suspected may help her through some of the issues she was currently having with being on the slopes.

“Oh yeah?” she asked. She was grinning from ear to ear, her cheeks post-orgasm rosy.

“Yeah,” I replied. I longed to touch her. Longed to reach out my hand and take hers in mine. “I want you to give the kids some basic ski lessons.”

Haley stopped in her tracks and her face fell. “James. I can barely stand on my own let alone support another person.”

I took a step toward her, careful to avoid any attention before cupping her face. “I believe in you. Just give it a try and if it doesn't work out, then it doesn't work out. No harm done.”

“Until one of the kids topples over a mountainside,” she said with a grumpy frown.

I couldn't help but laugh. The sex goddess of ten minutes ago had faded into a cute little grouchy kitten. “Well, if they do, make sure it's Leann. She's the one who gives me headaches.”

Haley burst into laughter and started to lean in for another kiss until...

“Hales!” a voice called from behind us. We swiveled to find Anna and Kevin walking toward us. “Surprise! We’re taking you guys out to lunch.”

I saw Anna give Haley a wink and I looked at Kevin, who shrugged.

So I turned back to Haley, who looked doubly embarrassed now, and sighed. “I guess we’re going to lunch.”



## *Chapter Nineteen*

Haley

“**T**hat sounds terrifying,” Doctor Harzel said over the phone.

We’d been talking—well, I had been talking—for the last half hour about me falling on the slopes.

“No kidding,” I said, curling my knees up to my chest in bed, where I was sitting as I had my telehealth appointment. “I gotta be honest, I’m getting really tired of reliving that day over and over, especially with the director’s cut endings.”

“I bet,” she replied.

“I mean, I know the odds of an avalanche at a resort like this are super low, and I shouldn’t be so afraid. The fact that I was nearly killed once is like being struck by lightning, right?”

“It certainly is rare,” she replied.

I was almost at the point of being frustrated with her for not contributing much other than little interjections, but not

enough to say anything yet.

“So, what do you think?” I asked.

“About what?”

“About the offer to teach James’s kids how to ski,” I reminded her. I’d been thinking about it for a few days—along with other things which kept me awake at night.

I hadn’t told Doctor Harzel about the kiss, or what came along with it. I didn’t know how to broach the conversation of, “Hey, I know it’s probably super unhealthy but since my boyfriend fucked off to live in Europe, I’ve sort of started making out with and having sexual encounters with my boss.”

Of course, we hadn’t actually had sex. Not yet, anyway. And every time my brain added that “not yet” qualifier, it made me wet all over again.

“Well,” she said, and there was a tone to her voice that led me to believe she knew I wasn’t being entirely truthful, “I think it’s a great idea.”

“You do?” I asked. “You don’t think I’d be putting the kids in danger because I might have a PTSD flashback and let one of them get hurt?”

“Hardly,” she said. “In fact, I think it’s one of the best ideas anyone has had in relation to your trauma yet.”

“Why’s that?” I asked.

“Because you need a reason to be on the slopes—one besides just skiing. I was going to recommend walking along

some of the paths or simply riding the ski lift up and down to get the feel of it back, but this is much better. You've already said you can put your own feelings aside when you need to in order to take care of the kids, and I think this is the perfect opportunity for you to remember the joy of skiing by imparting it to others."

It sounded like a lot of bullshit to me, but Doctor Harzel hadn't been wrong yet about my treatment. Of course, her answer might be different if she knew I had been sitting on their dad's cock just a couple of days ago.

"If you say so, Doctor Harzel," I said, shaking my head, though she couldn't see it.

"I believe in you. Send me a text later letting me know how it goes."

We hung up, and I started to gather up my ski stuff. I wouldn't need all of it—definitely not the stuff I'd need for more intense runs, like my goggles, but I needed my skis, my poles, and my clothes.

I hadn't washed my snow gear since the encounter with James, and I could still smell him on them. I took a deep breath and sighed.

*Dammit, Haley,* I said to myself. *You've got it so bad...*

I tried to argue that no, I didn't, but, as it turned out, arguing with yourself goes about as well as you'd think it would, and I simply ended up in a back-and-forth between the warring parts of my mind.

I pulled on my stuff and went out to the living room where James had the kids up and ready for me.

“Who’s ready to go skiing?” I asked excitedly.

Ben and Katie both jumped to their feet in their snowsuits, but Leann looked unsure.

“You okay?” I asked.

“I don’t wanna fall,” she said quietly.

“Why would you fall?” I asked, trying not to let my own fear of the same show through the words.

“Because I don't know how to do this,” she said.

I knelt down beside her, and my eyes flicked to James’s, and the memory of the other day came back in full force.

“Um...” I said, trying to regain my place in the conversation. “Well, you know, everyone falls sometimes. But the falling isn’t the hard part.”

“It isn’t?” she asked.

“No,” I told her. “The hard part is getting back up afterward and trying again.”

I could practically hear Doctor Harzel cheering in my mind. Yeah, yeah, I heard it...

“You promise?” she asked.

“Promise.”

James beamed at me, and I blushed as I grinned back at him.

We all left the penthouse together, with James breaking off to go to work and the rest of us continuing on and out the door toward the slopes.

“Alright,” I said as we got up to the top of the slope where I fell a couple of days ago. I tried not to let my voice shake as I talked to them, but the memory of my fall on this tiny slope came back to haunt me as much as the avalanche did.

But then another memory took over. The memory of what happened after the fall. Of James showing up and saving me. Of him pulling me into the warm tower. Of...

“Now what?” Ben asked, ready to go, pulling me out of my daze.

“Right,” I said, drawing my attention back to the kids and their lesson. “Step one is to make sure your feet are straight forward. Don’t turn them in or out.”

“I see people turn them in all the time,” Leann says, eyeing me suspiciously.

“That’s true,” I say to her. “But that’s for learning how to brake. Right now, you’re just going straight down the hill. Now, when you go, your poles help you stay upright, so you can use them to go faster or to push yourself upright. Here, let me show you.”

I took a deep breath and got to the edge of the landing above the slope and swallowed hard. This was it. Could I do it for the kids? For James and his kids?

I started off down the slope with all of the kids watching me intently. My leg began to shake about halfway down, and I had a moment where I truly thought I was going to fall, but I thought about the kids at the top, about Doctor Harzel, and about James, who had enough faith in me that he trusted his kids to me not only at home, but here on the slopes.

With a huge effort, I made it to the bottom, then turned around and shouted, “Okay, kids. Who’s first?”

Unsurprisingly, Ben insisted on going first. He made it about halfway, then turned his skis out and ended up falling to his butt, which he slid the rest of the way down on. Leann told Katie to go next, and she made it about half as far as Ben did before tumbling down, thankfully laughing the whole way. Finally, Leann went, and I could see the concentration all over her face as she kept her skis perfectly straight, making it all the way to the bottom.

I gave her a high-five and said, “Yeah! Amazing job, Leann.”

She squealed with happiness and jumped up and down, which, if you had ever been on skis, you know wasn’t the best idea, so she immediately fell. I was worried for a minute that she’d get frustrated, but she didn’t. In fact, she laughed so hard I was worried her ribs would hurt, and eventually, her siblings joined in, piling on top of her.

This was why I liked nannyng. I loved getting to see moments like this, to give the kids someone there to

experience it with them since their parents didn't have the option.

Well, usually they didn't.

"I don't think you guys will make it very far like that," a voice said from behind me, and I turned to see James in his snow gear, holding a pair of skis.

"Daddy!" Katie said, trying to get to her feet and failing as her skis got tangled up with Ben's and Leann's.

"Easy there," James said, laughing and picking his youngest daughter up after freeing her from the pile. "You guys having fun with Haley?"

"I made it all the way down the hill on my first try!" Leann said.

"That's amazing," he said, also giving her a high-five like I'd done. He looked over at me and was about to say something when Ben scrambled to his feet and raised his hand at his dad like he was asking for permission to speak, but he didn't wait to be called on.

"I made it all the way down, too," he said excitedly.

"You did not!" Leann said, looking irritated. "Don't lie."

"I'm not lying," he said. "I made it all the way down. I just wasn't on my feet for half of it."

James and I laughed while Leann rolled her eyes and Ben stuck his tongue out at her. We all pulled off our skis and started the trek back up the hill, with the kids running ahead.

“Be careful of slippery spots!” I shouted after them, thinking how it would be just my luck for one of them to fall and get a concussion now that their dad was here to watch.

“I’m gonna get there first!” Ben shouted, running as fast as he could.

“No way!” Leann called back, overtaking him in seconds, with Katie bringing up the rear.

“Wait for me!”

James smiled and shook his head. “You’re doing a great job, you know,” he said, his arm brushing mine in a way that was clearly intended to seem casual, but in reality, was anything but.

“They’ve only done the one run,” I said. “We’ve spent most of the time learning how to stand and balance and how to get in and out of the skis.”

“That’s great,” he said with an indulgent smile. “But that’s not what I was talking about.” He nodded up the hill to where his kids were waiting for us at the top. I watched as Ben threw a snowball at Leann, and both she and Katie bent down to make ammunition so they could return fire.

“Then what did you mean?” I asked.

“I mean you’re doing a great job with the kids in general,” he told me, and I felt myself begin to blush again. “I can’t tell you how many nannies I’ve gone through in the last few years. None of them ever seemed to connect with the kids like you have.”



“Yeah,” I said. “Leann definitely had some trust issues at first, and she’s told me a little bit about one of her old nannies who would yell and shame her in front of the other kids.”

“She’s definitely had it the hardest,” James said, frowning and shaking his head. “I mean, she’s the only one who has any real memories of their mom, so while the other two don’t know any different, Leann remembers what it was like to have a mom.”

“That’s really understandable,” I said. “She definitely still hurts from it, and I think that’s the reason for all of the issues with her behavior. She’s just looking for someone to ‘mom’ her.”

“Well,” he said, “you’re doing great in that department. I mean...” Now it was his turn to blush as he looked away from me. “Not that you’re their mom or anything. Just that you’re helping her through it.”

“Yeah,” I said, leaning just a little closer so my shoulder was pressed against him. “She’s a good kid. Just hurting.”

“You’d never know right now,” he said, lighting up again. “Look how happy she is. It’s been a long time since I’ve seen her like that.”

It felt nice to know that I had contributed to her life in some meaningful way, but just as nice to know that James saw the value in it. I didn’t want to depend on his evaluation of me too much, but there was something about him that made me want to make him proud of me.

Maybe it was because I wanted to see him naked, now that I knew what he was rocking under those snow pants.

But deep down, I knew it went beyond that. There was something special about James, about our connection.

And come hell or high water, I was going to explore it.

## *Chapter Twenty*

James

If the kids were excited to have Haley join us for a “special” dinner, I was doubly so, almost to an embarrassing level. It was time for my father’s monthly visit to see his grandchildren and I felt like this might be the perfect time for Haley to see how it would feel to be in our family. I’d taken an hour just to decide what I wanted to wear, and once Haley returned to the penthouse from her visit with Anna, I greeted her with my invitation.

“The kids and I would love it if you took a break from your regular diet of pretzels and Chinese food and had dinner with us.”

At first, Haley looked surprised, then rolled her eyes. “I do not live off of pretzels and Chinese,” she insisted. “I drink Gatorade, too.”

After a quick check to be sure the kids were nowhere to be seen, I reached for her delicate hand, warming her cold fingers

in my own.

“I hope this is all okay. I don't want you to feel any pressure.”

Haley shook her head, causing her blonde waves to bounce. “I don't feel pressure. Not at all. I love the kids and I love—”

She stopped her train of thought even though we both knew where it had been headed.

“—spending time with all of you guys.”

My heart pounded with the happiness that perhaps she and I were at the same level of attraction if we could just push past that last barrier that remained between us.

There was no question to me about what I wanted. I wanted her. I wanted her to wear my ring and sport my last name. I wasn't sure how I could know this all so quickly but I did. And the feelings weren't going anywhere.

“Well, we love spending time with you, too. Which is why we want you to join us for a family dinner. My dad will be coming by.”

Haley's face blanched and she looked like she might throw up. “Your dad?” she asked.

I nodded. “Is that okay?”

She was silent for a moment, then answered honestly, “I don't know.”

I looked at my watch to try and disguise my disappointment. “Well, dinner will be in thirty minutes so if you want to join

us, we'll be in the formal dining room.”

Haley nodded, grabbing her shopping bags and purse and heading past me to her room.

I was never great at disappointment, but I chose to hold out hope. I would probably be a little gun-shy too if my boss/lover told me I was meeting the parents.

Dad arrived fashionably late as usual and immediately gave each of the kids a hundred-dollar bill.

“Dad, I've told you that's too much money for the kids.”

“Nonsense,” he replied. “They have things they like to buy. Don't you, kids?”

My traitorous spawn cheered loudly and replied, “Yeah!”

I sighed and sent them to the dining room, fetching the dishes of food I'd catered from the kitchen.

I was just gathering silverware when I heard the sound of a female voice clearing behind me. I turned and found Haley, looking gorgeous in a red sweater leaning against the wall, smiling.

“Is this appropriate ‘dad’ attire?”

I nodded with a smile I couldn't restrain. “I should say so.”

Without a care in the world, I grabbed her by the hand and pulled her into the cabinets, pressing a deep kiss to her lips. She wrapped her slender fingers around my cheeks and kissed me back with a happy noise.

“Thank you,” I said. “This means a lot to me.”

Haley nodded. “You’ve done so much for me, and... well...”

She didn’t need to finish the statement. I knew what she wanted to say and I smiled in agreement. This was slowly becoming something more than an employer/employee situation and neither of us was upset about it.

“Can I help you carry anything to the dining room?” she asked, holding out her hands.

I handed her the silverware and napkins and nodded toward where the kids could be heard talking to their grandfather.

“Go on,” I said. “I’ll be right behind you.”

She smiled and took a deep breath, then walked confidently to the room where we would be having dinner. Hopefully the first of many.

My dad looked up as she walked in, and began to weigh her with his eyes almost immediately. He had a way of deciding how he was going to interact with people before he’d even had a conversation with them. It was one of the things that most got in the way of us having good communication and a great relationship.

“This must be the nanny I hear so much about,” he said with a mischievous smile that I saw all too often on Leann’s face. “What a knockout.”

“This is Haley Bo Baley,” Ben said playfully, sticking his tongue out at her. “She’s pretty much our sister.”

An uncomfortable shudder rippled across my skin hearing him call her his sister. That had some unfortunate implications I really didn't care to entertain.

"She is not like your sister, Ben." I chuckled nervously.

Haley shot me an uneasy sideways glance and I shrugged. The kid really did have an odd mind.

"Well, sit down," my father said, pulling the chair out next to him. "I'm always looking for girlfriends." He chuckled with a gurgle like the old lech he was and Haley looked to me for help.

"Actually," I said, intervening. "If Haley doesn't mind, I'd prefer that she sit over here near Leann. You don't mind that, do you Hales-er-Haley?"

Haley shook her head with what was a distinctly relieved look. "Part of the job." She laughed.

"Rude," Leann huffed.

I shot Leann a look and pressed a finger to my lips. She was still mad until I gave her a little wink to show her that she was in on a secret. Then she wiggled her eyebrows at me and attempted to wink back.

Perhaps Haley should refrain from letting Leann fall off a mountain after all.

Dinner was long, but only because Dad wanted to tell Haley every single one of his own Olympic stories as a champion skier which Haley listened to politely with grace. I couldn't help but adore her for it. He told stories like he was reading

obituaries. The fact that she managed to look so engaged was nothing short of a miracle.

After dinner, I sent the kids in their pajamas to have a sleepover in Grandpa's suite. It was so adorable to watch them all march out of the penthouse with their tennis shoes and sleeping bags. The three of them were yawning before they even left so at least Dad was going to have an easy night.

Once they were gone, Haley and I cleaned up the dinner in silence while some Michael Bublé played in the kitchen. Once or twice I took her hand and spun her, or pulled her into a kiss, but mostly it was just quiet contentment.

As soon as we could justify walking away from the remaining mess, Haley and I went to the parlor for a nightcap.

“Long Island, I presume?” I asked her, jumping over the bar to make it.

Haley laughed and nodded. “Why thank you. Nice to meet a man who can actually remember my order.”

I watched her look out over the dark, snowy landscape from where we sat in front of the picture windows. You could just make out the peaks of the mountains in the background and it made for a lovely sight.

I walked to her with the drinks in hand, sitting down beside her and bestowing her with one.

“Mademoiselle,” I said with a wink. “As reparations for your suffering tonight.”



She laughed and shook her head. “It was no trouble, honestly. I can tell your dad has a good heart and loves his grandkids. He wouldn’t be the first handsy old man I’ve dealt with.”

I scowled, not liking the idea of him or any other man putting their hands on her without her explicit permission.

She must have picked up on my ire because she turned her head to the side to look me in the eyes and asked, “What?”

I looked up, swooning as I saw those gorgeous eyes looking at me from beneath her thick, dark lashes, and sighed.

“I think it’s time I admitted that I have real feelings for you, Haley.”

The room went silent minus the faintest tones of Michael still playing from the kitchen. She looked up at me, her chest heaving as her heart pounded visibly in her chest.

“I have feelings for you, too,” she said at last. “And they scare me. This isn’t just a fling, is it?”

I shook my head, “I don’t think so. There’s something real here. Don’t you think?”

She nodded and took a long drink of her cocktail, then said, “Does that scare you?”

I shook my head no, reaching for her free hand and bringing it to my face. “The only thing that scares me is the idea that you might not feel the same.” I slid forward from my chair until I was kneeling on the floor before her, gazing up, her palm still pressed to my cheek. “I need you, Haley. We all do.”

I leaned up and gently pressed my lips to her neck, and she tangled her fingers into my hair. An intense pulse from my groin alerted me that I was ready for more, and that if she'd have me, tonight could be the night I finally have her.

"I want to be with you more than anything right now," I admitted.

"Me too," she agreed. Then she leaned in closer to whisper in my ear. "I've... I've been thinking about you inside me all week."

It was a damned miracle my cock didn't rip right through my jeans at her directness, but a growl slipped through my lips as I wrapped one of my huge hands behind her neck and squeezed. Her eyelashes fluttered and she sighed with pleasure, and I could see her nipples harden through her shirt.

"You want me to take you, Haley? You want me to claim you so thoroughly that no one else will ever do?" It was taking everything I had to keep my desire in check. I couldn't rush this or be too intense. She needed to set the pace.

But with a pouting nod and tiny whimper from her, I lost my fucking mind, every atom in my body needing to be inside her.

Now.

I grabbed her hips and hoisted her into my arms, wrapping her legs around me and carrying her to my bed. I had imagined her here a hundred times and yet, seeing her in it was so far

beyond what I could have imagined that I was boggled. I watched as she stripped off her sweater, tossing it aside.

Haley looked up at me with those flushed cheeks I so adored and cupped one of her own breasts, still restrained by her bra.

I climbed on top of her, kissing every inch of bare skin I could get my lips on, taking off her jeans in three small movements and licking the insides of her thighs like they were fucking candy.

I could smell her wetness as I subconsciously began to grind my still-clothed cock into the bed, feral with need. I took the opportunity to press my face into her slowly wetter and wetter panties and breathed her in deep, needing to inhale her pussy like it was oxygen.

There was nothing I wanted more than to bury my face within her dripping folds, but I knew I needed to be patient. We could only consummate this attraction for the first time once, and I wanted to make it so, agonizingly slow.

I shifted to undo my pants and stripped them away, underwear and all. My pulsing cock sprang forth and Haley audibly gasped as she saw it, reaching down to touch it with her fingertips.

“Damn... I could feel how big you were through your sweats, but...” She trailed off and her body gave a tiny thrust upward, her need obvious in the way she moved.

I huffed a sigh that was a product of the anguish I felt with having to restrain myself, but leaned into her neck and placed a kiss on it as my hands went to the clasp on her bra. “I’m sure we will find a way to get it inside you,” I crooned. “You seem like you like a challenge.”

“You have no idea,” she said, pulling my lips back to hers to devour them as I pulled away the bra, leaving her chest bare beneath me, heaving with every breath.

I gently sucked on her tongue until she whimpered and then my face went once again to those magnificent nipples. They were dark, flushed with the blood that engorged them and I needed to feel them against my tongue.

“I’m fucking obsessed with your nipples,” I groaned. “I could sit here like this for an hour and still feel like it wasn’t long enough.”

She gasped and grabbed my hair, holding me tightly against her. “Well, you’d be more than welcome to, but I think there are other parts of me that have been dying to feel you.”

Once again, I could feel her fingertips graze the head of my cock and I thrust against her hand. Trying not to just take her at my will was one of the most difficult things I’d ever done, and I still wasn’t sure I’d succeed.

But at the risk of coming off as a two-pump chump, I would prevail.

My hands drifted south, grabbing her lacy white thong and gripping it firmly. I pulled it tight in my hand and slightly

upward, knowing that the lace would create a sensation against her clit. She squirmed beneath me and it made me even more determined to draw out every moment.

“Fuck,” she moaned. “Please... I need to feel you...”

“You will get me, in time. Believe me, by the time I’m inside you, there is nothing else in the world you’ll be able to think about.”

I gave a sharp tug and ripped the fabric from her body, pulling her hips upward as I did. She didn’t protest, she simply moaned at the feeling of the jolt and spread her thighs for me.

“Good girl,” I said against the skin of her hips. “You know just what you want, don’t you?”

“Yes,” she gasped, writhing beneath me, pushing her hips upward toward my mouth, increasing the contact there. “Yes, please... please touch me. I need you to.”

She didn’t have to ask me twice as I plunged a pair of fingers deep inside her, sliding in as easily as if the crevice had been made to accommodate them. The slick of her wetness was a perfect lubricant for her to take them, and it was mere moments before I gave her a third.

“I want you to be ready for me,” I said, my mouth returning to her breasts. “I want you to be ready to be stretched to your limits.”

“God, yes...” she moaned, thrusting against my fingers as her hands held my head against her chest once more. “Fuck,

that feels...” She gave a shuddering gasp, then began to moan as she clenched around my fingers.

“Come for me now, Haley. I need to feel it before I can give you more. I need to know that you can’t take it any longer.” She did exactly as she was told and I felt a pulse and a drip from the tip of my cock as she screamed. “Good,” I said. “But I think you can do better. Why don’t we try that a couple more times?”

## *Chapter Twenty-One*

Haley

**H**oly fucking shit, James was good with his fingers.

I felt waves of pleasure crashing over me from the moment he touched me, and when he curled his fingers inside me, rubbing against the sweet spot inside, I saw stars. He knew exactly how to touch, stroke, and press to elicit a perfect orgasm.

And I wanted to return the favor.

As I was on my come down, he lifted his head from my chest, where he'd been using his tongue to toy with my nipple.

"Where the hell did you learn how to do that?" I asked. No one had ever made me come with only their fingers before. Most men didn't even care about a woman's pleasure, but he'd aced whatever course he took in making women scream.

"Just something I picked up along the way," he said with a grin and a shrug.

God, that smile, that slightly crooked curve that had mischief written all over it was enough to make my knees weak—well, weaker than they already were after having a leg-shaking orgasm at his hands.

“Well, I’m glad you did,” I said, putting my hands on either side of his face and leaning up so I could kiss him.

He moved up my body so that he was positioned over me as my tongue explored his mouth and tangled with his own. I gripped him to me, wanting nothing more than for him to just plunge himself inside of me and fuck me senseless, but he seemed to want to make this last, and I was fine with that.

More than fine.

I pushed him gently away from me and he looked confused and, if I wasn’t mistaken, a little hurt.

“Did I do something wrong?” he asked, frowning.

“Not at all,” I said in the most sultry voice I could manage as I pressed my hands to his chest and let them slide down to that magnificent cock of his. I was far from a virgin and had seen my fair share of dicks, but his was the prettiest and biggest I’d ever seen. “I just want to taste you.”

The frown on his face quickly melted into an expression of shock, then of sensual greed that had me spilling my own wetness once more.

“Yeah?” he asked as if he was surprised that I would want to.



“Yeah,” I confirmed. “I want to suck your cock until you can’t take it another second without coming. And *then*... I want you to fuck me.”

He looked like Christmas had come early, and he rolled off me to lie on his back. I slid down the bed so I was on my knees at the very edge and leaned forward, placing my face near his dick. I grabbed it with one hand, but quickly realized it wasn’t enough. I used both hands to stroke him up and down, relishing in the soft, silky skin there, before lowering my face and kissing the side of his length, up and down while still slowly pumping my fists up and down his length.

“Fuck, Haley,” he said, thrusting up into my grip. “Please, baby...”

I giggled, then ran my tongue up the underside of his cock, base to tip, taking in the intoxicating scent of him. It was rich and musky, but clean smelling—way better than most guys.

“If you insist.”

I took his tip into my mouth, stretching my lips wide to accommodate his girth and taking him as deeply as I could without gagging, which, admittedly, wasn’t far compared to what was left outside. His hands went to my hair, grabbing it into his fist and twisting it away from my face.

*Wow, I thought. A guy who gives a fuck.*

I began to suck and tease, to stroke and grasp, causing him to make all kinds of wonderful noises. I felt his hands on my head, in my hair, begging to instinctively move my head up

and down on his length, forcing himself deeper. Guys had done this to me before and I'd hated it, but something about the way he did it didn't feel gross or anything. In fact, it turned me on even more to know he needed me as badly as I needed him.

He began to buck up into my mouth as he used his grip to move my face in time, pressing into the back of my throat. I tilted my head to allow him to go deeper, all but swallowing him, but he still barely got halfway in with how big he was.

"Haley..." he moaned before tugging sharply at my hair. "Haley, I'm getting close."

I pulled away, not wanting to push him over the edge yet, but feeling accomplished at how quickly I had gotten him there.

I climbed up toward his face again, straddling him as his hands went to my breasts, grabbing them firmly and tugging at my nipples, sending me back into the throes of ecstasy. I grabbed his stiff pole and positioned it at my entrance, but then he grabbed me by the hips and slid me forward so I was seated on his chest instead.

"Not yet," he said, putting a finger to my lips as I opened my mouth to protest. "You got to taste me. Now it's my turn."

He grabbed me by the hips once more, his large, strong hands pulling me upward so that I was positioned over his face. His eyes met mine, and he raised his head to press his lips into my pussy.

God, if his fingers had been good, his tongue was a miracle worker. As I lowered myself onto his face, the moaning noises he made as he devoured me sent me closer and closer to the edge. The feeling of him licking and toying with my clit was better than anything I could remember feeling in a long time.

“James,” I gasped, knowing I was nearing another climax within minutes. “James... I... I’m going to come.”

I expected him to pull me off so he could move inside of me, but he didn’t. He grabbed me by the thighs, holding me firmly against his lips as he continued with his expert ministrations on my pleasure, plunging his tongue inside of me, then going back to my swollen bud to bring me to a panting breathlessness again and again until...

Stars exploded behind my eyes. The first orgasm he’d given me had been mind-blowing, and this one surpassed even that.

“Fuck,” I cried out. “God, yes, James. Yes, oh, God, yes...”

He continued to toy with me with his mouth, groaning like it was for him more than me until I couldn’t take it a second longer.

“Please,” I begged finally. “Please, James. Take me. I need to feel you. I need you inside me *now*.”

His mouth ceased its motion as he pulled me off his face, wiping his chin with his hand and sitting up sharply so that I slid down into his lap with a yelp of surprise. He had his back against the headboard, and my legs were on either side of his hips, his length pressing against my back from beneath me.

“How much?” he asked, running his thumb down my cheek before dipping his head to kiss the side of my neck.

“A lot,” I said, beginning to gasp and writhe, running my soaked crease over his cock.

“*How* much?”

“More than I ever needed anything. Please...” I begged.

“As you wish,” he said, giving me that same grin from before, giving me butterflies even as he reached between us to position himself at my entrance. He looked at me as his tip pressed into me, and I saw the same wild desire in his eyes that I myself was feeling. He paused, giving me a look that asked if I was okay to continue. He was *big*, and I didn’t know how I’d take all of him, but I’d be damned if I wasn’t going to try.

I nodded, swallowing hard, desperate to feel him inside of me. With no more hesitation, he lowered me down onto him, and I felt him fill me more than I ever thought I could be filled.

He’d done an excellent job with the foreplay, because I’d had guys smaller than him who hadn’t bothered and it had been uncomfortable at best as they fucked me while I was barely even wet. But James slid most of the way inside of me with ease, and though I could feel the stretch I’d been longing for, it didn’t hurt. In fact, the sensation that just barely avoided being pain, was so erotic that within seconds of being on his dick, I had a wave of small, pulsating orgasms around him.

He wrapped his arms around my back and began to thrust up into me as he lowered me down and lifted me up, over and over, deepening his penetration. My arms went around his neck, holding on for dear life because I was convinced if I let go and lost contact with him, that I would die.

“Haley,” he moaned, kissing my lips, then moving them along my cheeks and temples to the side of my head, where he peppered little kisses behind my ear and down my neck to my collarbone, where I felt his teeth graze me. “Haley...” He repeated my name, only this time, it was an animalistic growl, and the sound of it, plus the sensation of him biting my skin while thrusting up inside of me sent me into another wave of orgasms.

“Fuck,” I said. “I can’t take it anymore, James. Just take me. Please, just take me.”

He pulled his face away to look at mine, and now the sly grin he’d leveled at me before was gone, replaced with a wild hunger that was even sexier. Without ever pulling out of me, he got to his knees, my legs around his waist, and laid me back on the bed so that I was splayed out beneath him, and he began to slide in and out of me with reckless abandon, his lips on mine and one hand toying with my nipple again.

It wasn’t long before I felt another big climax coming. “James...” I gasped as he plunged deep inside of me. “James... I’m going to come.”

“Yes,” he said against my cheek. “You are.” He slammed into me harder, and suddenly I wasn’t Haley. I wasn’t even

human. I was the embodiment of pleasure as he sent me into the third earth-shattering orgasm of the night.

I had barely managed to come down from it before I felt another one building. How could he keep going like this? Most guys I'd been with barely made it through one orgasm for me, let alone however many James had brought me to.

"Haley," he moaned into my mouth. "Haley... Let me finish inside of you."

I nodded, biting down on his lip. "Yes," I said. "Please. I need it."

He began to thrust with more of a need of his own, rather than the way he'd been doing it before, which I now realized was for my benefit as much as his. He was an incredible lover, and if he wanted to come inside of me, I wanted that, too.

"Haley," he growled, picking up his pace and eliciting little whimpers from me as he did. "Haley... *Haley!*"

I felt the pulse of him finishing, the pressure and throbbing of his cock as he fucked his seed into me. The feeling of it was almost as good as the orgasms he'd given me, and when he collapsed to the side of me and pulled me against him, stroking my hair, I felt nothing but pure bliss.

Of course, nothing lasts forever, and once the afterglow faded, I realized what had just happened, and had no idea what the repercussions of it would be. He was my boss, and the father of the kids I nannied. What the hell kind of cliché was I?

I waited for what I felt was an appropriate amount of time, then slowly started to pull away.

“Are you okay?”

“Yeah,” I said, feeling incredibly awkward. “I just... I have to be up early to get the kids from your dad.” I scooted to the edge of the bed and grabbed my clothes, holding them over my body like a shield.

“I don’t understand,” he said slowly, sitting up and pulling his boxer briefs back on. “Did I do something wrong?”

“No!” I said emphatically. “No, not at all. I just need to get some sleep, and...” How did you tell someone you’re involved with professionally that you aren’t sure if you just made a mistake by fucking him? “Thank you.” I knew it was lame, but it was all I had. “I had a really nice time.”

And before he could respond, I hurried out the door and down the hall to the comfort and safety of my own room.

## *Chapter Twenty-Two*

James

**N**o one prepared you for the crushing guilt you will feel when you honestly start to consider letting another person into your life after you lose “the one.”

Haley was opening my eyes once more to the beauty of having someone you were attracted to close by, but I couldn't stop thinking about my vows to Jane every time she looked at me in that gorgeous, soul-crushing way.

Jane, my Jane. My lovely, college sweetheart—was taken from me and my kids by cancer and I was helpless to stop it. I have never in my life suffered through an experience that took so much from me and everyone I loved.

So, falling for Haley felt like disrespect to Jane's memory. Especially because I wanted her so badly.

When Jane and I had gotten married we were twenty-two years old and barely aware of life and its intricacies. There



was no way of knowing who we could have or would have become with each other, and in an odd way, cancer had saved us from the very potential of falling apart.

But here, now, with Haley, I was firmly the man I had grown into. I knew who I was and what I wanted and so no amount of success or failure could be blamed on growing pains.

I was distant after our hookup, far more distant than I should have been. But I was scared of what it meant for me to be so willing to put Jane in my past and make Haley my future. Would my kids even allow Haley to transition from their nanny to more? Would my peers?

It was the Tuesday after Haley and I'd had the most romantic and passionate night of likely both our lives and I was hiding in my office down at the equipment rentals like the coward I was. My front desk manager, Andrew, had been by several times to tell me that he'd seen Haley wandering the lobby—presumably looking for me. I thanked him and shooed him from the office before anyone could tell I was there.

After all, I was working with the lights off.

What was wrong with me? I was like a teenage boy whose condom broke on prom night. This had to be the most unattractive version of who I could be like, ever.

I had just finished eating my lunch when my phone rang and I looked down to find that the Ski Lodge Organization's president was calling me. Jared and I were on great terms and

sometimes this led to him asking for favors. Not typically pleasant ones either.

“Hey, Jared,” I said, answering the phone.

“James,” he replied. “How are you? I haven’t heard from you since the party. Whatever happened to that cute, young thing you were toting around all night?”

Something irked me about the way he was referring to Haley like she was some sort of supermodel that I was carting around for show. But getting angry wouldn’t help, I needed to diffuse and change the subject.

“She’s fine. Listen, I’ve been meaning to call you, too. What does someone have to do to be considered to host an Olympic qualifier?”

Jared laughed on the other end of the line. “Why? You wanna throw your hat in?” he asked. “That’s literally what I was calling you about.”

Now he’d piqued my interest. “Oh really?” I asked. “Okay, and what are the details?”

“Well, after the situation at Brother Bear’s—that of course Kevin couldn’t help—the committee is looking for new locations. You know, just to give Kevin enough time to get things sorted out.”

Poor Kev. None of that had been his fault and yet, he was about to take the full weight of responsibility for it.

“I could probably do it,” I said. “What does it entail and do I have to get sponsors? I hate working with sponsors.”

“Is that even a question?” Jared replied. “Obviously you have to work with sponsors. That is unless you plan to finance the whole thing yourself.”

“Don’t tempt me,” I replied, and the realization that I could be hosting one of Haley’s qualifiers crept across my awareness. “Hey, listen. Are there any rules forbidding location employees from competing at qualifiers?”

“Ah... so there is more with Haley Birmingham. You scoundrel.”

“It’s not like that,” I insisted, when in reality, it was exactly like that. “I’m just covering bases for her. She was hired by me after all.”

“I will check with those stuffed shirts up at the Olympic committee but not to my knowledge. And if it did, there’s an easy way around it.”

“Oh yeah?” I asked, feeling hopeful. “And what is that?”

“Marry her, of course,” Jared replied with a self-indulgent giggle.

“Don’t make me hang up on you.” I groaned. “So how do I sign up to do this?”

Jared took a minute to stop laughing at his own comedy genius and cleared his throat. “Well, you’re only a handful of steps behind qualifying. The major thing is the fact that you are required to host a major benefit for the charity of the committee’s choosing. They want to know you’re in this for the right reasons, obviously.”

“What other reasons would I have besides the right ones for doing this?” I asked, knowing full well what he meant.

“Don’t play dumb with me, James. Just throw the damn benefit.”

“Alright,” I said. “Alright. It’s about time I made a donation to cancer research, anyway. Clear your schedule for the end of the month. I’ll put something nice together to show the committee I’m not just some money-grubbing miser.”

“Good man,” Jared replied. “And if your nanny isn’t busy, feel free to point her my way.”

“Goodbye, Jared,” I said, hanging up the phone without any further notice.

I’d put my foot in my mouth because I’d been gushing over how easy throwing last-minute parties was. I pretty much asked for this.

By the time the day was over, I had pretty firmly decided that I wasn’t going to be avoiding Haley anymore because of my own guilt. That wasn’t fair to her.

And I needed her amazing brain to help me sort out a presentation for the benefit proposal. There was nothing like having a void that someone usually fills to remind you how much you need them.

When I walked in the front door, I could smell that dinner was already being made, and it smelled wonderful. Through the halls, I could hear my children talking cheerfully, and some of it even about schoolwork.

But the pièce de résistance was when I turned the corner to come face to face with Haley herself, dressed in a wool sweater and skirt. She looked amazing, though notably sad. I had a feeling that I was to blame for that, not to give myself too much credit.

“Hey,” I said, looking down into those ocean blue eyes.

“Hey yourself, stranger,” she replied, pulling her gaze away and ducking around me to get to the kitchen. “You know, disappearing after you sleep with a girl is usually considered bad manners.”

I turned to face her, ready to take my own medicine. “I wasn’t avoiding you, I—”

“I didn’t say avoid,” Haley replied, arms folded across her chest.

Shit.

“I assume there is nothing I can say to make this better?” I asked, only the tiniest bit of hope managing to stay with me.

“Obviously not,” Haley said. “I’m not just some hot, dumb blonde that you can use as arm candy.”

I took a few steps toward her, then closed the distance between us, putting my hands on her shoulders and backing her into the cabinets. I took my lead from her for her comfort, and she moved willingly, though still with passionate, quiet fury.

“I am a complete fuckhead, okay? I really feel close to you and that scared me.” I admitted. “I’ve been absolutely wracked

with guilt about my late wife ever since I realized...”

“You realized what?” she asked, still a tone of irritation in her voice.

“I realized that I was falling for you.”

Haley looked like she’d been expecting anything but that and her jaw actually dropped open. “You what?” She asked, trying to confirm the words she clearly didn’t believe.

“I know you heard me,” I said softly with embarrassment. “They are words that scare me to say as much as feel. I loved my wife. She is the mother of all that remains of her in this world—our children. I was worried that caring for you, that being with you was like betraying her memory.”

Haley’s expression softened and I couldn’t have been more grateful. How anyone could manage to stand up to a look like that was beyond me. Maybe Leann was a lot tougher than she appeared.

“I don’t want to complicate things right now. There are so many moving parts between you being my employee, and the children seeing you as a mentor. But if you’re willing, I’d like you to consider potentially being together.”

Haley looked equal parts scared and elated, and I could empathize with the feeling. She nodded and stepped forward to hug me. I hugged her back and sighed.

It felt like it was the first time I was breathing in over a week and God, did it feel good. Having Haley here in my arms had never felt more right.

I reached down for her chin and drew her eyes up to mine, then placed my hands on her hips and lifted her onto the counter. She softly laughed and I leaned into the delicate skin of her throat and placed a few mild kisses there. Haley shuddered and pulled my head in further, allowing me to trace my tongue from the soft space behind her ear to her collarbone.

“You can’t get me this wet,” she whispered. “Your kids are in the next room.”

God, hearing her talk like this put me at half-mast instantly. “But what if I don’t care,” I said, totally full of shit.

“You will,” she said, laughing, and grabbing tight onto my hair as I attempted to slip down to the floor to press my face between her thighs.

I hated that she was right, and still, I pressed my growing erection against the thin divider of a pair of white panties.

She looked over my shoulder to the hall, then hiked her skirt up around her hips and spread her legs so I could see that the intense arousal was mutual. Right between her thighs was a lovely wet spot.

“God, this is torture,” I growled in her ear. “What I wouldn’t give to suck every drop of that off those.”

I took my index finger and ran the back of it over the wetness, her swollen, beautiful pussy pressing into my touch.

“James...” she said. “We can’t...”

“Daddy?” I heard a small voice from behind me.

My heart rate nearly doubled as Haley flipped her skirt down, and I hoped that my body was enough to cover her. I was hard as a fucking rock though, so I pulled Haley against me, making a real effort to try and make it appear I was hugging her.

“Why are you hugging Haley up there?” Katie said as she padded toward us. “You said we’re not allowed to be on the countertops.”

Haley and I exchanged a fake laugh for Katie’s benefit, and I thanked whatever higher powers may be that this whole situation was killing my hard-on faster than watching a porno where they wrestle in pudding.

“You’re so right,” I said, nodding. I took a step back since the evidence of the encounter had mostly subsided and held Haley’s hand as she jumped down off the counter. “Good call, Bug.”

Katie nodded with pride in encouraging us to follow the house rules. “When do we get to eat dinner?” she asked.

Haley looked up at the clock. “In about ten minutes, can you wait that long?”

Katie nodded and turned to leave.

But before she went down the hall, she turned back to us and pointed. “Your skirt is tucked into your underwear, Miss Haley.”

Haley and I exchanged horrified looks, but the second Katie disappeared, we burst into laughter.



“We are really gonna need to be more careful with that, aren’t we?” I asked.

“I’m thinking so,” Haley replied. “Now, come help me set the table.”

## *Chapter Twenty-Three*

Haley

**T**he kids had the day off from school, so James had suggested a ski lesson in place of their extra assignments for the day, which had Katie cheering. Apparently, she had loved it the first few times, maybe even more than Leann, who tried to hide her delight but failed.

“Go get your clothes on,” I said. “Leann, can I count on you to help Katie if she needs it?”

“Yeah, I can do that,” she said, grabbing her sister’s hand and dragging her along behind her.

Ben followed behind them at a run, quickly overtaking the girls.

“Watch it,” said Leann as he nearly bowled over Katie.

“Well, hurry up then!”

I laughed as they all disappeared into their rooms, and I was left alone in the living room, since James had already gone to

work.

I flopped down onto the couch, pulling out my phone. I opened up the text thread I had with James.

I looked at the messages No one reading them would have any clue that he and I had anything more than a professional relationship. They were all about logistics with the kids, what time they needed to be at places that were out of their normal routine and stuff like that, or requests for days or partial days off.

No one would ever know that he'd been inside me just a few nights ago, and that he'd been all over me again last night.

The very memory of how he felt, of how fucking good he was, was enough to make me wet. I could still feel the way his body moved over mine, causing him to slide in and out of me in a way that had me coming and coming...

I could still hear his words from the night before. "*I'm falling for you.*" I still didn't know what to do with that information. The logical part of my brain said it was a bad idea, and that I should put an end to it, even if it meant losing my job. But the other side... the other side couldn't help but relish in the taboo of it all.

"All ready!" Ben said, rushing into the room and interrupting my naughty line of thinking. He then started to sing. "I wi-in! I wi-in!"

"Not fair!" Katie called as she and Leann came down the hall.

“Yeah,” Leann said, looking at me to referee. “I had to help Katie. Ben just had to dress himself.”

“It wasn’t a race,” I said reassuringly to the girls, then looked at Ben. “But I’m glad you were all able to get ready so fast. Now we can go skiing that much faster!”

We walked down the steps of the resort and out the doors toward the bunny slopes. After I got them strapped in and skied down to show them the technique again, Ben insisted on going first, which the girls rolled their eyes at, but didn’t argue about. He lined himself up with me at the top of the hill, dug his poles into the snow, and pushed off.

He whizzed down the hill, speeding right past me at the bottom because we hadn’t worked on stopping yet. Eventually he glided to a stop, then cheered.

“Did I do good?” he asked, “walking” back over to me with his skis still locked onto his boots, making him move like a penguin.

“You did great,” I said, giving him a high five. “Okay, who’s next?”

Katie raised her hand, and Leann helped her to the edge of the slope. Katie’s tendency was to sit down on her skis when she started to lose balance, which didn’t work as well as you’d think. But she seemed to like sliding down that way, anyway.

But today, she actually managed to stay on her feet for most of the way down, using her poles to keep herself upright.

“That’s amazing, Katie!” I called to her. “Keep it up!”

Of course, distracting a five-year-old from something they're concentrating on is a bad idea, as I quickly learned, because she lifted her hand to wave at me and lost her balance. Her skis released—a safety feature, and she rolled the rest of the way down the hill.

“Wow, Katie,” I said, choosing to focus on the positives. “You almost made it as far as Ben did.”

She looked pretty happy about that, and I went to ruffle her hair, but she dodged me and threw her arms around my middle.

“Thanks, Haley,” she said.

“You're welcome, Katie.”

Last up was Leann, who I'd given a little extra instruction to at the end of our last session, figuring as the oldest, it might make her feel good to have something a little more advanced to show off.

She got into position at the top of the slope, and I nodded at her to go ahead. She nodded back, then pushed off with her poles. She was about halfway down the hill when she turned slightly to the left, then to the right, then back to center in a very basic slaloming movement.

“I did it!” she cried out at the bottom. “I did it!”

“Yeah, you did,” I said. “You've been trying really hard, and it shows.”

She beamed at me, and we all went back up the hill. This time, I showed them how to turn to the side to slow down or

stop. I told them they only had to use it at the very bottom so I could catch them since they'd never done it before, and it can be tough to figure out the balance on turning like that.

This time, Leann went first. She tried her slaloming again and nearly took a fall when she did it a little too fast, but she managed to stay on her feet, and right at the bottom, she pulled herself to the side and braked right before falling onto her ass and laughing.

“Whoops!” she said as she got to her feet. “I think I need more practice.”

“Yeah,” I said, “but for the first time, that was great.”

“Really?”

“Really,” I replied.

Katie went next, trying to copy her sister and ending up rolling down the hill once more. Thankfully, she was all giggles as Leann helped her to her feet.

“That was a good try,” I said, “but why don't you try getting all the way to the bottom on your feet before adding in the extra stuff?”

She nodded happily and turned to watch Ben, who was ready to go the second I gave him the signal that I was ready to watch him.

He started off doing great, keeping himself upright with his poles, weaving just a bit as he did. He was about halfway down, when I suddenly saw him turn sharply to the side, like

he was braking, but there was fear on his face as he tried to get himself facing forward again.

He'd hit a patch of slick snow and skidded on his skis to the edge of the slope where the trees grew thick, and he couldn't stop himself. I kicked my skis off and tried to get to him as quickly as I could, to stop him from getting hurt, but I wasn't fast enough. He stumbled over his skis and fell down the hill, rolling over himself until he came to a stop.

By falling head-first into a tree.

I rushed over to him as Katie screamed and Leann hugged her, looking just as scared as I felt. He had sat up and was crying. There was a decent-sized bump on his head that he was holding like he was in agony, which, for a kid his age, I was sure was pretty close to the truth.

“Ben,” I said as I fell to my knees beside him. “Ben, I need you to look at me.”

I needed to check him for signs of a concussion, to make sure I didn't have to take him to the emergency room. With a goose egg like that, there was a decent chance he might have knocked himself out.

He wouldn't sit up or look at me. He just lay there crying and holding his head. I grabbed a handful of snow and gently pulled his hands away from the bump and pressed the snow to it.

“This should help,” I said as he finally met my eyes. His pupils seemed to be normal, and his gaze wasn't unfocused.

There was still a chance he could have had a concussion, but it seemed unlikely.

Thank God. The last thing I wanted to do was explain to the guy I had started hooking up with—my boss, who was apparently “falling for me”—why his kid had to go to the hospital on my watch.

He was still sniffing as I pulled him into my lap and hugged him tightly. He was a pretty skinny kid, so it wasn't hard for me to pick him up and carry him down the hill to where his sisters sat.

“Is Benny okay?” Katie asked as soon as I set him on his feet.

“No,” he said before I could answer, clutching the snow to his head and wiping away a large drip where some of it had melted onto his face. “I'm not okay. I hate skiing. I'm never doing it again.”

I wasn't quite sure what to say. It wasn't like he didn't have a valid reason to be scared now. I'd taken a tumble like that when I was a kid, but I'd already been skiing for a while and had just overestimated my skill. I was pretty sure it was the same as what had happened to Ben, but I wasn't sure.

“Why don't we call it for today and we can all go inside and have some cocoa?”

Ben gave a big sniff and nodded his head, his tears subsiding slightly at the prospect of having some hot chocolate, and Leann and Katie seemed to share the sentiment.



I walked up the hill to where Ben had fallen to collect his skis and poles while Leann fussed a bit over Ben's injury. Then I grabbed his hand in mine and led all three children back into the lodge and up to the penthouse.

By the time we all got back to the suite, Ben's snowpack had completely melted, leaving him with soaking wet hair. I helped him out of his snowsuit as he continued to sniffle, and dried his hair with a towel.

"I mean it," he said suddenly as I rubbed a towel over his head. "I'm not skiing anymore."

"That's totally your choice," I said calmly, trying to figure out how I could motivate him. I debated telling him how I bumped my head as a kid, but I had another story of a bigger-scale incident that might help him feel more understood and help him to see past this roadblock on his learning journey. "But you know... just a couple of months ago I got really hurt skiing."

"You did?" he asked. "See, I shouldn't be doing it! It's dangerous."

"That's not my point," I said with an indulgent smile. "Have you ever heard of an avalanche?"

He nodded. "Sometimes they happen around here. Dad always gets really upset when they do."

"Because they can really hurt people," she said. "I was skiing, and when I got to the bottom, the avalanche came down the mountain and hit me really hard."

“It did?” he asked, looking up at me in wonder and horror.

“Yeah,” I said. “It broke my leg really bad. I had to go see a lot of doctors to get better. And you know what the first thing I did when I got better was?”

“Sell your skis?” he asked, though I could tell from his face he knew that wasn’t the answer.

I laughed at his precociousness. Then gave him a hug. “No, Ben,” I said as I pulled away. “I went out to try skiing again. And you know what?”

“What?” he asked.

“It was really scary.” I gave a bit of a shiver as I thought about that first time after the avalanche, looking down the hill and feeling like it was a million feet down. “But I had to remember that one bad day skiing didn’t change all the good days I had skiing. And I wasn’t going to let my fear control me. Do you want to let your fear control you?”

He shook his head. “I’m not scared. I just... don’t wanna do it anymore.”

“And that’s totally your choice,” I said, putting a hand on his little shoulder. “But I hope you’ll try again because if you live your whole life being afraid of stuff, you won’t get to live very much at all. And you might miss out on some really great moments.”

I silently cursed the wisdom of my own words. I’d been living in fear of something I really loved for the last few months, something that had brought me some really great

moments over the years, including the one immediately before the avalanche, when I'd qualified for the Olympics. I knew, if I could convince Ben to get back on the slopes, I would have to honor his bravery and do the same myself.

He nodded at me, then said, "Okay. I'll try one more time. But if I fall again—"

"You can get back up," I said. "And try again. Because I know you're strong and brave, right?"

He hesitated, then nodded again. "Yeah. I am."

"Great," I said. "Now let's go have some cocoa with your sisters."

## *Chapter Twenty-Four*

James

“Say that number again?” I asked in dismay as the caterer quoted me what it would cost for the benefit.

“Two hundred and seventy-three thousand dollars, for the four courses.”

I was loaded, don't get me wrong. But numbers like that still had a tendency to make my head spin and my palms sweat. “Okay,” I managed to choke out. “Yeah, let's do it.”

“Excellent, Mr. Warner. Would you like me to email you an invoice now?”

“Please,” I said, feeling like I was cutting off an arm and mailing it to her. “Thank you, Kristie.”

What I wanted to say, of course, was, “Fuck you all the way to the moon and back. I'm serving pizza.” But I had to keep the reputation of the lodge in mind, plus it would get me an

enormous tax break, and it would also make me money in the long run.

In the meantime, though, I was going to have to make a deal with the devil himself.

There was something about sitting on the other end of a call that you really didn't want to make that made the wait for an answer so much worse.

"Mark Karth's office," said a friendly female voice. "How can I assist you?"

"Hi there," I said as politely as I could manage. "It's James Warner, can you put me through to Mark? We have a deal he's been hounding me about for months and I'm finally ready to accept defeat."

There was a silence on the other end, and I could almost hear the wheels ticking. I bet she was smoking hot and knowing Mark, she definitely put out. But shit like that only made me more thankful for Haley, now. I couldn't imagine working with someone who was modelesque but had the brain of a goldfish.

"I—"

"Don't worry about it," I said. "It was a stupid joke."

"Oh..."

Another long pause followed, and when it didn't seem like Mark was being fetched, I said, "So can I talk to Mark then?"

"Oh," said the bubbly voice. "Yes. One moment."

Some gratingly pleasant music came on the line and I turned to my desk to look over a few of the contracts my lawyer had sent over for my Olympic qualifier location bid. I couldn't exactly send them in until I threw the benefit, but it was good to have a look beforehand.

"James!" came Mark's voice on the other end of the line. "I hear you're ready to talk about my proposal."

"How old is she, Mark?"

"Who?"

"The receptionist. Let me guess, five-nine, billowy red hair, legs that go on for days?"

Mark laughed and I could almost hear him checking her out. "Wrong," he said. "She's a brunette."

Good lord, I couldn't believe that I was about to change the integrity of my life's work with this man. "Well, you heard right," I said. "The lodge would be happy to accommodate a Nike store and brand partnership."

"Did you buy a yacht?" he asked like he was in on some secret.

"What?" I asked with a little irritation.

"Is that why you're taking me up on my offer? You bought a boat?"

"Hardly," I replied. "What use do I have for a yacht in Montana?"

“Fair point,” he replied. “So, I’ll have my people send you those informational packets and some paperwork to sign—and I will personally write you the big, fat, juicy check you’re so clearly in this for.”

And this was why no one wanted to do a deal with Mark.

“Thanks, man,” I said in my best impression of a charismatic businessman. “I really appreciate your patience while I thought this over.”

“No problem,” he said, laughing. “No problem.”

I could hear a girlish shriek in the background, then a soft moaning sound. He was so fucking predictable.

“Goodbye, Mark,” I said.

“Later,” he replied.

I hung up and shook my head. He was truly incorrigible. I can’t even imagine how it would look if I had Haley down here all the time, dressed like a porn star working as my “receptionist.”

Actually...

I headed out of the office and locked it. It had been a while since I stopped in at home during lunchtime and the kids were off school today. Could be a nice surprise all around if I made lunch.

I walked in the foyer and immediately noticed it was rather quiet. My kids were practically circus animals.

“Hello?” I asked. “Is anyone home?”

There was no response and when I walked into the kitchen, I saw that no lunch had been prepared either.

“Hello?” I asked again.

“Hey,” said Haley. “You’re home early.”

She looked gorgeous in a blue top and tight black jeans. Clearly, she was headed out somewhere.

“Where are you off to? And where are the kids?”

“I’m meeting Anna for lunch,” she said, putting in a pair of earrings. “And the kids’ grandma came to get them.”

“I see,” I said furrowing my brow and crossing my arms as I leaned against the doorway. “Well, I came home to make everyone lunch but clearly people have plans.”

Haley froze, seemingly unsure of how to respond.

“It’s fine,” I said, waving at her nonchalantly. “I’m fine. Go have fun.”

“You sure?” Haley said, walking over to me. “I could cancel.”

“No, you won’t,” I said, taking her beautiful face into my hands and kissing her forehead. “In fact, let me pay for lunch. Please?” I got out my wallet and handed her my black Amex.

She smiled and shook her head. “You know my boss pays me really well, right? I can afford to buy lunch on my own.”

“No, I hadn’t heard,” I said playfully.

“Well, if you’re gonna insist,” Haley said with a suddenly seductive tone. “At least let me give you something in return.



You know, a midday de-stressor.”

At first, I had no idea what she meant and began to turn to offer her my back. But she grabbed me by the shoulders and stopped me from turning, before kneeling down on the floor and reaching for my belt.

“Oh?” I said in surprise. “Yeah? Well, I’m not gonna say no.”

Haley gave me a sexy grin and toyed with my belt. Then she pulled down my zipper and tugged my slacks off my hips.

I gasped as her long fingers grazed my cock through my underwear and I looked down to see her staring at it like it was a problem she needed to solve.

“I can never get over how thick this thing is,” she groaned. “You’re delectable.”

I reached down and played with her hair, petting it as she pulled me loose. “I’m glad you’re happy.” I said. “You are the only one riding this train so it’s nice to know the route is pleasant.”

Haley laughed. “You certainly have a way with analogies, don’t you?”

“Is it doing something for you?” I asked playfully.

“Is this doing it for you?” she replied.

Then she took all eight inches of me into her throat and I needed to grab the kitchen island for stability.

“Holy mother of...”

Haley had the wisdom of a scholar, the beauty of a sunset, the heart of an angel, and the mouth of a porn star. Better than a porn star, to be honest.

Using her lips and hands she worked me, her eyes beaming with the knowledge that she owned me so thoroughly at this moment that the director of the Olympic committee herself could show up and I'd say, "Five minutes, please!"

Before I could stop myself, my inner monologue had taken hold of me, and I rushed to my climax. One swift gasp and I spilled into her mouth, Haley gulping down every last drop.

"You..." I panted. "Fuck."

"Yes," she said, wiping her mouth and standing. "I do. I think you have a first-hand account."

I was obsessed. She was my perfect match.

"Come to a benefit with me," I blurted out.

"What?" she said. "Was that even English?"

"Oh, very funny," I said, pulling her into me. "I would like it very much if you would do me the honor of attending my Olympic benefit with me."

"As a sideshow attraction?" she asked, pulling a face.

"No," I said with a laugh. "As my VIP guest. My date, even."

Haley's jaw dropped open. "Just last week you were telling me that taking someone to a benefit was more important than marriage—"

“Actually,” I replied, pressing my finger to her lips. “I think you’ll find that I said ‘being invited as someone’s date to a benefit is more socially important than being married.’”

“I’d love to go!” she squealed.

“Really?” I asked.

“Absolutely. I’ll wear the dress you bought me.”

“You will not,” I said, crossing my arms. “You will use that card and buy yourself a few things. That way when you wake up that day, you can decide what you feel like wearing.”

Haley threw her arms around me and I felt like a superhero. I loved feeling like that. Jane used to make me feel like that.

Every anniversary, I’d plan a trip for us and she would be blindfolded until we arrived. And every time she would act as if I’d performed magic getting us there.

When I took her to Paris and we emerged from the airport, she walked into the Parisian sunlight and a beautiful bunch of finches flew around her very delicately. She had commented how it made her feel like Cinderella, and everywhere we would go, we would spot the finches.

Not just in Paris though, everywhere we went we’d joke that we were part of a Disney movie and that the birds were telling us we were about to find magic.

The day she passed, a finch sat outside my window sill all day.

“Thank you so much, James,” Haley said. “You’re amazing.”

“You’re very welcome,” I said. “I’m honored that you would let me take you before some younger stud decides to ask you.”

Haley laughed. “I’ve had the younger guy, remember? I want you.”

The room was still for a minute, not even our breathing was audible. Then I leaned in and kissed her as deeply as I could, putting my whole arm around her waist feeling that nothing would ever be close enough.

Then Haley’s phone buzzed and she grabbed it. “Anna’s here,” she said. “Gotta dash now but I’ll catch you later. Okay?”

I nodded and gave her a small salute, happy as can be with the deep realization that I was definitely going to marry her someday if she would have me.

“Bye,” she said, waving as she slipped out the door.

“Bye,” I called back.

When she was gone and the girls’ voices disappeared down the hall, I decided to go to the drawing-room where Jane had once put a grand piano. We both learned how to play in college and I hadn’t touched it since she died.

In fact, when she died, it was one of her last requests.

“Play music, Jamie,” she’d said. “Never stop playing music for me, for us.”

I sat down on the bench and ran my fingers over the keys, breathing in the smell of the wood, realizing that Leann was almost old enough to take lessons. Hell, all of them were.

I closed my eyes and began to play softly, and like magic, I could feel Jane’s presence. It had been so long, and my heart had been so heavy. This felt like the first day of spring.

Once one song was complete, I got to the next, and then the next, and the one after that, until I heard the door open and three little voices chattering wildly echoed down the hall.

Hearing their little conversations made me smile, and I stood, closing the lid to the keys. I placed a hand on the instrument and sighed deeply then I turned to go and greet them in the living room.

But as I moved for the door, something caught my eye out the window. Something small and yellow was planted to the bit of roof that existed outside of the music room.

A finch.

We met eyes and for a moment, I felt something unexplainable wash over my very being. Something that felt like freedom, happiness, and contentment. All the pain of losing Jane melted away at the sight and the doors opened to appreciate the beautiful moments we shared.

And then the bird flew away.

And I felt sure that some magic lay ahead.

## Chapter Twenty-Five

Haley

I wasn't sure at first how to respond to James's proposition, but I couldn't help but continue to feel drawn to him. No matter what I did to distract myself, it didn't matter, because I had to see him every day.

Of course, there was the little matter of him telling me this was even more socially important than wearing a ring from him, but who was keeping track?

"What about this one?" Anna asked, holding up a gown in a green-to-black ombre with beautiful beaded details in the shape of vines.

We'd come to town to shop for a dress, since I didn't have any that were appropriate for an event like a benefit. The blue dress I'd worn at the last party I'd gone to was the only one I had that came close, and Anna told me there was no way it was enough. I needed a *gown*.

Thankfully, I had an afternoon off while James took some time with the kids, and Anna agreed to go with me into town to help pick out a dress since she'd been going to a lot of these things with Kevin lately.

"Add it to the stack," I said, holding out my arms, which were already laden with close to a dozen dresses to try on.

Anna looked around, then said, "I think that's about all we're gonna find. May as well go try them on."

"What's our next stop if we don't find one here?" I asked. Back in college when we'd had formals, we'd go to every single shop in the downtown area, even after we already found at least one dress we liked, just to make sure there wasn't something better.

"Next stop?" Anna asked with a laugh. "This is it, babe. Welcome to Montana. You're not in San Francisco anymore."

"Damn..." I said. "It really is like a different world here."

"No kidding," Anna said. "I thought at first that I would hate it here, and I worried about what that would mean for my relationship with Kevin. Like, was I going to have to break up with him because I couldn't deal with living here? Give him an ultimatum to come back to Cali with me?"

"What made you change your mind?" I asked.

"I kind of just got used to it before I had the guts to bring it up," she said before turning to the fitting room attendant. "We have..." She rifled through the stack of dresses in my arms. "Eleven."

The girl at the little counter grabbed a number five tag and a number six tag.

“Here you go!” she chirped, handing them to Anna. “The big stall at the end should be open and have enough room for you to both go in.”

“Thanks,” Anna said back just as cheerfully before leading the way to the very back row of the dressing rooms.

I tried on the first of the eleven dresses and immediately ruled it out. The neckline made the dress look more like a mother-of-the-bride dress than one a twenty-five-year-old would wear to a formal event.

“Oh, no,” Anna said with a laugh. “Hi, Grandma.”

“Shut up,” I said back, laughing along with her and throwing a sock at her. “Or I’ll make you put it on.”

She gasped in mock horror and put a hand to her chest. “You wouldn’t dare!”

“Oh, I would,” I said as I unzipped the matronly monstrosity.

The next dress was a maybe as far as I was concerned—the green and black ombre. It was silken with a semi-fitted bodice, thin straps, and a flowy skirt.

At least, it was a maybe until Anna spoke up.

“It looks like you stepped out of *Lord of the Rings*,” Anna said, and I looked at her in surprise. I’d thought the dress looked nice, but she must have realized I’d taken it as an insult



because she waved her hands. “No, no—in a good way. Like one of the elves or something.”

“Yeah,” I said, taking it off and tossing it with the first for Anna to hang up for me. “Not exactly the look I was going for. I need to be...” I was about to say “sexy” or “sultry,” but I felt like saying so would give away that there was more between me and James than just employer and employee stuff. “Modern.”

Anna lifted an eyebrow as if she didn’t believe me, which she was right not to. I still didn’t know what I wanted to happen with James, and I wished dearly that I could ask my best friend for advice, but I worried she’d judge me.

Then again, she was in a relationship with her dad’s best friend, so maybe she wouldn’t judge me after all.

“Hey, Anna?” I said, my back turned as I pulled another dress up over my chest, waiting for her to zip it up for me.

“Yes, Haley?” she said in a jokingly formal voice.

“What, um... What's it like dating a guy a lot older than you?” I asked.

There was a pause, and I turned around to see her giving me an appraising look.

“It’s amazing,” she said with a shrug and a small shake of her head, though her eyes were still searching mine. “A lot of the guys our age are still really self-centered and wild, but, to use Kevin as an example, he isn’t bogged down by the societal expectations younger guys tend to worry about. He doesn’t

feel the need to go out and get shitfaced, and he isn't sitting around wondering if he's too young to settle down. He's ready for an actual commitment." She paused. "Besides, the sex is amazing because he's been doing it for long enough that he's learned what to do and what not to do, and he isn't just focused on his own pleasure—he actually gets off on mine, which is so out of the ordinary, I can't even believe it."

"No kidding," I said before I could catch myself, then I snapped my mouth shut and turned my back to her again.

"What does that mean?" Anna said behind me, her voice dripping with suspicion.

"Nothing," I said, pretending to look at the dress in the mirror, I had already decided that the canary yellow disaster looked like a cheap prom dress, but I needed something to keep me from looking at Anna while I figured out how to spin what she'd likely already figured out.

"Hales..." she said slowly. "What did you do?"

I unzipped the dress and tossed it with the no pile, not meeting Anna's eyes.

"I, uh... I may have kissed James," I said.

"You kissed him?" she asked, sounding unconvinced.

"Yeah. One night before putting the kids to bed," I told her.

"And that's all?" she asked, her eyebrow going up again.

"Well... then he kissed me," I said, my fingers twisting in the fabric of the dress I'd just put on, which I needed her help

zipping, but she was too enthralled by the conversation.

“And *that’s* all?” she repeated.

“And then... we hooked up and we slept together and then later that week we made out again,” I said quickly, like ripping off a Band-Aid, trying to get the words out so that they would maybe hit Anna less hard. Like she wouldn’t pick up on the “hooked up” and “slept together” part if I followed it up that quickly with the part about making out, though I knew that was wishful thinking.

“You what?” she squealed. “Oh, my God, Hales. I want all the details. Now. Please, girl.” She actually got on her knees on the bench in the room and put her hands together to beg me.

“Okay, okay,” I said, relenting with an anxious grin, my heart hammering against my ribs at the prospect of admitting this to another person, even my best friend who would likely understand better than anyone. “Well, you remember that party you and Kevin came to?”

“Oh, my God,” she gasped. “You two fucked that night? You were still with Max!”

Her voice was much louder than I’m sure she intended, and it likely carried out of the stall and down the hall.

“Can you keep it down?” I hissed. “No, we didn’t fuck that night.”

“So that was when you kissed?” she asked.

“No! Will you let me finish?”

“Sorry, sorry,” she said quickly with an eager expression on her face. “I’m listening.”

“Okay,” I said, taking a deep breath. “Well, that night, Max was supposed to come with me, but he bailed that morning. Afterwards, I found out about the Switzerland thing, but either way, he wasn’t there. After the party, me and James were both pretty drunk, and there was this thick, potent chemistry between us.”

“Oh, my God,” Anna said wistfully, like we were in some kind of romcom.

“But obviously, I was with Max, so I didn’t do anything, but holy hell, did I want to.”

“I bet,” she said. “James is absolutely delicious.”

“You have no idea,” I said, finally starting to get into telling the story.

“Hales, I have goosebumps. You better get to the good parts.”

“Well, the next day was when Max broke up with me to go do his new job overseas, and I was devastated,” I told her. “But James found me crying and comforted me.”

“And that’s when he kissed you?”

“Will you let me tell the story?” I asked her, and she mimed zipping her lips shut, though the scandalous smile on her face remained. “No, that’s not when he kissed me. He was just really kind. I mean, it was really awkward after I’d walked in

on him masturbating after the party and saying my name, but —” Wait! You walked in on him doing what?” Anna cried out.

“If you don’t keep your voice down, I’m not going to tell you anymore.”

“Okay, okay,” she said. “But you totally didn’t mention that.”

“Sorry,” I said. “Those couple of days were so jumbled because of how upset I was that I kind of forget the order of things unless I’m really focusing on it. Yes, after the party I heard him saying my name, so I walked into his room and found him jacking off.”

“About you,” Anna said, confirming what I said.

“Yeah,” I said, “and if I hadn’t been sure at first, his reaction confirmed it when he told me he couldn’t stop thinking about how beautiful I looked.”

“Wow,” Anna said. “Direct.”

“No shit,” I laughed. Well, after he comforted me when he found me crying, later that night I asked him for a private conversation, and... I kissed him. To thank him.”

“Why were you crying?” she asked.

“I. uh... I fell down while skiing,” I explained. “And I had a bad flashback.”

“Oh, Haley...” Anna said, her grin disappearing for a moment.

“It’s fine,” I told her. “James was there and managed to get me into one of the ski lift towers and we started making out, and then... we touched ourselves to completion with me in his lap.”

Anna clapped a hand over her mouth to keep from crying out again, and when she moved her hand, she hissed, “You did *what?*”

“I know,” I said, bowing my head. “I’m totally *that* cliché nanny who sleeps with the dad of the kids she watches.”

“And you *did* sleep together?” she asked, confirming.

“Yeah,” I said. “About a week ago. And last night we had this super-hot, steamy, make out session, and I may have given him a blow job.”

“I cannot even,” Anna said, as quietly as I’m sure she was able to. “God, Haley... So, what do you think you’re going to do about it?”

“I... don’t know,” I said honestly. “I really like him, and I think he likes me. He’s said as much, and he told me going to this benefit was the social equivalent of being engaged or married. I just don’t know if this is what I want. I still want to go to the Olympics. I want to be a competitive skier.”

“Who says you can’t be if you’re in a relationship with him?”

I thought hard about her question. “No one, really.”

“Then why does it matter?” she asked. “If you can have your cake and eat it too, why not?”

She had a good point. But it felt like there felt like something more to consider,.

“I don’t know,” I said. “It just feels really big. Like, I thought Max was the one, and it didn’t come close to feeling this big.”

It was true. Despite the newness and the surprise of this particular potentially budding relationship, it felt like there was something I couldn’t ignore about it. Like I would be an idiot to walk away before I knew what it could be.

“Speaking of big...” Anna said with an exaggerated wink. “What are we talking?”

I tossed a dress I’d just taken off at her. “Do what I brought you for and hang up those clothes and *maybe* I’ll tell you.”

## *Chapter Twenty-Six*

James

I sent the kids to my dad's house for the night because I had a distinct feeling that Haley and I would want some alone time. They were all too happy to pack up and go see the man who handed out hundred-dollar bills like they were ones.

"Do not bring them back with a shit ton of stuff, Dad," I said to him. He simply smiled at me and shook his head. We both knew how this was going to go, but I liked to pretend he cared what I said.

Haley came out of her room the minute the kids were gone and ran up to me, jumping on my back.

"It's time to get ready," she said with the biggest smile I'd ever seen on her.

I spun in a circle, eliciting a loud shriek from her, and darted toward my bedroom.



Haley kicked open my bedroom door with her foot and I turned and released, dropping her onto my bed. I watched as she bounced in more places than one, and I realized she wasn't wearing a bra.

“Um, Haley? Where is your brassiere, Madam?”

Haley rolled around, giggling. “Why do I need one? I'm not wearing one with my dress.”

My eyes widened, and she giggled again. “I'm not wearing panties now, either...”

“I will definitely need to get a visual confirmation of that,” I said with a chuckle. I reached for her oversized sweatshirt and lifted the hem. Indeed, she was devoid of underwear. “What a bad girl...”

Haley pulled it back down and waved her finger at me. “Nuh uh. Not until the banquet is over.”

I gave her a devastated look that was somewhere between pouty lips and puppy dog eyes. “But I need to relax before my event,” I said in a voice that I hoped would convey that there was no pressure.

“Hmm...” she said, toying with the bottom of the sweatshirt once more. “I dunno...”

She gently tugged up the top high enough that I could see her beautiful patch of hair that had been neatly groomed and settled between her strong, gorgeous thighs.

“You can't expect me to see that and not want a taste,” I said, gesturing to her. I could already feel pressure in my groin

where my pants were getting tight.

Haley giggled and rolled over, exposing her ass to me instead. “None for you...” she teased.

“Oh no?” I replied. “None for me?” I climbed on top of her in my sweats and gave her ass a few good thrusts.

I realized pretty quickly that I’d played myself because I was instantly stone-hard. On the bright side though, I heard her moan and she pressed back into me.

“You sure your convictions are really that solid, beautiful?” I said with a soft growl in her ear. She whimpered and nodded, knowing she was destroying me. “Alright,” I said, climbing off of her and helping her to her feet. “Suit yourself.”

She bit her lip, gave me a grin, then pulled her sweatshirt over her head and walked—hips swaying—to the bathroom. “I’m getting a shower,” she declared.

“Then I’m coming with you,” I called after her, practically tripping over myself in an effort to strip down. I’d only seen her naked a handful of times but her curves could knock your eyes out.

The bathroom was steamy already as I dashed in, and I could see her in the shower, eyes closed, washing her incredible body..

I walked up to the glass, hard cock in hand, and watched.

She looked like a fucking shampoo commercial gone porno, and I couldn’t take my eyes off her gorgeous nipples.

I began to stroke myself quietly as she moved from skin to hair.

“You know it’s rude to stare,” she said matter-of-factly. “Even ruder to pleasure yourself on that side of the glass.”

I chuckled at her snarkiness. “You said you didn’t want any,” I pointed out to her, dropping my length and pulling open the heavy glass door.

“I did,” she said, eyes quickly going to my cock. “But then I remembered you had that.”

I looked down at my junk with her and tilted my head in approval. “You like what you see?” I asked.

Haley nodded and reached out a hand to take hold.

I, however, swerved her attempt, sticking out my tongue and saying, “None for you.”

Haley frowned, then leaned back against the glass and spread her lips for me, showing me the perfect pink of her pussy and tiny swollen clit.

I took a step forward and put my thumb on it, slowly, torturously slowly, I ran my thumb the length of her sensitive bud, teasing and toying for effect. Haley let out a pacified whimper, and I fought my instincts to lean in and call her a good girl.

“You like that, don’t you, baby?” I said, pressing into her with my body and placing several kisses along her neck. Haley whimpered and I was delighted. The tables were turning in my favor.

I knelt down before her and pushed the water out of my eyes as I pressed my lips and tongue against the wet place that didn't need my saliva to be dripping. God, she tasted divine.

“James...” she breathed, putting her hands on the back of my head and playing with my wet hair. “Oh, God.”

I didn't respond, at least not verbally, but rather ran a hand up her thigh and inserted one of my fingers deep inside her. My other hand went to her hips to steady her, as my touch made her writhe in pleasure.

Her voice rumbled with desperate need, and I wrapped the tip of my tongue thoroughly around her clit, drawing circles as she squirmed more and more.

“Oh God, James, *yes!*”

Haley pressed herself so thoroughly against my mouth that I stopped possessing the capacity to breathe. But if this was where I died, it was a a hell of a way to go.

I felt Haley begin to slide a little as she came and I stood to catch her when her orgasm slowed. She immediately reached up and took my dripping face into her hands.

“Dear God, you are good at that,” she said, her face positively beaming.

“It's not work if you love what you're doing, right?”

Haley giggled and leaned her dripping body against me. I leaned in and kissed her, my red hair hanging down over my face like a willow.

“Well, this certainly can’t be one way, can it?” she asked with a devious grin.

I put my hands up to indicate I was up for anything and she trailed her hand down me, grabbing me firmly in her fingers.

Her touch was intoxicating, as always, and I didn’t mean to but I thrust up into her palm.

“Calm now, big boy,” she said. “The fun is just starting.”

God, the way she said things drove me wild. Like she was in charge and she was just pretending to let me be. It made me want to do filthy things to her and claim each and every act.

Her stroke became more measured and faster, and I could feel her drawing my orgasm from me.

“Haley…” I breathed, quietly. “Hale—”

She withdrew her hand and turned away, squeezing some shampoo into it. She began to hum a jaunty melody and my mouth dropped open. What was going on?

“Everything okay?” I said, my voice slightly cracking with the discomfort of being edged to an orgasm then being left unfinished.

Haley looked over her shoulder at me. “Oh yes,” she said. “I just wanted to give you a taste of what’s coming after the benefit.”

I gaped at her, totally shocked that she would do this. “Baby?” I said in a half gasp, half chuckle. “Haley, you are gonna be in so much trouble for this.”

“Good,” she said, turning to me with soap running down that delectable body. “As long as you wait ’til we get back here to administer any consequences. I will happily take my punishments.”



This was precisely how I ended up at the dinner, shaking hands with local celebrities and doing some very deep breathing every time I caught sight of Haley’s lovely visage.

She spent a lot of time with Anna, but when she didn’t, she was busy charming the pants off all the old fogies who came to put it on their taxes too.

Everyone who met her adored her, and I had several of my friends come up to me to tell me she was delightful.

I couldn’t help but beam with pride every single time because Haley didn’t need me to shine, and I loved that. A man like me, someone with money and status, could never be attached to a woman who couldn’t carry their own. And for Christ’s sake, Haley was practically a damn Olympian. It was safe to say she was a force to be reckoned with on her own.

At about nine p.m., I walked to where Haley was standing and talking to the Olympic coordinator associated with the event.

“Nice to see you, Chuck,” I said, putting my hand out to shake his. “I’m going to need to borrow this gorgeous creature

for a moment.” I turned to Haley. “Would you do me the honor of sharing a dance with me?” I asked, giving a little bow.

Haley, who looked every bit the goddess in her crimson gown and white satin-gloved arms, smiled gracefully and nodded. “It was nice to meet you, Charles,” she said.

“Please,” he said. “It’s Chuck to friends.”

I whisked Haley away to the dance floor and began to sway with her to something slow.

“Well, I give up,” I said. “How in the world did you manage to charm Chuck Goodwin? He’s notoriously hard to please.”

Haley spun as I guided her, turning back into my arms and allowing me to press her against me once more. “I just have a way of hearing people. It’s one of the things Anna has always said she liked about me.”

“I can see why,” I said. “You’re a star tonight, Haley. I couldn’t be happier you came with me.”

Even in the dim lighting, I could tell Haley blushed. “I guess that means we’re married socially, huh?” she said.

I could hear the questioning tone behind her words and it made my heart race like a twelve-year-old at his first school dance.

“I suppose it does,” I said back. We danced together quietly for a few minutes, her head on my chest as we swayed, then I asked her, “Is that something you want? Marriage.”

I could feel Haley nod yes. “But only if I find someone worth having a marriage with.”

“Smart,” I said slowly. “Marriages aren’t easy. You need to find someone who will make the hard work worth it.”

We stopped and she stared into my eyes. I knew that she was thinking what I was thinking. That maybe we could be worth it for each other. I leaned in and kissed her, for the first time not caring what others might think.

“You wanna get out of here?” I asked. “I can get someone to shut this down when everyone leaves.”

Haley nodded vigorously and ran to go say goodbye to Anna and Kevin.

I, on the other hand, pulled in my party coordinator and gave her instructions for the rest of the night’s schedule.

“It will be one hundred percent taken care of, Mr. Warner,” she said.

“Thanks, Sandy,” I said. “You’re a lifesaver.”

I met Haley at the exit of the ballroom and we walked to where my car and driver waited. I helped her in before sliding in behind her.

While we rode, Haley put her head on my shoulder. “You make me feel like Cinderella,” she said.

Jane’s words came back to me. First the finch and now this?

“Well, you certainly deserve it,” I said, kissing the top of her head and her lips. “Now what was it exactly that I was waiting



until the party was over to do?” I grinned at her mischievously.

She returned my smile and put her hand softly on my lap, rubbing my cock with just one clandestine finger. “Believe me, James. The minute we’re in that suite, you will know exactly what I meant.”

## *Chapter Twenty-Seven*

Haley

“Come on, Benny!” I called to him. “You’ve got this!”

He was up at the top of the slope, ready for his first run since his fall a week ago. He was staring down at me, and I could almost see him shaking with fear even this far away. He’d been anxious about it all morning, and on the walk here, he didn’t even try to race his sisters.

But he was still determined to face his fears, and I was so proud of him. He’d told me every day for the last week about how he was going to do it, how he was going to ski down the hill without falling so he’d know he could do it and stop being afraid.

I yawned as I waited for Ben to be ready. I’d been unusually tired for the last week, but that could easily be attributed to me staying up late so that James and I could have some alone time, which, more often than not, ended with him inside of me.

I had never been with someone whom I had such incredible chemistry with. Even with Max, who I'd really cared about, I hadn't had this level of intimacy so quickly. The sex had been good, but something about my connection with James was otherworldly, and it was even more so when we slept together.

And as for sleeping together, I'd fallen asleep in his bed every night for the last week and had to make sure I was up and back in my room before the kids—specifically Leann, since she was already looking at us pretty keenly—woke up and caught us. We still hadn't put a definition on the relationship, but it was clear that this was more than something casual, and I didn't know what that might mean for my future.

I yawned again as Ben stepped aside to let Katie go first to give himself more time. After Ben's fall last week, she was a little gun-shy herself, but she was quick to overcome whatever fear she may have been feeling. She sped down the hill, completing the run without falling for the first time.

"All right!" I said, bending down to give her a high-five.  
"That was great!"

"I did it!" she squealed, then threw her arms around me.

"Yeah, you did," I replied, hugging her back.

"That was great!" a voice said from behind me, and I turned to see Anna walking up to us, a pair of skis slung over her shoulder.

"What are you doing here?" I asked, giving her a hug.

“Kevin is at some meeting or event or something with James. I wasn’t paying that much attention,” she said. “But he mentioned that you were giving the kids ski lessons, so I figured I’d take advantage of the opportunity since my best friend *is* an Olympic-qualified skier.”

“You are more than welcome to join in,” I said, pointing up the hill. “Ben’s about to come down. Aren’t you, buddy?”

He gave me a shaky thumbs up, and I clapped for him, with Anna, Katie, and Leann, who’d gone after Katie, at my side, clapping too.

“I’m ready,” he said.

Then he started off down the slope. He stayed upright, unlike how he’d done last week when he’d been so confident and had bent down for more speed. But he was steady, and he slid in a straight line, his skis never wavering.

When he reached the bottom, he turned to the side to stop like I’d taught him, and his sisters both erupted into cheers and applause.

I, on the other hand, opened my mouth to congratulate him, then immediately turned to the side, and vomited into the snow.

The celebration stopped instantly as Anna and the kids backed away from me, giving me space until I was done. I coughed a few times and spit to clear my mouth of the foul taste, then stood up and looked at Anna.

“Why don’t we all head back inside?” she said. “Haley can get cleaned up and we can all play a game while she does that.”

I nodded, grateful for her help, and we all trudged back inside, the lesson cut very short for the day.

Anna pulled out *Sorry!* and sat down at the dining room table with the kids while I went to my room, peeling off layers as I went. I barely made it to my bathroom before I felt sick again, and I bent over to throw up into my toilet. Once I was done, I sank back onto the floor, panting. What the hell did I eat? Or had I gotten a stomach bug?

After a few minutes where I waited for my stomach to stop churning, I crawled the couple of steps over to the cabinet beneath my sink, where I kept most of my toiletries. I reached for some mouthwash, and when I did, I noticed something.

Sitting at the back of my cabinet was a box of tampons I’d bought the week before in anticipation of my period, which I now realized should have started no less than five days ago.

And I hadn’t had even a hint of it starting.

No. No, no, no, no, no.

I was on birth control, so this had to be a fluke. I couldn’t possibly be pregnant, could I? Surely, this was just a random instance of a late cycle, and had absolutely nothing to do with the antibiotics I’d been on for two weeks for the sinus infection I had right before I started this job, which the doctor

had warned me might affect the effectiveness of the pill. But I'd made Max wear condoms up until we broke up.

Which meant...

I pulled myself to my knees and began to heave again, trying to process what I knew but wasn't ready to acknowledge.

I was having my boss's baby.

My boss. James. Who I had really been enjoying getting to know better. But now, this would be a wrench in any plans we might have had.

Plans.

Fuck.

My plans to go to the Olympics. I couldn't compete in downhill skiing while I was pregnant, or even if I was raising a newborn.

I scrambled to my feet. I needed to talk to Anna. Now.

I rushed from my bathroom and poked my head out into the hall.

"Anna?" I called.

"Yeah, Hales?" she said back.

I heard a bit of laughter and Katie saying, "Sorry!" and I waited a few seconds to answer her.

"Um... can I see you for a moment? I need some help with... stuff."

There was an odd silence, and I waited while Anna spoke to the kids, saying things I couldn't hear but also couldn't care about right now. It was only about a minute later before Anna's face came into the hall, and I rushed forward to grab her by the hand, dragging her into my room.

"Ow, Haley," she complained. "Careful. Why are you—" She really looked at me and her face looked worried. "What happened? You look freaked out as hell."

"I missed my period," I said very quickly so that it was almost unintelligible.

"You *what?*" Anna asked as though she hadn't understood, but the look on her face showed the same worry mine probably did. "How?"

"How the hell do you think?" I snapped. "Pretty sure we both took sex ed in high school, Anna."

"I just mean..." She looked lost for words. "I guess I mean... who? Max?"

I bit my bottom lip and shook my head. "No. It has to be James. I was using condoms with Max at the end, and I've never used one with James. I thought my birth control would have been effective again after I stopped the antibiotic, but I guess I was fucking wrong!" My words grew more and more hysterical as I went on, and by the time I was done, I was practically screaming.

"Shh!" Anna said, looking at the door. "You don't want them to hear you."

“Gonna be hard to hide it for long,” I said, choking back sobs. “God, what the hell am I even doing? This was just supposed to be a job to pay for therapy so I could get back into training and go to the Olympics. And now, what? I’m gonna be some cliché single mom with no future who got knocked up by an older guy?”

“First of all,” Anna said, “you don’t even know for sure if you are pregnant. So why don’t I run out and get you a test? I’ll bring back something fun for lunch for the kids to distract them. Second, do you really think James is the kind of man who would leave you high and dry if you *are* pregnant? You know him better than I do at this point, but I can say from what I’ve seen, he’d at least do his best to make sure you were taken care of, even if he didn’t want to take this all on.”

“Great,” I said. “The man gets to decide what he does or doesn’t want to take on, while I’m stuck no matter what he decides.”

“Unfortunately, that’s just how it goes sometimes,” Anna said, and I buried my head in my hands. “But don’t prewrite the script. Let’s get you a test and we can go from there.”

“Okay,” I said, trying to breathe as Anna hugged me.

“No matter what happens, it’s all going to be okay,” she said. “You always have me, even if everything else falls apart.”

“Thanks, Anna.”



She gave me a kiss on the head and walked out the door. I followed her, trying to keep a cheerful face on for the kids. I needed something more than a board game to distract me, so I turned on the Nintendo and pulled up Mario Party so the four of us could play together. At least it took my mind off the test for about an hour while I waited for Anna to get back.

When she walked in with arms full of Happy Meals, I breathed a sigh of relief. I took the “special” bag from her and rushed back to my room, telling the kids I needed to use the bathroom but would be right back.

I sat on my toilet staring at the test while I waited, but it didn't take long. That second pink line showed up almost immediately. I took a second test, since the box had two, just to confirm, and it was also positive.

As if in slow motion, my mind wandered to an image I'd had for as long as I could remember—me, competing at the Olympics. But the image began to crackle, then embers began to burn in the corners before, eventually, the whole thing went up in smoke. My dreams were nothing but ash.

I cried for a few more minutes, since I had plenty of time before the tests should have been done. When I walked back out to the other room, I shook my head at Anna to say it was negative, and she breathed a sigh of relief. I hated lying to her, but I needed to figure out what I was doing, and I knew she would do everything in her power to help me, but I didn't need that just yet.

What I needed was to talk to James, but I had no idea how. As I watched the kids and Anna scarf down their lunches, I resolved to wait to tell James. After all, there could be any number of reasons not to make an issue, but ultimately, I knew I was just scared.

And, even more than losing the Olympics, the thing I was most afraid of was losing him.

## *Chapter Twenty-Eight*

James

**T**he music in the Italian place was way too loud but that didn't stop us from having fun and eating way too much. Having Haley around night and day was like living my twenties all over again in only the best ways, and it was clear when she spent time with the kids that they adored her.

Even Leann, who never liked anyone, could be seen holding onto Haley's arm when she needed something, and I'd even caught them having little talks before bedtime in Leann's room.

I tried not to go to the place of wondering when it was all going to go wrong, but it was so perfect that I knew we were headed for a test of some kind.

All major long-term relationships had them, and I was certain ours would be no exception.

“Are you sure you don't want any wine?” I asked her, laughing about the story she'd just told me about her and Anna's third roommate in college. Apparently, she'd once brought home two guys and not realized it until all three of them ran into each other sober the next day.

“Yes,” Haley said. “Thank you, though. I'm sure it's wonderful.”

“It ought to be.” I laughed. “This wine is six hundred dollars a bottle.”

“What?” Haley asked, gasping and covering her mouth as a little of her water spilled out.

“God, that reminds me of some of the shit that Henry and Kevin and I did when we were twenty-somethings,” I said, choosing to ignore her surprise. “Has Anna ever told you how her father Henry got his limp?” I noticed she was staring at my glass of wine like it was going to bite her.

“No,” Haley said, taking it from me into her hand and turning it around to look at it. “I didn't notice he had a limp.”

“Oh yeah,” I said, taking it back and pouring myself another glass. “He got that when the snow was unfathomably high one year and we all decided to get drunk and jump off the highest balcony at what is now known as Brother Bear's. Henry went first.”

Haley laughed. “That does sound like a Henry move to be honest. He could be the poster child of, ‘What happens when

party boys get old and have kids that their friends decide to sleep with.”

I couldn't help but let out a self-indulgent laugh. She had him pegged.

“That's Henry, all right,” I said. “He was always the one who pulled the most and had the least interest in anyone besides the woman who would be his wife. Meanwhile, four-eyes Kevin and stick-thin James longed for the people who couldn't see us past that swoopy hair and perfect smile.”

“Stick-thin James?” Haley asked, laughing a little.

“Yep,” I said, nodding and reflecting on my former self. I thought I was doomed to be the epitome of snappable for the rest of my life until I started training to go to the Olympics. I filled out nicely then and married the girl who liked me before the fame and money.”

Haley went quiet, and I realized we had never directly talked about Jane.

“I'm sorry, Haley,” I said. “I—”

“Why?” she asked. “For talking about someone you love? Never apologize for that, James. I just don't always know how to support you when you or the kids bring her up.”

I could feel my lip tremble as I attempted to not burst into tears at her kindness. If I'd had a ring on me now...

“Thanks,” I said instead. “That means a lot that you would listen. For me, I just want to share memories. For the kids too, probably.”

Haley nodded and put her hand on top of mine. “Are you ready to head out?”

I nodded and hailed the waiter for our check.

The whole way back to the resort, I couldn't stop thinking about her effortless heart. She was the kind of person who could and would see the good in everyone, and that couldn't have been clearer than when she met me.

Honestly, she should have told me to fuck off and find someone else, but she didn't. And her willingness to give a grumpy, damaged man a second chance at a first impression had now changed both our lives.

When we entered the penthouse, the energy had shifted in the nicest of ways. The space felt like ours instead of mine. Shared instead of separate.

Haley went straight for the master bedroom and began to strip out of her cocktail dress in what I could only assume was in favor of comfier clothes.

Whatever I'd once felt about Haley in formalwear had faded to give way to how I felt about her in no makeup and sweats. Preferably my sweats if I had my way.

I followed behind her, undoing my cuffs and loosening my tie, admiring this marvel of a woman as I did.

“God, I'm stuffed,” she said. “I love Italian, but it does not love me. Maybe I should sleep in my own room tonight.” She made a noise with her mouth that indicated she was referring to gas and I laughed.

“Well, if you do, I’ll be right alongside you. I’m lactose intolerant and choose not to heed it.”

Haley’s eyes grew wide. “You can just ignore it?”

“No,” I said with a grin. “No, you can’t. I pay for it every minute of my life.”

Haley burst into laughter and I smiled as I saw her grab my sweatshirt and carry it with her to the bathroom. “I’m gonna grab a quick shower. Okay?”

I nodded and sighed as my heart fluttered at her loveliness. “You better be quick or I’ll come in there after you,” I called.

“Don’t threaten me with a good time,” she shouted back.

After changing into my pajamas, I turned down the bed and flipped on the TV so we could watch an episode of the Netflix food competition we’d been watching. Haley and I had taken to judging it as if either of us were gourmet chefs.

As I waited, I opened my phone and caught sight of the webpage I’d been on last, *Build your custom engagement ring*. It was fast, too fast, but what I felt usually didn’t come around once in a lifetime, let alone twice. I must have been the luckiest son of a bitch in all of history.

Haley emerged from the bathroom, which burst open with steam like a sauna, wearing a towel on her head and rubbing lotion onto her face.

“I thought you said last night was the last time you were gonna use my face products,” I said, laughing. Haley had

taken to using all the skincare products I had on my towel rack, and I was happy to share.

“Well, I lied, obviously,” she said. “The cold air really does a number on your skin when you’re out there so long.”

“Yes.” I chuckled. “I’m familiar. Why do you think all those expensive creams are there to begin with?”

“Makes sense,” Haley said with a smile as she approached and kissed me.

“I’m gonna run to the bathroom really quick,” I said. “And then we can see whether Sharon or Chris are gonna be the next best hot dog chef.”

“I can hardly wait,” she said, laughing.

God, her laugh was beautiful. It had a musical quality to it which accented her naturally smoky, sexy voice so well. It was quickly becoming one of my favorite sounds in the world, right alongside the laughter of my children.

I hadn’t been lying when I said I was lactose intolerant, I could already feel my stomach cramping. I grabbed for the bathroom read I’d been enjoying and took it to Haley’s bathroom since she was still in mine. As I turned to open the lid of the toilet, that’s when I spotted it.

Like a herald of doom, there sat a little plastic white stick with a pink cap on it. Two pink lines stared me in the face.

Two pink lines.

What the fuck!



I snatched the heartbreaking thing and rushed for the bedroom, ripping open the door and waving it at Haley, all of my effort being used to hold back sadness I didn't want her to know I was feeling.

“What the hell is this?” I demanded.

Haley lost all the color in her face and her mouth dropped open. “I...”

Our eyes met and we both understood who had left that there, as if there was any confusion to begin with.

“What, I wasn't enough for you?” I choked out.

“James,” she said slowly, terror building in her eyes. “I haven't even looked at anyone but you since the night after the party. You're the only person I've been—”

“Am I?” I said, my pain turning into anger. “If you remember correctly, I'm not the only person you were sleeping with at that time. Did you use protection when you were with Kevin's nephew?”

“Are you being serious?” Haley said, tears appearing in her eyes. “I'm on birth control, James. I think it was the antibiotics —”

“What a load of shit,” I said, throwing the damned thing across the room. “I hope you have a good fucking cellular provider, cause you're gonna need it to get ahold of your baby daddy.”

Haley went quiet, staring at me, tears rolling down her cheeks.

I fucked up.

That was too far, I'd fucked up.

There was no situation in the world that asked for that kind of treatment and now I had forever made myself not good enough for her. What if it was mine? I was panicking to such an extent that I had said things I didn't really mean and now it was all ruined.

Haley didn't say another word, just pulled off my sweatshirt and angrily threw it at me.

"Fuck you," she said. "What the fuck was all that good guy tortured soul shit? A fucking act? No, fuck you. I'm out of here."

"Haley," I said, reaching for her. "Please..."

"Please what?" she screamed. "Please don't be pregnant with a baby that is likely mine. Or please don't leave because I was a jackass? Or maybe you mean please close the door on your way out."

"No, I—"

"No," she said firmly, holding up her hand to me. "Not another fucking word. Goodbye, James."

With that, she stormed out of the room and slammed the door behind her.

I felt my heart shatter and I grabbed the nearest breakable thing, throwing it against the door after her.

I couldn't stay in this room a second longer. It had gone from heaven to my personal hell in seconds. I grabbed a pair of my jeans and the sweatshirt that still smelled like Haley and after dressing, fled the room like it was on fire.

I hadn't felt this much pain since I'd lost Jane. Realizing it was one moment in time when I could have done so much better and instead, I did my absolute worst made it even harder to accept. Even if somehow miraculously Haley forgave me, which I didn't deserve at all, I would never be able to redo the moment I found out we were possibly having a baby together.

I told my driver exactly where to take me and I climbed into the back, cracking open the mini fridge almost instantly. I was going to need something stronger than wine in my system to deal with this.

I remembered the moment Jane told me we were having a baby, three months into her pregnancy no less. I broke down on the sofa, weeping like I never had before, and instantly became a dad. My own father had been so middle ground in his parenting that I'd always dreamed of being that dad who was as present as possible. I liked to think I'd done my best with Leann, Ben, and Katie, but was it really true, or was it just what I was telling myself to get by?

By the time I arrived at Brother Bear's, Kevin was waiting for me outside. It was a good thing, too, because I was shitfaced.

"I fucked it all up, Kev," I whimpered. "I did something unthinkable and now she's leaving me."

“Why don’t we get you inside?” Kevin said softly.

He didn’t ask me another question that night, simply put me up in a suite and made me some coffee.

And I fell asleep crying, knowing I’d probably made Haley fall asleep like that, too.

## Chapter Twenty-Nine

Haley

A day later, I woke up and immediately ran to the bathroom to vomit. If this was going to be indicative of every day, that I'd just have morning sickness all the time, I wanted no part of it. Not that I had much of a choice, unlike James, who seemed to think this was a one-person issue. I hadn't even seen or heard him in the penthouse since our fight.

*“What a load of shit.”*

I threw up again, this time because of the memory of him saying things to me I couldn't believe came out of the mouth of the same man who'd said such beautiful and romantic things to me over the last few weeks. It was nearly crippling.

When I finally pulled myself together enough to get out of my room and start getting the kids ready, I noticed that James's things were gone from near the front door. He almost never left before I got up, and since we'd started sleeping together, he never did. Even before, he'd at least always tell

me when he was going to be gone, and the one day he'd done it since then, I'd at least woken up to a good morning text.

But not today. This morning, I was greeted only by a folder on the breakfast bar, where the kids' assignments for after school were sorted out and listed for me. I felt tears welling in my eyes as I realized that James wouldn't even show his face to me now.

I was on my own.

Leann woke up first as I was still trying to stifle my tears, and she said, "Haley? What's wrong?"

"Nothing," I lied, wiping my tears. "Just some allergies."

"Oh," she said. "Daddy was having allergies last night."

"Really?" I asked, trying to pry without seeming too interested. She was a sharp kid and would probably pick up on my intentions in a second if I wasn't careful.

"Yeah," she said. "I heard him sniffing and I went to check on him. He's okay, though. Just has a runny nose."

"Is that so?" I said dryly. I hated to admit it, but it gave me a twisted rush of satisfaction to think that he was distraught as well. But then my heart sank again as I realized that, if he was that upset, it was probably because he really didn't want anything to do with me or the baby after all.

The other two kids got up pretty soon after that, and I threw together a fast breakfast of bacon, egg, and cheese sandwiches. Ben took his with ketchup, and Katie liked hers without the bacon since she said it was too "sour" for her.

“Sour?” I said, checking the package to make sure it was still within the expiration date.

“Yeah,” she said, handing her bacon to Ben, who scarfed it down. “Like popcorn or chips. It’s sour.”

“Oh!” I said, realizing what she meant. “You mean it’s salty. Is that right?”

“I don’t know,” she said, looking genuinely confused.

“Well, sour would be like a lemon, or like a sour candy.”

“I thought sour and salty were the same,” she said. “Sour candy has salt on it.”

“Actually,” Leann said before I could respond. “It’s a kind of sugar that’s really sour. Salt doesn’t really go on candy.”

“Except chocolate and caramel,” I said, and all three kids looked at me in surprise. “You’ve never had salted caramel or chocolate? Well, I’ll get some at the store today for us to try.”

I got a little choked up at the notion, considering I was already formulating something in my mind that would make the candy sampling something really special to me.

There was no way I could keep working here, *living* here, if James was really leaving me to deal with this on my own. If he wasn’t the person I thought he was, I couldn’t look at him day in and day out and just be okay with him abandoning me when I actually needed him.

I was going to have to quit my job, and without even the Olympics to look forward to, my future was looking pretty

bleak. I still hadn't told Anna I was pregnant, and I was worried about how mad she'd be at me for lying, but all things considered, that was the least of my worries.

I took the kids to school, then went to Brother Bears to find Anna. Kevin answered the door in a robe, and I was about to leave when Anna called to me from around him.

"Haley?" she said, coming to his side, tying up her robe. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing," I lied. Again. "Just... wanted to stop in."

Kevin gave me a look like he didn't believe me, but Anna didn't even hesitate before saying, "Get your ass in here and tell me what's wrong."

I hesitated, debating running and running and not stopping until I hit Fisherman's Wharf, but if I knew my best friend, she'd be right on my heels, chasing me down until I told her the truth.

"I... I lied," I said, meeting her gaze so she'd know exactly what I'd been untruthful about, and her eyes went as wide as dinner plates.

"Shit," she said.

"What?" Kevin said, looking back and forth between us. "What's shit?"

"Come inside," Anna said, grabbing my hand and pulling me past Kevin and into their living room. She sat me on the couch and knelt down in front of me. "What do you need?"



“I don’t know,” I said, my voice cracking.

“Okay,” she said, reaching up to put a hand on my cheek. “That’s okay. Do you want some tea? Coffee? Cocoa?”

“I don’t know,” I repeated. Even the smallest decisions felt monumental now, and I had such bad anxiety over choosing the wrong thing that the idea of choosing the wrong damn hot beverage left me crippled.

“It’s okay,” Anna said. “Let’s start with some water. Kevin, can you...?”

He nodded, realizing that Anna and I needed a moment, and left the room to go to the kitchen and get some water.

“You’re pregnant,” she said the second we were alone.

“Yes,” I said, tears spilling over and streaming down my cheeks. “And I told James and now he’s avoiding me, and I can’t do this alone, and now I won’t be able to compete in the Olympics, and I need to quit my job because I can’t face him, and... and...” I began to sob in earnest, and Anna moved to sit beside me on the couch so she could put an arm around me.

“You’re gonna be okay,” she said. “If nothing else, you have me. And Kevin. We’ll make sure you’re taken care of.” Kevin walked in at that exact moment, and Anna looked at him and said, “Won’t we?”

He looked like a deer caught in headlights as he looked between us, a glass of water in his hand. “Uh...” He had no idea what we were talking about, but he seemed to understand

that the correct answer was, “Yes,” which was exactly how he responded.

“See?” Anna said, hugging me tightly. “You’re not alone, no matter what. And if James is going to be a fuckhead about this after he was just as present there when you got pregnant, then you don’t want him in your life anyway.”

“Pregnant?” Kevin questioned, almost dropping the glass of water. “Holy shit.”

“Yes,” Anna said, glaring at him. “Pregnant. And your friend has decided to ghost her while he decides if he wants anything to do with it. So maybe you could have a word with him.”

“I certainly will—” Kevin said, but I interrupted him from saying more.

“No,” I said.

“No?” Anna asked, looking back at me.

“No. I don’t want anyone swaying his decision. If he feels forced into anything, I don’t want that, anyway. I don’t know if I’m going to raise this baby or put it up for adoption, but I don’t want anyone in this baby’s life who doesn’t want to be there either way.”

Anna stared at me for a long, hard minute. “Okay,” she said after giving herself a minute to think about it, though I saw the righteous indignation cross her face more than once. “Okay. We won’t say a thing. Will we?”

Kevin also looked like he didn't want to agree, but I gave him a pleading look, and, combined with my tears, he seemed to be uncomfortable enough to do what we asked.

“So, what now?” Anna asked.

“Now...” I thought for a moment. “Now, I quit my job. I can't have a baby with my boss and still work for him every day. Even if he decides he wants to be involved, I can't stay his employee. And if he doesn't want to be involved, I can't look at him every day and know what he's putting me through. I can't answer questions from the kids about who the daddy of my baby is if the daddy won't step up. Even if he does, I have no idea how I'm going to explain it to them.”

I stayed for a few more hours until I had to leave to pick the kids up from school, since I'd promised to bring them salted caramel and chocolate to try. After the store, I went to their school and piled them into the car to drive home.

At our little tasting, it was decided that Leann enjoyed salted caramel with milk chocolate, but did not enjoy sea salt with dark chocolate, while Katie preferred the opposite. Ben liked it all and ate as much as the girls were willing to let him have.

We watched a movie, and Katie curled up in my arms, falling asleep halfway through, and my heart nearly shattered at how much I was going to miss this. But it was for the best. Not just for me and my baby, but for them. They needed more stability in a nanny than I could provide with my current situation, and that meant I had to go.

I put them to bed and tucked them in, wishing I could have just one more day with them, one more ski lesson, one more meal, but knowing that drawing it out would only make things harder all around.

Once they were asleep, I went to my room and took out my laptop. I opened up an email thread and typed out:

*Dear James,*

*I am writing to inform you that, effective immediately, I am resigning from my post as your nanny. On a professional level, I do not feel that I am currently equipped to handle the needs of the children while figuring out my options regarding the issue of my pregnancy. I wish you and your children the best.*

I paused, unsure if I wanted to take it further, but decided not to. It seemed like I'd covered everything that was necessary without adding too much emotion or personal motivation to the letter. I read it over, then again, and again, and finally, with a teardrop falling from my eye, I pressed send, then stood, not wanting to look at my screen for one more moment.

I rushed around my room, packing up as much as I could, leaving behind only the things James had bought me—specifically the dresses, which held too many memories for me to want to take them with me. Once my case was packed, I sat on the edge of my bed and waited for the sound of James coming home. He was later than usual, and a small part of me hoped he would stop at my door to say... something. Anything.

But he walked past, straight to his room, and shut the door. I could practically see him in there, loosening his tie and kicking off his shoes. I could imagine him pulling off his belt and sitting at the edge of his bed, pulling off his sweater, taking off his pants...

I forced my mind away. That was over, and it had been his decision. His choice was to disappear when things got scary. And people like that don't get to live in my head rent-free.

I looked down at my computer just in time to see the read receipt from my email to James go off, and right on cue, I closed it up, stuck it in my bag, grabbed my suitcase, and left.

## *Chapter Thirty*

James

**W**hen I finally had the emotional strength to be a person again, I called my dad to tell him I'd be by to pick up the kids.

He had been really good about all this, not asking too many questions and just telling me to take my time. It was so unlike the man who had raised me that I half wondered if I was dreaming.

Seeing my kids again after a few days was such a relief. They were like tiny rays of sunshine that broke through the ironclad clouds filling my sky.

"Hey, guys!" I said with a brighter tone than I felt.

"Daddy!" Katie said happily. "You came back for us."

"Of course I did," I said with confusion. "Did you think I left you to live with Grandpa forever?"

“Ben did,” Leann said, climbing in and buckling her seatbelt. “He said you and Haley went to go make a new family.”

“I did not,” Ben said angrily. “That was you, Leann.”

Of course it was. My brilliant little girl and her perceptive nature. “I would never, ever leave you,” I said, not addressing the mention of Haley or any new family at all. “You are my babies and I will love you always.”

“I’m not a baby,” Ben said. “I’m seven now.”

His earnest face made me laugh for the first time in days as I looked up at him in the rearview mirror. “True,” I said, playing into his point. “I guess you’re old enough to go out and get a job and everything.”

“No, I’m not, Daddy. I’m still just a kid.”

“Oh...” I said with mock realization. “Well, then as a kid I think we should take you for ice cream.”

“Ice cream!” all three kids shouted in unison.

“Inside voices please,” I said with a chuckle. God, they were so refreshing, even if they were a little noisy.

“Ice cream,” whispered Ben.

We drove across town to this little family-owned ice cream shop and each kid got a scoop of their favorite flavor. For Leann it was chocolate. For Ben, Bubblegum. For Katie, it was pistachio, which would never fail to boggle my mind. She was a weird little girl and it was wonderful.

We sat outside chatting away about their school life and what their friends were doing for their birthdays. Leann told me about the kid whose mom had cancer and how much it had hurt her feelings.

“Lee,” I said, putting a hand on her shoulder. “We should be happy for other people, not angry at them. Wouldn’t you be happy if it had gone differently for your mom?”

“I’ll never know, will I?” she asked with a scowl.

I couldn’t exactly refute that, so instead, I placed a kiss on top of her red hair.

“Was Momma nice?” Katie said. The poor girl had been so little.

“The nicest,” I said. “Your mom was so pretty and kind. And she had a really good singing voice.”

“I wish I had met her,” Katie said sadly.

“You did,” I said to her, patting her on the head. “And she will always be with you in your heart, you know.”

This was the first time I was having a conversation like this with the kids and it was a lot harder than I expected. How could I ever explain to Katie that she wouldn’t know the mom who gave her life but that her mom loved her? How could I prove to Leann that Jane would have wanted her to be pleased for the little boy instead of jealous?

“I think Mom is a fart,” Ben said.

“Excuse me?” I said, laughing.



“Yeah,” he replied, nodding. “Mom became a ghost and ghosts are air. Farts are air too so I think Mom must be a fart ’cause you always say she made people laugh and farts make me laugh.”

I laughed so hard I started to cry, and once I started crying, I couldn’t stop.

I put my head in my hands to try and shield the kids from the reality that dads cried, too, but my perceptive little Lee put her arms around my neck and kissed my cheek.

“It’s okay, Daddy. We will get through this.”

Sometimes people talk about being old souls, and I wasn’t sure if that is true, but if it was, Leann would be one of them. She was brilliant with reading people and she always seemed to know exactly what to say whether you wanted to hear it or not.

I felt two more little sets of arms hug me and I reached out my arms to pull all my kids into a tight hug. “Thanks, guys,” I said, kissing each one of them on the hair. “You’re the best.”

“What are farts for?” Ben asked, shrugging.

When we finally left and went home, I sent the kids to the game room to relax and said I’d go make popcorn for a movie.

When I went to the kitchen, I pulled my phone from my pocket and dialed Haley’s number. I knew the odds of her answering weren’t in my favor, but I couldn’t help trying.

Indeed, it went to voicemail.

I set my phone down on the counter and sighed, rubbing my temples. It was absolute hell not knowing where she was or what she was doing with the baby that was likely mine. I knew I didn't really have a say but I loved Haley, and I...

I loved Haley.

I realized I hadn't actually said it like that to myself before and I immediately knew what I needed to do. I had to find her, tell her how I felt, and beg her for a chance at redemption someday. She was worth every bit of humble pie I would have to eat to make this right if only she would give me the chance.

I rushed to the living room and beckoned my tiny adult to speak to me in the hallway. Leann trudged over; eyebrows raised in curiosity.

"Hey," I said quietly. "I know you know something is going on with me and Haley and I have to go talk to her right now."

"Is Grandma coming over?" she asked with an annoyed drawl.

"Actually," I began. "I was wondering if you wanted to be in charge. I was your age the first time I babysat my brother. How about I give you twenty dollars and as many snacks as you guys want and you make sure those two don't hurt themselves."

Leann looked at me in consideration before saying. "Grandpa gives me a hundred dollars every time I see him. Isn't the safety of your children worth at least that?"

Dear Jesus. What kind of politician was I raising?

“Fine,” I said. “A hundred dollars—”

“And the snacks?”

“And the snacks.”

“Okay,” she said. “I’ll do it. I have your phone number on my backpack in case of an emergency and I know how to call 911.”

“Good girl,” I said, pulling her into a hug and kissing her on the head. “I’ll be back as soon as possible. If the clock reads seven and I’m not back, call Grandma.”

“We will see,” she said in an ominous tone, walking back to her siblings.

Despite the fact that I was beginning to worry if I’d made a bad deal, I rushed for the door and grabbed my coat, bolting for the car.

When I arrived at Brother Bear’s, I paid the valet to park my car and ran into the lobby, making a beeline for Kevin’s office. If anyone would know where Haley was, it would likely be Anna.

I was familiar with the layout of the lodge, but where exactly Kev’s office was, I didn’t know. So, I swung up to the front desk and asked a young man who was working there.

“Excuse me,” I said to the man wearing a name tag that read *Andy*. “Can you point me to Kev’s office?”

Not surprisingly, he looked at me warily. “It’s at the back of that hallway...” he said hesitantly.

“Thank you so much, Andrew,” I said, pulling out a hundred-dollar bill and stuffing it into his jacket pocket. “You’re a lifesaver.”

I followed the hallway all the way to the back until I saw a door that read *Kevin Young - Manager*. I grabbed the handle and pushed open the door, hoping Anna would be there and could point me toward Haley.

What I came upon was a little more than shocking.

Anna was there, all right, naked and bound to a chair with Kevin’s cock in her mouth. My brain told me to run but I couldn’t stop staring like it was some kind of a trainwreck.

“Hell fuck, James,” Kevin said, withdrawing his member and trying to cover himself with his hands. Poor Anna was helpless to make herself decent and I turned so my back was to them. “Close the fucking door.”

I did better than close the door, I stepped out of it and closed it behind me, only pausing to utter, “Good for you guys,” with a little chuckle. I wished I could say it was the first time I’d walked in on Kevin doing something of that nature, but I’d be lying.

Within a moment or two the door opened again and both Anna and Kevin were staring at me with irritation.

“Sorry about that,” I said as I strode into the office past Kevin. “Do you do that in here often?”

“None of your damn business,” Kevin said to me in an annoyed, but not angry voice.

“You have realized that this entire wall is windows that overlook the location where the majority of your guests spend their time.”

Kevin and Anna both stared at me sheepishly.

“You *do* know. Wow, Kev. Nice.”

“I see you’re feeling better,” Kevin said. “Why are you here?”

I looked out the window, trying to see if I could see Haley from here, but of course I couldn’t. “I’m looking for my girl,” I said blatantly. “I have to tell her I love her.”

There was a pregnant pause that filled the office, then Anna spoke.

“Maybe she doesn't want to see you,” she said.

I turned to face them sighing. “And if she doesn’t, that’s fine. I’ll leave and never bother her again. But I need her to know how I really feel.”

Even though he tried to hide it, I saw Kevin’s mouth quirk up in a semi-smile and Anna wasn’t much different.

“She’s skiing,” Anna said finally.

“Pregnant?!” I asked, feeling more than a little worried.

“Yes, pregnant,” Anna replied. “Exercise is good for the baby.”

I looked frantically out the window once more. “Where is she, Anna? Please help me this once and I’ll never ask for anything again.”

I turned back to Haley's best friend and begged her with my eyes.

"She's on the west slopes," Anna said eventually. "I'm sure if you take the lift, you can probably catch her."

I would have kissed Anna if I didn't think Kevin would punch me out, but instead, I bolted for the door, saluting them as I passed.

"Have fun, you two. Use protection."

"Oh, that's fucking rich coming from you, dick," he called after me.

I couldn't get to the lifts fast enough and my heart pounded with every step I took. How would I be able to make this right even if she did listen to me? What could I possibly do to make her see that it was a momentary lapse in judgment? One that I knew didn't deserve to be forgiven and I would have to live with, always.

And then there she was, looking rosy from the cold and as beautiful as ever. It had only been three days and when I saw her, it hit me like it had been a lifetime.

She dismounted the lift warily, staring at me like she didn't know what to expect.

A million thoughts raced through my mind. Should I kiss her? Should I throw myself at her feet and beg for forgiveness?

"Hi," I said anticlimactically. "I love you."

## *Chapter Thirty-One*

Haley

I woke up to sunshine on my face, coming in through the window of the room I'd stayed in before I'd gotten the job at Sunset View. I couldn't even bring myself to think his name, it hurt so bad.

I met Anna for breakfast at the resort restaurant since she wanted to check in on me.

"Did you sleep okay?" she asked.

"No," I replied. "I barely slept at all, between crying, throwing up, looking up statistics about single moms, child support, and adoption, just so I know all my options. It was dawn before I finally fell asleep."

"Dawn was like an hour ago," Anna said.

"I'm aware," I said, yawning.

"Do you wanna go get a nap?" she asked.

“No,” I said. “I need a distraction.”

Anna smiled at me. “What did you have in mind?”

“I don’t know,” I said. “I was hoping you might have an idea.”

Her eyes lit up. “Well...” she said. “What if we went into town? I wanted to show you something, since you kind of helped with it.”

“That sounds ominous,” I said, looking at her in suspicion, but grinning along with her since her excitement was so infectious. It was the first time in over twenty-four hours that I was able to smile without it being faked, and I noticed how sore my cheeks were instantly at the change in expression.

“Oh, it is,” she said with delight. “Come on. Eat up so we can go.”

We finished our breakfasts and went back to our suites to get our coats and other cold-weather gear, and then Anna drove us into town.

As we drove, my phone began to buzz and I saw James’s name and face pop up.

“You gonna get that?” Anna asked, looking over at me.

“No,” I said, putting the phone on silent and tucking it into my bag.

She parked us at a municipal lot in the center of the downtown area, close to where I’d gone to look for dresses with her.



“We’re not going shopping, are we?” I asked. Normally that would cheer me up in a heartbeat, considering we’d both worked for a fashion company back in San Francisco, but she’d been pretty clear that the mall was the only place in town to really go for clothes, and I didn’t think I could stomach going there with everything going on.

“No,” she said, grabbing my hand and tugging me along with her. “But we are going to a store.”

“Okay...” I said slowly, unsure what she meant by that and feeling a bit gun-shy about where she might be taking me.

We finally turned a corner, and the first thing I saw was a massive display window filled with cribs and baby clothes and toys. There were letters and numbers on the front indicating sales and promotions, and lots of women with children in tow or with baby bumps milling around.

“No,” I said, tugging back on Anna’s hand. “No, Anna, I can’t.”

“What?” she said, looking back at me in confusion. Then she turned around and followed my gaze. “Oh!” She gave a small laugh. “I’m sorry, Hales, I should have probably thought better about bringing you here without some kind of clue. No, we aren’t going there. We’re going... here!”

She pulled me in front of an empty storefront in the middle of the busy main road. It was empty except for a few naked mannequins standing around. The lights were out, and there was a “Sold” sign in the window.

“Uh, Anna Banana,” I said, using the cutesy nickname I’d given her in college and only used now when she was being a little ditzy. “I think they may be closed.”

“What?” she said, rifling through her purse for something. She pulled out a key, then looked at me. “Oh, no, Haley... This is mine.”

“What’s yours?” I asked.

“The shop!” she exclaimed, putting out her hands like she was presenting it to me.

“The shop?”

She sighed and took my hand again, dragging me to the door and unlocking it before pushing me inside.

“Welcome to my store,” she said with an air of forced bravado, though the way she looked at me told me that she was desperate for my approval.

“What do you mean it’s yours?” I asked, and she turned to me.

“I mean Kevin bought it for me. You know we always talked about owning our own boutique one day. Well... now I do! And I want you to do it with me.”

“The store?”

“No, I want us to do what we said we’d do if we turned thirty and were still single,” she said sarcastically. “Yes, I mean the shop!”

I laughed despite the emotional agony I was in at the way our conversation was so normal for us, but it was happening in the midst of things that were so totally abnormal.

“What do you need me to do?” I asked, ready to be all in on this project with her.

She took me into the office and we started going over details of who would be in charge of what, and how we would go about getting things ordered and set up, as well as how we would run the grand opening.

By the time we left, it was already afternoon, and I was feeling a bit better about things. Even if I ended up a single mother, I had a direction that didn't involve the sport I'd have to give up before too long. One that would allow me to support myself and a child.

As we left the store and Anna turned to lock it up, I saw a woman walk past with her baby strapped to her chest, carrying a large bag of things from the baby store across the way. I looked at the little girl who gazed up at me as she passed. Her eyes were a beautiful shade of green and her hair was the color of a sunset, and I felt my heart break in two as I thought about how my own child might look like that. Might look like their father.

*“I hope you have a good fucking cellular provider, cause you're gonna need it to get ahold of your baby daddy.”*

I couldn't believe James had said those things to me, to the point that I haven't even allowed myself to relive that conversation yet, not even to tell Anna what he'd said. It had

been the most devastating moment of my life to hear those words from his mouth, to know how I felt about him, how much I'd trusted him, only to have him treat me like I was disposable.

I looked at my phone on the way back to the resort and was surprised to see close to a dozen notifications that James had tried to call, but I was done with that. He'd ruined it. I could never not hear him say those things to me. Hell, he probably wasn't even calling about that. He probably just wanted someone to watch the kids.

When we got back to Brother Bear's, though, I was feeling renewed and like there was nothing that could drag me down more than I already had been. And with nothing left to lose, suddenly a fear of skiing seemed ridiculous. I did some research and found out that it was perfectly safe for me to go skiing at this early stage, and so I decided I was finally going to do it. There was nothing that scared me as much as the road ahead of me now, and I was determined to overcome my fear of skiing once and for all.

I suited up and grabbed my gear, then headed out to the slopes, hoping to get a few runs in before sunset. I could ski into the night, but for now, I just wanted to prove to myself I could still do it.

I went out to one of the intermediate runs and rode the lift to the top. It felt like a million miles straight down when I stood at the top looking down at the hill. I could see the lines in the

snow where others had braved this course, and I knew that it wasn't even close to as hard as I was capable of.

At least, as hard as I was capable of before my leg got broken by an avalanche.

It took every ounce of bravery I had within me, but finally, after watching several other people go ahead of me, I built up the courage to push off.

The wind was so icy it was like fire against my cheeks, and I felt the thrill I'd always loved about skiing as I flew down the side of the hill, my skis moving from side to side as I slalomed with an ease I hadn't expected after my injury. The muscles in my legs and core screamed, no longer used to these movements, but I didn't care. The feeling of gliding over the snow with nothing there but me and my skis was second to none—even to some douchebag pretending to fall for me.

By the time I reached the bottom, I was giddy with excitement over finishing the run, and all but giggled at the knowledge that I'd overcome my fears.

But I wanted more.

I went up to the next level slope, riding the lift up and looking over the edge as it dropped me off. Max and I had done this one before the avalanche as a fun, easy run. Now, I was already feeling a bit tired and a part of me worried that I might not be at my best with my muscles and mind so fatigued, but I knew I'd regret it forever if I didn't try.

I zipped down the slope, one of the higher-level intermediate runs, and actually laughed out loud when I went over one of the bigger jumps and landed it perfectly. The muscle memory was strong, and I silently cursed myself for not having done this sooner, for allowing myself to be ruled by fear.

This was what I needed. Skiing was fun. Skiing was freedom. Skiing was something that would always be there for me when I needed to clear my head or to think things through. I could let my body take over so my mind could work out what it needed to.

When I reached the bottom, I pulled off my skis and practically ran to the lifts for the advanced slopes. I knew I wasn't ready to conquer a black diamond yet, but a blue square seemed within my grasp.

I stared up at the lift. The sun was just starting to set over the other side of the mountain, so it was darker than I might normally have liked for a run like this, but I didn't care. The course was lit by large lamps at night, so I could easily see my way, despite the dark.

I pulled my skis back on and climbed into the lift, jittery with excitement about the upcoming run.. The higher I got, the more the sunset turned orange, then deep red, and the color reminded me so much of James and the baby I was currently pregnant with so much that I nearly started crying.

But I wasn't going to do that. I was going to stay strong and I was going to have a fantastic run on this course.

At least, that was what I thought until I saw someone standing at the top of the mountain as the lift approached. The person was standing there, watching me as I dropped down onto the snow. He stepped forward, and my heart nearly stopped as James said, “Hi. I love you.”

## *Chapter Thirty-Two*

James

“Hi,” I said. “I love you.”

Haley just stood there staring at me angrily. She had every right to be but that didn't make it any easier to see.

“If you think you can just show up and sling things at me you think I want to hear, you have another thing coming.”

I took a tentative step forward. “I'm not,” I said. “I really do love you.”

Haley crossed her arms and looked like she was trying to decide whether to have a conversation or tell me to go fuck myself.

“I came here to get away from you, you know. You emotionally evicted me from the place that was my home, forced me to quit the job I loved, and abandoned me because something scared you. Newsflash, James, I'm scared, too. But I don't have the luxury of running. I'm carrying a reminder of



what I thought our relationship might have been everywhere I go.”

“I know,” I said, closing the distance between us. “And there is nothing I can ever do to fix that. I accept that I did that and there are going to be consequences of that that I have to live with forever, no matter what happens between me and you.”

Haley’s expression softened a little, and I took this as a sign to continue.

“You make me a better man, Haley. You’ve brought laughter back into our house, and warmth back into my heart. I can’t even remember what life was like before you because without even realizing it, I was making you a part of me.”

I saw Haley tremble and I reached forward, slowly pulling her into my arms, giving her plenty of chance to pull away.

“You are my finch, Haley. You are my sign that magic is real and that anything is possible. Things that once seemed like drudgery now have a renewed sense of promise, and places I’ve been a million times are appearing to me in ways that I’ve never seen before.” I could feel myself getting choked up, utterly overwhelmed with my need for her to know how much I felt for her. “You inspired me, Haley. You found me at the exact time that I felt the most lost and you saved me. I need you, and I think you need me, too. The way you make a room light up with your presence... I haven’t felt that in the longest time.”

I felt a wet drop cascade down my cheek as she looked up at me and wiped it away.

“I’m sorry,” I said.

“For what? Being a human with feelings?”

“For everything. You deserved so much more than that reaction.”

I took her chin in my fingers and slowly placed a kiss on her lips that she melted into.

Fireworks erupted in my heart as I tasted her and my fingers tangled in her hair with tentative hope. I couldn’t lose her again, not now. Not after I realized how much she meant to me.

Haley pulled away and looked at me, tears staining her cheeks. “Don’t you ever do something like that to me again, James,” she said.

“Never,” I said, swearing. “Not in a million years.”

She nodded. “Then now what? I still haven’t decided what I want to do about the...”

I wanted to touch her, to hold her, to tell her I would fight the whole world for her and the baby.

But I knew it wasn’t my place.

Instead, I asked her something else.

“Move home, please.”

“James...”

“Hear me out. Move back in with me, firmly in with me. Share my room and my things. You can even use all of my skincare creams if you want to.”

Haley gave a teary laugh, which summoned forth a smile from me. “Are you sure you want to make that offer?”

“Yes,” I said hopefully. “A thousand times yes. And I know that it’s not my right to tell you what to do with this baby, but at least let me take care of you while you decide. After that...”

Haley raised an eyebrow. “After that, what?”

I felt my stomach go nervous like a million butterflies had taken over. “After that, I will ask you to marry me and we can plan our life together. Whichever way you choose.”

I could practically see Haley’s heart pounding as she considered what I was saying. She tried to say something but appeared as though she couldn’t find the words. So instead, she just nodded vigorously.

Finally, I grabbed her hard and pulled her into a deep, longing, needing kiss before a realization hit me.

“Shit,” I said, looking at my watch. “It’s six-thirty.”

“What’s six-thirty?” she asked.

“I may have left Leann home watching the kids. She charged me a hundred dollars for it too.”

Haley’s eyes got wide and she grabbed my hand. “Did you want to still have a home when you got back? And three children?”

The prospect was daunting but I laughed anyway, feeling so much relief that I felt like I could've flown all the way home.

“You don't trust Leann?” I asked.

“No way,” she said, as we jumped on the next lift to go down the mountain. “She is way too smart for her own good.”

“She knows, you know. About us. I confirmed it anyway, but she definitely knew.”

Haley sighed and shook her head as we jogged towards the car. “The faster we get back the better.”

When we arrived back at the penthouse, the kids all rushed Haley with excitement, happy to see their mother figure back. Leann had kept everyone alive, though there was a significant amount of Cheeto dust covering the sofa now.

“I was worried you turned into a fart,” Ben said.

Haley looked at me in confusion.

“I'll tell you later,” I whispered, laughing.

The kids continued to chatter away and Haley responded to every question about the last three days that they threw at her. She was a natural, and I could only hope that she would want to raise the baby with me.

There was almost nothing I wanted more. Especially now that I got my girl back.

## *Chapter Thirty-Three*

Haley

“I just don’t know what to do,” I said to Anna as she swept up cobwebs in a corner of what would soon be her boutique. “He says he’s in it for real, but I can’t just ignore the way he talked to me and the things he said, can I? If we’re going to raise a baby together, I need to know that the person I’m doing this with really wants it, and I just don’t know for sure.”

She shook her head and raised the broom to take down some dust overhead. “You definitely shouldn’t discount his reaction. It matters in a decision this big. But...”

“But?” I asked as I put some duct tape on a mannequin that had lost one of its arms, trying to put the poor woman back together with next to nothing to hold things in place.

What a fucking metaphor.

“But... well, sometimes people say things they don't mean when they're scared.” Anna grabbed the dustpan and scooped the gray pile she'd accumulated into the blue piece of plastic before dumping it into a garbage bag.

“Maybe I shouldn't be having a baby with him then, if he's so scared,” I said, accidentally pulling off the arm that I was supposed to be fixing. “Damn it.”

“That's your call,” Anna said as she went over to the dust-covered till and blew on it, sending a cloud of ashen particles into the air. She looked at it appraisingly, checking the buttons, which didn't seem to work. “That needs to be replaced. And don't worry about that mannequin. I can get a new one of those too.”

“No,” I said stubbornly. “I can do it.”

“You don't have to—”

“Yes,” I said defiantly. “I do.”

“Okay...” she said slowly, as though she didn't want to argue anymore, which I was glad about. “Anyway. What are you going to do about the baby, then?”

“Hell if I know,” I said as I finally got the duct tape to lay flat around the edge of the arm, which was now held in place, but it was at an unnatural angle, and I tore the arm off again and crumpled up the tape, throwing it into a pile. “I could keep the baby, and we could raise it together with the other kids. And as much as I'm hurt by the things he said, he really is a good father.”

“Yeah,” Anna said, agreeing with me as she picked up my pile of little silver tape balls and threw them into her garbage bag. “He does seem to be.”

“So maybe it wouldn’t be the worst thing to have a kid with him,” I said, sitting down and tapping the arm against my knee absentmindedly.

“Maybe not,” she said.

“But then again,” I said, moving the arm so that I was whacking it on the tile floor with a bit more force than I should have. “Everything with us is still so new, and if he’s even a little unsure, wouldn’t this baby be better off with two parents who are fully committed and *happy* to have it?” I was so emphatic by the end and was punctuating my words by hitting the mannequin arm on the floor so hard that, when I finished speaking, I’d broken the damn thing in half.

“Also a really good point,” she said, walking over and taking the pieces from me to throw them away. I glanced up at her as she looked at me like she was studying me, trying to figure out where I stood, but even I didn’t know where I stood at that point.

“You’re really not being very helpful,” I told her sarcastically. “Truly. I don’t know how I could ever make this decision without you.”

“I’m sorry,” she said, sitting down beside me. She took my hand and squeezed it, and the pressure was comforting. “I don’t have any answers for you because I can’t possibly

understand how you're feeling right now. If I had to make the choice you have to, I don't know what I would do either."

I sighed and put my head in my hands, no longer able to distract myself from my problems with a meaningless, tedious task.

"I just don't know if I can do this, Anna. I'm so happy to have James in my life, but I don't know if he's ready for this level of commitment." I buried my face in my hands. I was all cried out about this, but I was feeling defeated, even though I hadn't even come up with a plan yet. It was just so overwhelming that I wasn't sure what I could possibly do that would be the right choice.

"Well..." Anna said hesitantly, and I looked up at her.

"Yes?" I asked.

"Here's what I'll say, and you can just take it for what it's worth," she said.

"Please," I begged her. "Please. Any advice would be helpful."

Anna shrugged. "You've been through a lot in the last year, and you're right to be cautious about people and their motives because you still have a lot of healing to do—emotionally and physically."

"Oh, believe me, I'm aware," I said sardonically. I had more than my fair share of trauma of various kinds that I was dealing with, and James's outburst at me, which still weighed on me, was only the most recent item in a long list.



“So I think you need to decide what’s important to you,” she said. “James said he was sorry, right?”

“Yeah,” I said.

“And that he wanted to raise this baby with you?” she asked.

“Also yes,” I said. “But I don’t know if I want this baby at all, even if I’ve forgiven him. I mean, my whole future is in the balance, and I don’t know what the right thing to do is.”

“Look,” Anna said, standing up again and picking up the mannequin I’d failed to fix so she could take it outside. “I wish I had an answer for you, but no one can decide this but you. I can only give you the advice that I have, which is to really figure out what you want. Do you want this baby?”

“I don’t know,” I said.

“Then you need to figure out how you’re going to make that decision. And you should probably do it sooner rather than later.”

She walked out the back door to the alley so she could take out the mannequin and I picked up my phone, typing out a text message:

*Hi. Do you have time to talk? I could really use some help.*

I waited for a response, tapping my foot impatiently, staring at the screen. Anna was just walking back inside, wiping her hands on her jeans, when I got a reply.

**Dr. Harzel:** *Yes. How about in five minutes?*

I quickly typed out a reply accepting the time slot, grateful she could take me on such short notice, and ducked out to the alley to video chat with my therapist.

“Hi, Haley,” she said in her calming voice when I answered her call.

“Hi, Dr. Harzel,” I said, the words feeling like a sigh of relief. “Thanks for squeezing me in.”

“Of course,” she said. “I had the time. What can I do for you?”

“Well, I kind of have an issue... A big one,” I said.

“Oh?” she asked, raising her eyebrows just enough that she seemed interested without coming across as nosy. This was salacious at the least and scandalous at the worst, but she had a way of making it feel like it was safe to share.

“Well...” I took a breath. “I kind of started seeing someone after Max moved.”

“That’s good,” she said. “It’s always a good idea to not seclude yourself. Just make sure you’re ready for the kind of relationship you’re heading into.”

“Well,” I said, my heart hammering inside of me like a jackhammer. “About that...”

I struggled to find words to explain everything that had happened in the last few weeks, but they failed. Thankfully, Dr. Harzel was great at finding the right questions to get the right answers.

“Let’s start simple,” she said. “Who is it?”

“It’s, um... James.”

“Your employer, James?” she asked.

“Yeah,” I admitted. “I didn’t mean for it to happen, but we had this incredible chemistry that I’ve never felt with anyone—not even Max, and things just kind of... happened. I really thought I was falling in love with him.”

“And you don’t think that anymore?” Her face was slightly concerned, but mostly neutral. I could never read her, which made it impossible to give her the “right” answer. She just wanted honesty.

“I don’t know,” I said. “You see... I’m pregnant.” I let the words hang in the air like smoke. It was the first time I’d said those words to anyone like that. Just a confession without prompting.

“I do see,” she said, making a note on a piece of paper in front of her. “And I assume this wasn’t planned.”

“No shit,” I said wearily, then put a hand over my mouth. “Sorry, Dr. Harzel.”

“No apologies needed. I’m here for you to express yourself, however that may be.”

I smiled softly at her, then my face fell again as I continued to lay out my issues. “Well,” I said, “It’s definitely James’s. And the sweet, romantic, caring man I thought I knew turned into a complete nightmare the second he found out.”

“That must be really hard,” she said. “How did you feel about that?”

“Horrible,” I said. “I quit my job and moved out, back to staying with Anna and Kevin. He apologized and I moved back in—into his room, actually. But...”

“But?” she asked.

“But I can’t decide what to do about this baby,” I admitted. “I have no idea if I should trust that James is really committed to this or if I should put the baby up for adoption. I’m just not sure what I want to do. Either way, my shot at the Olympics is fucked because there’s no way I can carry a baby for nine months and still be ready.”

“That must be really devastating,” she said.

“It really is.”

There was a long silence while I waited for Dr. Harzel to tell me the right thing to do, but I knew she wouldn’t. That wasn’t her style.

“Let me ask you a question,” she said. “If James hadn’t reacted badly, if he’d been supportive from the start, what would you want to do?”

The answer there was easy. “I’d want to raise this baby together,” I said.

“And do you think you can forgive him for whatever he did that upset you enough to leave your job and your new home?”

I took a deep breath and let it out shakily. “I already have,” I admitted. “I just haven’t told him.”

“Then I think you have your answer, Haley,” she said. “Now you just have one thing left to do.”

“What’s that?”

“Tell him.”

## *Chapter Thirty-Four*

James

I waited patiently in my room, pacing the floor and trying to plan out what I was going to say if I didn't get the answer I wanted to hear.

I needed to support her most of all. No matter what I felt in the moment, Haley was bound to feel thirty times worse.

Haley had texted me about an hour ago to tell me she was going to be home a little later than expected because she scheduled a last-minute appointment with her therapist. I could read between the lines enough to make the connection. She was going to be making her choice.

Suddenly, I heard the front door open and close, and my pulse jumped to about four hundred beats per minute.

“Hello?” Haley called out, sounding nervous.

“I’m in the bedroom,” I said, sitting down and pretending that’s where I’d been the whole time. I grabbed a book for

extra effect just as she walked into the room.

I could instantly tell Haley had been crying when she entered and I felt like I couldn't breathe.

“Good book?” Haley asked, gesturing to the last-minute prop.

“Yeah,” I said. “It’s a great read.”

“Even upside down?” she replied.

I looked down to see that I was holding it the wrong direction and rolled my eyes, tossing it aside. “How was the therapy?” I asked.

“Amazing as always,” she replied. “I do not pay her nearly enough.”

I nodded with a smile that I didn’t quite feel and reached for her hand. “I’m glad you feel like you’re getting what you need.”

There was a moment of quiet in which I pulled Haley into my lap before she said, “Did you really mean what you said about being together?”

“Of course I did,” I said without hesitation. “You are everything I need. And I think I have the ability to be pretty good for you, too. Some obvious exceptions aside.”

She nodded and buried her face into my chest, then whispered into my ear, “I want to have this baby with you. You’re a really good dad, even if you were a jackass to start with.”

I could feel emotion catching in my throat. I was going to be a dad again.

“I was,” I said, my voice cracking. “You’re a hundred percent right, and I’m so damn sorry.”

Haley put her fingers to my lips. “But I believe you when you say you love me. Because I love you, too. And there is no way something feels this strong and right if it’s not shared by both people.”

I couldn’t help myself. I wrapped her entire body in mine and dipped her back to kiss her deeply. Haley was mine, for better or worse, and our future was opening up before me like a gate that had been sealed shut until now.

My hands made their way beneath her shirt and moved across her body until they reached the place where my baby was.

Mine.

I shifted so my body was hovering over her and looked into her shining sapphire eyes that were begging me not to fuck this up again. She needed me, but even more so, I needed her. She saved me from a prison of my own making and showed me that I could change.

Her dreams were my dreams, her failures mine to share. There was not a single piece of me that didn’t have Haley’s name written all over it.

None more than my heart.



I kissed her again, and then a third time. Every moment led me to wanting a little more.

Her body pressed against me, wanting me just as badly as I wanted her.

And just like that our hands and lips and skin were desperate to make as much contact as possible. We tore at each other's clothes and tossed them wherever they might land, not caring about anything besides wanting to pick up where we'd gone all wrong.

It was all so simple and yet, it was exactly what we needed.

I kissed my way down her legs, pulling her leggings off and tearing away her panties, as if daring them to come between me and my conquest.

Haley moaned at the moment of pain as the fabric tightened around her thighs before giving way to my strong grasp with a ripping sound. But the slick wetness that covered her thighs told me what I really needed to know.

Torturously slowly, I licked each patch of skin clean, eliciting whines and whimpers from her that were enough to drive a man insane. I knew what I'd almost lost, and what I was never willing to give up again. If I had to spend the rest of my life worshiping this divine creature one orgasm at a time—I was prepared to do just that.

By the time my mouth reached its final throbbing destination, it barely took a minute of my tongue flicking over her swollen clit to send her into screams of ecstasy. Thank

God the kids were at school because this was definitely not family-friendly, especially with the words Haley was saying.

“Fuck, yes,” she cried out. “Oh, James, fuck, yes...”

“Come for me, angel,” I begged moments after I felt her tip, raising my head from between her legs. “That’s it, baby.”

Haley’s hands grabbed onto my red hair like it was the only thing holding her to the planet and a shiver crept down my back. Her fingers moved quickly to my neck where the tie I’d worn today still rested. She toyed with the silken fabric before pulling it off over my head and pushing her way out from under me and pinning me to my pillow.

I had never been more aroused in my entire life.

We didn’t exchange any words, only a look. My hands rested at my sides, not daring to move as Haley grabbed my cock and pulled it forth. A groan rippled through her entire body, leaving those magnificent breasts shaking, her perfect nipples pert.

She put my tie between her teeth and used her hand to finish making me hard enough to ache, stroking gently up and down. Then she dropped it from her lips and grabbed it firmly, wrapping it around my cock,

“Oh, dear God...” I moaned, my senses overloaded and my nerves on fire. “Fuck yes.”

Slowly she worked me, the tie running across my shaft, up and down, then sliding around it in the most tantalizing way. Haley grinned, loving the way she was undoing me.

I couldn't help but thrust into her hand, thick wells of precum dripping down her hand and my tie. "Oh God," I moaned. "Haley, I have to wear that tomorrow."

Haley shook her head and unwrapped it, putting it around her neck and falling back onto the pillow.

I didn't need any cue, my body knew exactly what to do as I swung over her, wrapping my arms around her hips. She was soaked, wet, and ready for me, and I leaned down to kiss her as I held her to me, then slowly pressed myself inside, giving her plenty of time to adjust to my size.

Haley moaned, her hips lifting so they could buck against me. She was one of only two women who seemed to be made to take me fully. I held her there beneath me with my hands still on her hips and pounded into her, needing the tight squeeze around my cock from her insides more than I needed air at that moment.

I could feel another climax building from Haley as she tightened around me, and I slid down the sheets so that our bodies were pressed flush against each other. My mouth went straight to her nipples, and she cried out as my teeth pulled lightly.

"Yes," she whimpered. "Oh, God. Harder."

She didn't have to tell me twice as I did what she asked, and I felt her clench around me so intensely, that I struggled to thrust through her orgasm.

“Yeah, right there,” she said, her arms around my neck, holding me to her. “God, yes, James, just like that.... Don’t stop, please...”

My head spun with the desire and pure connection between the two of us, and I kissed her deeply as she panted until I felt her loosen around me once again, ready for more. Then I rolled to the side, pulling her on top of me and groaning as her weight settled.

I loved being in control, but there was something unparalleled about the weight of a beautiful woman on my cock that was more erotic and sensual than almost anything else in the world. Within only a couple of minutes, I was close enough that there was almost nothing I could do to stop myself from coming now.

“I love you, Haley,” I whimpered. “I never want to risk losing you ever again.”

“I love you, too, James.”

With that, my climax roared, overtaking me as I emptied myself into her, filling her, but not stopping my movements until I felt her go over the top alongside me, the both of us moaning and panting in time with each other like a choreographed dance or a symphony made up of only our bodies and voices.

The sounds we made echoed down the hall and around the room in a beautiful symphony of our pleasure. This was my girl, and our bodies had finally found union. Lasting and unbreakable.

Haley collapsed onto my chest and I immediately pulled her into me, cradling her body against mine with utter love and devotion. “You’re amazing, beautiful.”

“You’re not so bad yourself,” she said as she yawned. “Does this feel like the start of something to you?” she asked, her blue eyes searching mine.

“Yes,” I replied honestly. “You were the beginning of my something new. The thing I needed more than I even knew.”

Haley leaned in and kissed me, relaxing against me as we dozed.

But thankfully we didn’t fall completely asleep because it wasn’t long before we heard the front door open and the sounds of the kids’ voices echoed down the hall to us.

It was a damn good thing we were both athletes because the speed at which we had to move to clothe ourselves was record-breaking. Thankfully we were able to get it done before Leann walked in.

“Hi,” she said, giving us a suspicious look.

“Hi yourself,” Haley said back. “Do you have a lot of homework?”

Leann shook her head and narrowed her eyes at me. “Did you do it yet?” she asked me.

For the life of me, I couldn’t figure out what she was referring to. “What do you mean?”

Leann shook her head as if she was disappointed with me. “Have you asked Haley to be my new mom yet?”

Haley and I both went pink but laughed.

“Is that something you would want?” Haley asked her.

Leann seemed to consider for a moment before nodding her head. “I think you would be a good mom.”

Haley and I exchanged looks. Leann had no idea how relevant that statement was and somehow that made it doubly sincere.

“Thanks, kiddo,” my gorgeous girl replied. “That means a lot to me.”

Leann nodded then left, seemingly satisfied with how this had all turned out. I couldn’t have felt lighter, like everything was guaranteed to be all right.

It wasn’t like I thought nothing would ever go wrong again, but the way this new chapter of our lives was starting made it feel like whatever came our way, we would be able to handle it as long as we had each other.

That night after dinner, we told the kids they were expecting a new baby sibling, and as expected the responses were varied.

“I’m gonna be a big sister,” Katie cried, jumping up on her chair with excitement. “Finally.”

“Can it be a boy?” Ben whined. “I don’t want another sister.”

“I’ll put in a good word with the stork buddy, okay?” I said.

Ben seemed satisfied with this answer and went back to his pizza.

Leann, however, went quiet, looking down into her lap and sniffing.

I looked at Haley and she at me. We thought Leann would be the most excited. She had always loved being Ben and Katie's big sister, and she loved Haley. So why was this making her so sad?

"You okay?" I asked her.

Leann shrugged her shoulders. "You're not gonna care about us anymore," she said with another dramatic snuffle, "Since you don't love my mom anymore and you love Haley instead."

I opened my mouth to refute this, but Haley put up her hand, then went to Leann's side, hugging her and stroking her hair.

"Leann, I will never in a million years take the place of your mom and I don't want to. And even more importantly, no one will ever make your dad or me stop loving you guys. You're always gonna be just as important. I love you." Haley looked up and around at Ben and Katie. "I love all of you guys."

Her eyes landed on me and I felt my heart give an enormous thump.

Haley was my girl, now and always. And I knew I needed to make it far more official.

## *Epilogue*

Haley

**I**t was strange. I'd never lived with a boyfriend before. Even with Max, we stayed with each other most nights, but we each had our own rooms at the resort. But now, I was living with James. I'd already been living with him, but it had a totally different feel now that I was staying in his room with him, and even more so now that the kids all knew.

I was pretty sure Leann already knew, even before James told her. At least, she insisted she did. That girl was sharp as a tack, both in her intelligence and her wit.

"Come on, guys," I called to them. "School doesn't open when you get there. Let's go."

"Sorry," Katie said, rushing out of the room she shared with Leann, carrying her shoes. Her hair was in a pair of very sloppily braided pigtails, which she showed me with a smile. "Leann said she'd do my hair."



“That was really nice of her,” I said, feeling a warmth in my chest at the sweet gesture. “And is Leann coming?”

“She said two minutes,” Katie told me before sitting at the breakfast bar and beginning to eat her oatmeal.

“Two minutes?” I called down the hall, hoping both Leann and Ben would hear me.

“Four minutes!” they called back in unison.

I rolled my eyes and checked the time. They were going to have about a minute to scarf down their food.

“Morning, beautiful,” James said, coming out of his room—*our* room—and straightening his tie. I bit my lip, remembering how just last night, that tie was in my hands, sliding up and down, wrapped around his length...

James seemed to notice me staring because he cleared his throat, though his bright green eyes remained locked on mine. God, I could stare into them all day and never get tired of looking at them.

“Um, good morning,” I said after far too long of a pause.

“Are you gonna kiss?” Katie asked from behind me.

I turned to her with a smile and hugged her from behind, gently tickling her. “What do you think? Huh?”

“Stop!” she giggled breathlessly. “Don’t tickle me-ee-ee!”

“It’s way too early for tickling,” Leann said grouchily as she finally emerged from her room, her hair brushed out and falling over her shoulders.

“Then I won’t tickle you,” I said before pointing to her bowl. “Eat. We’re leaving in five minutes.”

She grumbled inaudibly, but sat at her seat and started to eat just as Ben came running out of his room wearing two different socks.

“Come on,” I said, deciding to fight my battles, and deciding this wasn’t one I cared about.

The chaos of it all was comforting in a strange way. It was disorganized and wild, but it was mine.

It was *ours*.

James was still eating his oatmeal when I kissed him on the cheek before rushing out the door to get the kids to school.

When I came back, James had already gone to work, but he’d left me a note on the table.

*Don’t worry about the cleaning today, and I’ll pick the kids up from school. Go enjoy the slopes for a bit. –James*

I smiled and picked up the little piece of paper, taking it to my room and tucking it into a book to preserve it. I’d always done things like that. It wasn’t always easy to remember little moments and gestures over the years, but by keeping little mementos, I could look back on them fondly. I had an entire box filled with things like that from my grandmother, who passed away a couple of years ago.

I got my gear out and laid it all out on the bed so it would be ready to go, but looking at it reminded me of a lingering question I had.

I pulled out my phone and the card that had been mailed to me after I'd qualified for the Olympics. The number for the coach was on there, and I dialed it, sitting in a desk chair by the window, overlooking some of the harder slopes.

It rang only a couple of times before he answered.

"Paul Nelson," he said by way of a greeting.

"Hi," I said. "This is Haley Birmingham."

"Oh, Haley," he said. "How are you? I've been waiting to hear from you about your recovery. Are you ready to start your official training?"

I took a deep breath. "Actually... I was wondering if there was any way to defer my qualification for the next winter Olympics." There was a silence on the other end of the line, and I almost wondered if we'd been disconnected, so I continued. "You see, my leg is better, but, uh... I'm actually pregnant and won't be able to train for another nine months, and that's getting really close to the games."

"Yeah," he said. "That is cutting it really close, especially since you'll need time to recover afterward."

It wasn't anything I didn't already know, and I wasn't hearing an answer, but the tone of his voice gave me a clue as to what it would be.

"So..." I said. "Is there any option to do it?"

I heard him sigh and could almost picture him running a hand down his face in exasperation.

“Unfortunately,” he said, and I felt my heart sink, “because there’s no guaranteeing you’d still be in shape by the time the next games roll around, you have to qualify again.”

I’d known it was a strong possibility—a probability even—but I’d still been slightly hopeful that there would be some good news.

“I understand,” I said, feeling my dreams of going to the Olympics slip away.

What was odd, though, was that I wasn’t nearly as upset as I thought I would be. It was like the dream was still there, but I was so happy that I knew, even if it never happened, that I would be totally fine.

I heard Paul Nelson sigh. “Look,” he said. “I can’t promise you a spot on the team next time around, but I can tell you that, if you’re serious, I’ll take you on personally to get you ready for the qualifiers as soon as you’re ready to go.”

“You mean it?” I asked.

“Yeah,” he said. “It says here you’re living in Montana?”

“That’s correct,” I said.

“Perfect. I live pretty close to where you live, so it’ll work out well.”

“I... I really can’t thank you enough,” I gushed, sitting on the edge of my bed and brushing some stray hairs behind my ears.

“Just show up ready to really grind when the time comes, and that will be thanks enough. I like to win, and I only take on people I think can do that. I saw your qualifier, and your resilience after the avalanche was inspiring. Honestly, it’s Hallmark movie material, and I eat that kind of thing up, and so do audiences.”

“Okay,” I said, slightly overwhelmed by what he was saying. “Okay. Yeah. I’ll call you when I’m ready.”

“Perfect,” he said. “I’ll hear from you in about twelve to eighteen months, then?”

“Sounds good. Thank you so much.”

We both hung up and I reached down, placing my hands over my lower belly.

“I’m sorry,” I said to my baby, even though he or she couldn’t hear me. “I’m sorry for ever thinking you would be something that would derail my future. You *are* my future.”

I took another minute to enjoy the glow of the phone call, then changed into my gear before grabbing my skis and poles and heading outside.

I didn’t make it far. I got to the bottom of the ski lift and found James waiting for me, a single rose in his hand.

“I was hoping we could ski together,” he said.

It occurred to me we’d never done that, and I wondered how good he still was and if I could keep up with him. But I was willing to try, considering how sweet the gesture was.

We rode the lift up to the top, where he handed me the flower.

“Hold this for me?” he asked, and I obliged, just in time to see him drop to one knee.

“Haley,” he said, pulling a ring box from his pocket and opening it to present me with the most gorgeous diamond ring I’d ever seen. “I spent a long time with my heart so guarded that I couldn’t even fathom the idea of being with anyone, and the few people I tried to open up to left me more closed off than I had been before.”

“James...” I said softly, my hand over my mouth.

“Let me finish, please,” he begged. “I was done trying for love, but you... you gave me something that I haven’t had in years. You gave me something worth opening up for, worth being vulnerable for. I didn’t know a connection like ours could exist, but every time we touch, it feels like a symphony plays in my head only for us. I know we haven’t known each other long, and that we didn’t start in the most conventional way. In fact, we’re a walking cliché, but I couldn’t care less because I love you. You’re the most incredible woman I’ve ever met, and I can’t imagine living one more minute of my life without knowing that you’re mine forever. You make me a better man, and I want nothing more than to make you happy for the rest of our lives.” He held the box up to me. “Will you marry me?” he asked.

I was stunned. The speech was beautiful and had left me speechless. I knew my answer, but I couldn’t speak.

“I...” I managed to choke out. I cleared my throat and tried to ignore the deafening sound of my heartbeat in my ears. “I... yes. Yes, I’ll marry you, James.”

He stood up and kissed me, then pulled away to show me the ring up close. I reached for it, and he gave me the *Pretty Woman* treatment, slamming the box closed with a laugh.

“Oh,” he said slyly. “Did... did you want this?” He held up the closed box, then slipped it into his pocket.

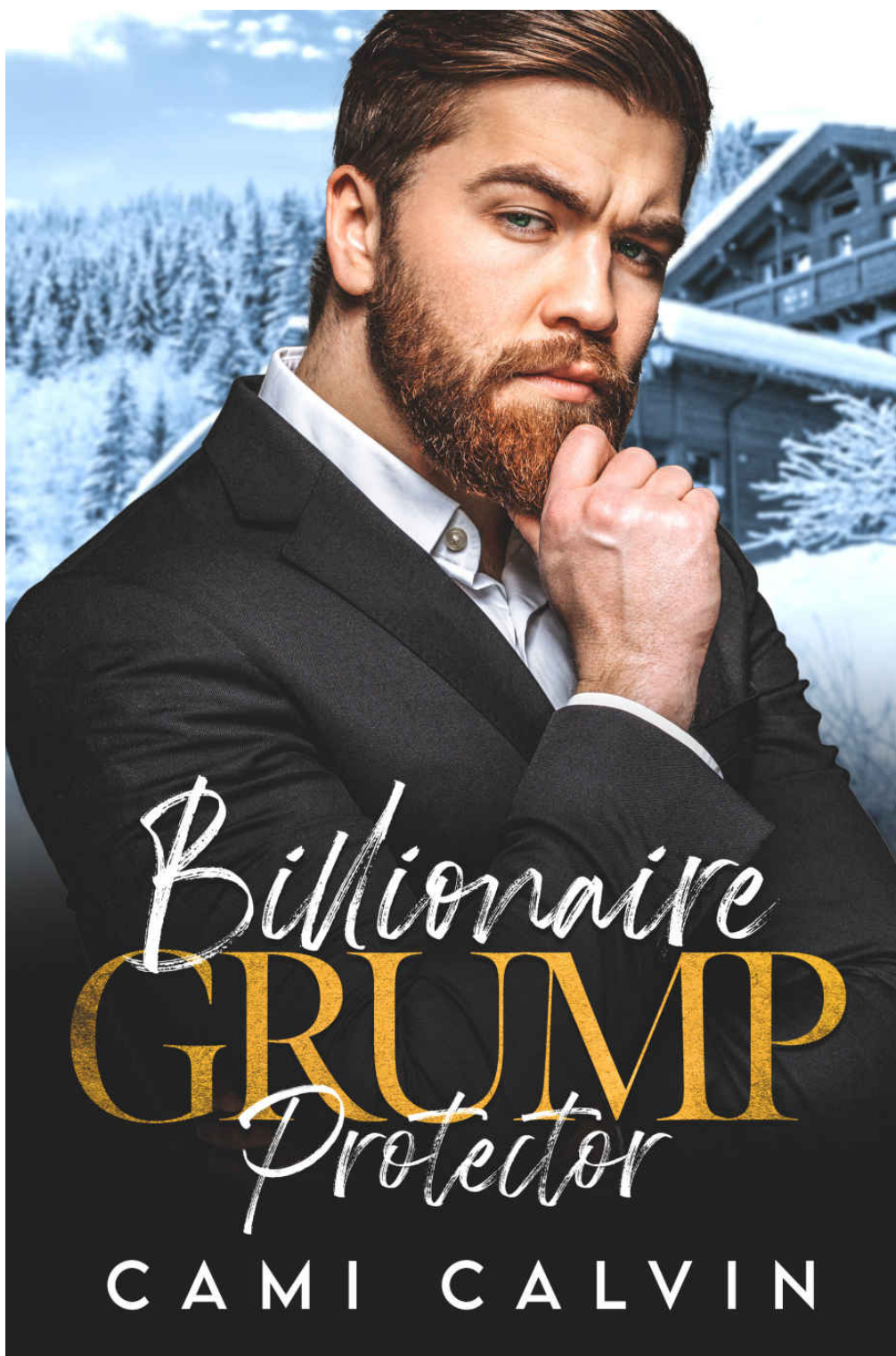
“Uh... yes?” I said, confused by this odd turn of events.

“Well...” he said. “Then I suppose you’d better catch me.”

And with that, he turned and took off down the mountain. I followed quickly behind, my prize zipping through the snow ahead of me.

Oh, yeah. And the ring was down there, too.

**THE END**



*Billionaire*  
**GRUMP**  
*Protector*

CAMI CALVIN



## *Chapter One*

Harry

The champagne was flowing freely, and every single person was decked out in their best party clothes. The shimmering lights glinted off sequins and metallic fabrics that hugged bodies as they gyrated to the thumping bass coming out of the speakers positioned around the room. It wasn't midnight yet, but you'd think it might have been with how toasted everyone already was, and I could see the glint of broken glass scattered around the room.

That would be coming out of the deposit.

I watched the party from the doorway, making note of what kinds of tools and supplies I'd need to make sure were available for my cleanup crew tomorrow, not a single soul in the room even noticing my presence. But such is the lot of the man who owned the lounge where the party was held. I was always destined to observe, but never partake in the festivities.

Everyone inside was about my age, and yet, I had no idea what it would be like to be so carefree and unburdened that you could actually enjoy a New Year's Eve party with friends and not worry about being too hungover to work the next day.

Or that same night, to be fair. Not like I ever had a night off. Not in at least ten years, which would be about the last time I attended a dance like this. My dad entrusted me with a great deal of responsibility at a young age, and I took it seriously—so seriously that I sort of forgot about anything else, including how to just enjoy a night out with friends.

“Oi!” I said suddenly, watching one of my staff trying to subtly sip some of the champagne. She hadn't seen me standing there, and when I gave her a look to let her know she'd been caught, she immediately turned bright red and set the champagne onto the bussing tray.

“Sorry, Mr. Sutton,” she said, standing still as though waiting for me to scold her further.

I stared at her for a moment, then grabbed her glass, handed it to her, grabbed another, and held it up.

“Happy New Year,” I said. Tipping my head back and taking a sip of champagne. She looked surprised, but smiled and sipped her own. “Consider this a break. And don't let me see it happen again.”

“Yes, Mr. Sutton,” she said, drinking down the rest of the champagne and putting the glass with others she was taking back to the kitchens.

I could have gone the other way and given her hell for it, but it was New Year's Eve, and she was here working for me instead of out with friends. She probably didn't even have the option for a night off, if my guess was right since I'd had nearly double the number of requests for the night off as I had availability for people not to come in. And several more called in sick at the last minute, to absolutely no one's surprise. Yet this girl, Wendy, I think her name was, had actually bothered to show up, and if the price of that was to allow her to enjoy a single glass of champagne, so be it.

I watched the party a while longer as people laughed, danced, and enjoyed each other's company. I wondered what that must be like, to have time to spend having fun like that and people to spend it with. I had a few good friends, but most of them were in my same line of work, and therefore our relationships and conversations usually revolved around ski lodge management rather than anything going on in our lives. Occasionally, those conversations would happen, but they were in passing. Never part of a planned event.

After a while, I pulled myself away and grabbed another glass of bubbly on my way out. My staff could take it from there, and, truth be told, as much as I wanted to feel connected, I wanted to be alone with my thoughts at that moment.

I ended up in my office, going over papers as I sipped my drink. I glanced down at my Rolex and saw that it was very nearly midnight, and I could hear the celebrations booming from the event rooms around the lodge even from this part of

the property, which was somewhat removed from the hustle and bustle.

What would it be like to spend holidays like that? At parties, with friends, without a care as to what had to happen the following morning, or even in the next five minutes? Not that it really mattered for me. I had been working for my father making an obscene salary since I was barely an adult, which meant I had anything and everything I could ever hope to want.

Except someone to enjoy special nights with, of course.

Sometimes I wondered if it was worth it. If the amount of money could ever make up for the loneliness. My ex-girlfriend certainly didn't seem to think so, considering she used at least one of the times I was too busy to spend time with her to "spend time" with someone else. I have no proof that she was unfaithful, but there was enough evidence that I knew I couldn't trust her, so I ended it, and thus ended all of my connections to any kind of social scene that existed outside of the ski resort life.

A part of me wanted to call her, to see if she was with anyone tonight, or if she'd be willing to keep me company, just so that I wouldn't have to be alone on yet another holiday. I didn't even really get to see family on Christmas because Dad owned a bunch of resorts around the world, and he and Mum were usually enjoying skiing in the Alps at this time of year, while I was stuck managing the lodge in Montana, of all places.

“If you can manage this resort well, you’ll be well on your way to running several in no time,” he’d said to me when I was fresh out of university. At the time, I’d been over the moon, grateful to have been given the responsibility and trust. But now, it was thirteen years later, and the resort was doing better than ever, but Dad still hadn’t given me any more responsibility, and I got to watch my youth slipping away as I devoted every single moment of my life to my father’s dream.

And I had no idea if it was mine, too.

My phone went off, and I looked down to see my friend Zane had texted.

**Z: *Hey, man. You doing anything fun tonight or working again?***

I debated answering at all, since I didn’t like my answer any more than he was going to, but was lonely enough that even a text conversation would fill the void.

**Me: *Working, of course lol.***

I added the “lol” to make it seem like I wasn’t feeling quite so down as I was willing to let on, but Zane knew me too well for that.

**Z: *And was that by choice or because you needed to?***

**Me: *Does it matter?***

I waited for him to answer, watching the three little dots blink on my screen for longer than I expected, but finally, his response came.

***Z: Yeah, man, it does. Is there really nowhere you can go to have some fun? I could even give you the address of the party I'm at.***

I debated the offer for longer than I knew I really should have. There was only one answer I could give.

***Me: I really can't.***

I hated it, that this was not only my lot, but that I *could* make other choices and kept opting not to because of some misguided notion that I'd make my dad proud enough for him to... what? Burden me with even more responsibility I wasn't ready for, but took on anyway?

***Z: That's up to you, dude. But I'm telling you, you're not all that young anymore, and you're never gonna be this young again. If you keep skipping out on all the fun parts of life, you're never gonna get another chance at them. Maybe your resolution should be to make more time to enjoy your life, bro. Mine... I'm proposing to Sarah. Tonight. Wish me luck.***

I stared at his message, reading it over and over again. It was everything I always said to myself, every little argument I had in my head about whether I'd get to the end of my life and regret how I spent my time. It never mattered, anyway, though. Didn't matter if it was me, Zane, or anyone else telling me. I stayed on the path I was on and never deviated from it.

I wasn't even sure I knew how to, even if I wanted to at this point.

Suddenly, I heard a loud cheer go up from what sounded like the entire hotel. I looked down at my watch and sighed. Midnight.

Another year gone by without any kind of forward momentum in my life, and, one might argue, I'd even gone backward with the loss of Alana from my life. Not like Zane, who had rung in the new year possibly as an engaged man. I didn't think there was any chance of her saying no. They'd been together for years and even had a kid on the way. To be honest, I'm surprised he took so long, but I guess they just never felt the need to make anything official. Not like Alana, who'd wanted more and more commitments than I could offer.

Not that she was ever truly gone. She'd been here in this office just last week when I'd called her for a quick shag. I knew she was wanting more, to get back together, but I had zero trust in her. There was no working around that. But that didn't mean I didn't get lonely.

And horny.

In fact, I debated calling Alana just then, thinking some sex might help me with my current mental state, or at least distract me from it for a while. I even had her number pulled up, ready to go when I decided against it. I wasn't giving her another chance—not for real. And calling her up to come over on New Year's Eve seemed like a bad way to reinforce that message.

But it still stung to know I could be out with friends, enjoying a night of drinking and celebrating, possibly even witnessing or partaking in a proposal if I wasn't so tied to my

work—to my father’s work. And if there was one thing I knew for certain, it was that I was forever unwilling to let the man down. His approval meant more to me than anything else in the world, and, despite my own sadness about it, I would give up whatever it took to make that happen.

I stood up from my desk and stretched. The parties upstairs were still going and would be until about two in the morning, when the event rooms would be closed for the night and the revelers would be kindly asked to vacate. But I’d had quite enough of listening to them, knowing I wasn’t part of it at all and likely never would be.

I walked from my office up to the penthouse suite, where I lived. It was so much easier to run the lodge when I resided on the property, and so the lodge was literally my entire world. Probably not the healthiest way to live, but it was the one I’d chosen.

Once inside, I loosened my tie and went to my couch, reaching for one of the glasses and the decanter beside it. I poured myself a couple of fingers of whiskey (okay, more than a couple), and began to sip it slowly. I turned on the TV, but nothing seemed to be worth watching, so I eventually turned it off and spent the remainder of the night in my suite. Drinking. Alone.

Not for the first time, and not for the last.



## *Chapter Two*

Sloane

I have this horrible habit of pretending I'm the main character of the movie that my life feels like. Everywhere I go, everything I've ever done has felt more bold, more interesting, and more unique than anyone else I know.

Of course, some people might call this mental illness but I prefer oneness—as in “one with the universe.” I waltzed through life with my noise-canceling headphones turned up loud and my hair looking like I'd had a blowout seven days a week.

“Isn't it a little cold to be leaning out the window, Chippy?”

I turned to face Kendal, my older brother who was driving us up the mountains in his Jeep, and gave him a look of disapproval.

“I'm living in the moment, Ken Doll. And stop calling me Chippy.”

Chippy was short for Chipmunk, which he had called me ever since I was a kid. I used to have these buck teeth that looked ripe for cracking open nuts and he had a field day with that.

Ken gave a little chuckle and I gave him a middle finger. We liked to joke around but at the end of the day, we really loved each other.

Kendal was already in high school when I was born and he'd always been there for me as a guardian and supporter. He was at every school play, every birthday, every special moment I'd ever experienced, and this one was no different.

I was six months from graduating from my hospitality program at CSU Long Beach and he had hooked me up with an internship with an old frat brother of his who was a ski lodge billionaire. Apparently, when he'd attended university here—a transplant from England—he loved the scenery so much that he and his mega mogul dad opened a string of resorts.

At first, I wasn't really sure about spending a month with some older guy I barely knew. But after a little convincing, and seeing how damn gorgeous this friend was, I agreed to live in Montana for the duration of the job shadowing.

Montana was beautiful. Unlike California, you could really breathe out here, something I was sure the locals probably took for granted. There were trees absolutely everywhere, and the valleys which cropped up between the stony mountains were dotted with crystalline lakes.

This place we were going to was supposedly going to be phenomenally gorgeous as well, and I was gonna be able to enjoy it for the next month.

A lot of people asked, “why hospitality, Sloane?” And I always produced the same answer... Have you seen how well Airbnbs are doing? I want to take that short-term rental idea one step further and open a series of wilderness-themed Airbnbs so that people like me, who are sick of city life and not being able to breathe can find a little escape in nature.

The only thing that turned me off about this place was that it was a ski lodge, which personally I found revolting. Skiing was the type of activity weird rich people did between their thousand-dollar bottles of wine and when it was too cold to summer in The Keys.

But at the end of the day, it was a free place to stay and an internship that most people in my program would kill to have. I was lucky by all accounts and I wasn't going to let a few rich snobs make me forget it.

But by the time we arrived, I realized it might be more than a few rich snobs I had to contend with. The lodge was positively crawling with people, fresh off their New Year's excitement, and it took Ken and me fifteen minutes just to get to the front entrance.

Not for nothing, it was absolutely gorgeous, as predicted, and I couldn't wait to explore the little ravine in the area where we entered the property.

The snow looked heavenly. Even this late in the day, there was so much of it where parts remained untreaded.

“Well, Chippy?”

Kendal’s voice broke through my gawking and I saw that we’d not only parked but that he’d gotten out and was holding our luggage.

“Oh,” I said with surprise. “I didn’t realize we’d stopped.”

Ken laughed. “I noticed. Now get your ass out of the car and let’s get inside. I’m having some major shrinkage here.”

“Ew, Ken. That’s disgusting.”

He laughed and I jumped out, picking up some snow and chucking it at his face for the offense of having talked about his genitals. But it had lured me out, even if it was mostly for revenge.

The walk from the parking lot to the front entrance was busy, but almost nothing could distract from the weird Hilton of the Hills vibe I was getting. A perfect place for people who had absolutely no personality to come and stare at each other while they spent thousands on meaningless shit.

“This is...”

“Hideous? Unnatural?” I filled in for my brother as we walked into the lobby. It looked like it could have been an upscale shopping mall.

“I was gonna say classy. But sure, Sloane.” He rolled his eyes at me and I stuck out my tongue. “You’re not gonna say

all this shit to my friend, are you?”

I opened my mouth to say something about living my truth but I quickly shut up. Free, high-quality internships were not easy to come by and Kenny was sticking his neck out for me.

“No,” I said, shaking my head. “Promise.”

Kendal looked at me suspiciously but we kept walking to the front desk.

Behind the counter was some snow bunny-looking girl who swooned when she made eye contact with my blue-eyed, auburn-haired brother. I should have expected it, of course, that’s what happened no matter where we were. Ken was a good-looking dude and he didn’t really know it, which I can only assume made him more attractive to the types of girls who’d never seen something real in their life.

“Hi,” said the blonde girl whose nametag read, *Aubree*. “Are you checking in? Honeymoon suite, perhaps?”

Now, I was no idiot. A man and a woman walk in together and I was sure the natural guess wasn’t brother and sister. But Kenny and I look ridiculously alike. Like could be twins alike if he hadn’t been so much older than me. As it stood, he looked more like my father. But at the minimum, it was clear we were related.

“Oh,” he said, laughing in a way that would have been flirting to anyone else. “No. This is my little sister, Sloane. She’s here to intern under Harry.”

A weird look flashed in Aubree's eyes and she sized me up in a predator/prey type of evaluation. "Oh," she said, a little colder than she should have. "I'll go find him for you."

As she walked away, I could see Kendal looking at her ass and I gave him a slap on the arm. "Don't be gross," I said. "She's too young for you."

Ken gave me a glare. "You're too young to be considered a person so... there."

"Nice one," I said, giving him a deadpanned look. "They give out master's degrees for that level of comeback?"

"Kendal!"

I turned to find a tall man with chestnut-colored hair and the greenest eyes I'd ever seen staring at us. He was smiling, which I figured must have been a good sign, and he reached for my brother to pull him into a hug.

"Harold," Ken said, laughing with the joy of seeing his friend. "You look like you've aged like a fine wine."

"You look like you haven't aged at all," the man I presumed was Harry said as the two embraced. "Wow. Has it really been ten years? Feels like only nine."

I will admit, as much as the display of brotherhood made me cringe, Harry's accent was really hot. It was like he was an extra on TOWIE or something. Kendal laughed like this Harry had said the funniest thing in the world and I couldn't help but roll my eyes. They were acting like two college guys who

were too busy hyping each other up to notice the world around them.

“If you two are done stroking each other’s egos...” I said, stepping forward. “Hi. I’m Sloane. Ken’s little sister.”

Harry turned to look at me and he got an odd look on his face. Something like a cross between seasick and starving.

“Uh... hi,” he said, putting out his hand. “Harry. Thanks for coming in.”

“Thank you,” I replied. “This place is...” I could feel Ken’s eyes on me and I smiled. “Something else.”

Harry sighed and pushed back a bunch of his hair. “Something else is right. It feels like nothing is functioning today.”

Oh, goody. I was here to intern at a polished turd. This must be one of those places that looked fancy but cut corners anywhere they could.

Not to mention that this Harry was annoying me already. I hated a whiner, and knowing I was going to have to spend a lot of time with this whiner made me anxious.

“Why don’t I show you to your room?” he asked, clearly noting the non-response he got out of me. “Your brother tells me you’re interested in opening some Airbnbs,” he said. “That’s cool.”

For the first time since I arrived, I felt a little excited. I loved talking about my passion project. “I don’t think enough

people in the world take time away to enjoy the earth's natural beauty," I said.

"Tell me about it," Harry replied with a little laugh. "It's like pulling teeth to get people out here."

I raised an eyebrow at him. "Not this commercial stuff. Real nature."

Harry looked a little taken aback and I could feel Ken's grip tighten on my shoulder. "We'd love to see the room. Lead the way."

Ken pushed me forward with a brotherly shove and I turned to give him a finger.

"Why are your friends so old and out of touch?" I asked.

Kendal looked like he wanted to punch me in the face. "Sloane!" he hissed.



## *Chapter Three*

Harry

**O**ld.  
Sloane had called me old.

It was one of my worst fears coming true, that I'd gone so long without being young that I'd missed out on it altogether, and was now...

Old.

Far too old for anyone young and lively. Someone who had a sense of work-life balance, who actually had the desire to see the world, and not just hear about it from her dad while she remained stuck here in Montana.

Oh, right. That was just me.

"Well," I said, trying to sound much less wounded than I felt. "Shall I show you to your rooms?"

Sloane gave me a look I couldn't quite work out, but her bright red curls bounced as she turned, and I caught myself staring. I didn't remember her being this beautiful when I'd seen pictures of her when we were in school.

Then again, she'd been a child, a fact I had to keep reminding myself of as we walked through the halls and rode the elevator until we arrived on the fourth floor, the second highest one in the lodge. All the rooms up here had stunning, panoramic views of the mountains, and the facilities were more newly remodeled, so they were outfitted with newer bathrooms and hardwood floors rather than carpeting.

"So," I said, trying to make conversation but feeling distinctly awkward after her comment downstairs. "You said your dream is to work with Airbnb?"

"Not really work *with* them, per se," she said "I want to own a few in really unique, remote locations, like an igloo in the Arctic Circle, or a treehouse in Costa Rica overlooking the ocean. Places people can go to really experience life from someone else's perspective."

I couldn't help but be impressed by her enthusiasm and vision. Even right out of business school, I had no idea what my passion was, which was part of why it was so easy for my dad to rope me into running this lodge.

"I think that's rather impressive, to be honest," I said. "There are a lot of easy paths when you graduate with a hospitality degree. That won't be one of them, but it certainly sounds like an absolute adventure to do."

Was I giving myself therapy today? I had taken the easy path. Was the only reason I hadn't given myself more time to have fun because I was afraid that I might fail if I went out on my own? Or was it really just because I didn't want to let dear old Dad down?

I supposed multiple things could be true.

"Well," I said when we arrived outside of the two adjoining rooms. "This room will be yours, Sloane. They're next to each other, and you can open the door between, but you'll both have privacy when you want it."

"Cool," Sloane said, tossing her hair over her shoulder as I opened the door. "Thanks." She turned and flopped down on the bed, bouncing a bit like she was testing it for springiness before picking up the remote and turning on the TV.

Kendal sighed and turned to me, reaching out his hand. "She probably won't say it, but I will. Thanks for doing this, man. She really needs it or she won't graduate."

"It's my pleasure," I said, shaking the hand he offered. "And if either of you need anything during your stay, you can use the phones in the room. You're more likely to get help faster that way, but you're always welcome to reach out to me directly anyway."

Kendal smiled. "Thanks again. You ever need anything—"

"I'll let you know," I said, grinning back. I looked around him. "See you tomorrow, Sloane! Lots of material to cover if you want to be ready to shadow me."

She looked at me with a forced smile, then turned back to the TV.

God, she was beautiful even when she was being rude.

*Stop it, Harry,* I thought as I turned and left the room. *She's Ken's much younger sister.*

It was a hard position to find myself in. I could think of a million reasons why I shouldn't make a move on this girl, but my mind was reeling with how I could possibly get her alone long enough to win her over.

Even though I knew she was completely off-limits, the image of that fiery red hair and the outfit she wore drove me insane. Just the look of her screamed freedom and a lack of inhibitions.

And maybe that could be extended to other areas...

*Bad Harry.*

I tried to force my thoughts to stop veering into the territory of impropriety, but, as thoughts were so inclined to do, they kept revisiting a mental image of her stripping off her embroidered jeans, standing before me in her T-shirt and oversized sweater and nothing else, her fiery curls framing her face as she walked toward me...

I shook my head slightly, trying to clear the image before my body betrayed my impure thoughts to anyone walking past. I made it to my office quickly, then turned and locked the door because I knew I was losing the fight with my lust, and lo and behold, I was rock hard before I even made it to my desk.

I sat down in my chair and ran a hand over my stiff length, hoping perhaps I could reclaim my dignity and make it go away, but I knew that there was nothing for it but to get rid of it the old-fashioned way. Especially once I touched the throbbing beast and it roared with need.

*Shit.*

I looked at my door to check that the lock was actually engaged, then unbuttoned the top of my pants and slowly pulled down the zipper. I couldn't believe I was really doing this—that I was about to have a wank over my friend's little sister. What kind of cliché was I?

But any and all thoughts about stopping vanished the second my hand wrapped around my cock. In fact, the only thing that I could bring to mind was that same image of Sloane half naked, only now, she was removing the jumper and the T-shirt to reveal a pair of lovely, perfectly perky tits, which bounced along with her hair as she walked toward me.

“Fuck,” I whispered into the emptiness of my office as my mental image of Sloane made it to my desk.

*“You can't stop thinking about me,”* she said.

“No,” I said. “I can't. You're gorgeous, you know.”

*“I do,”* she replied with a grin. *“And I know you can't resist me.”*

“No,” I confirmed.

She gave a little laugh that was as musical as bells tinkling, then slowly dropped to her knees in front of me. *“Perhaps I*

*could give you a little something, then.”*

I moaned, trying to keep my voice down so that my assistant, whose desk was right outside my door, didn't hear me.

The imaginary Sloane took my cock in her hands and leaned forward, licking her lips. Her hair billowed around her as she bent forward and licked the tip, where a large drip had emerged.

As I pictured her taking me into her mouth, I began to stroke myself slowly at first, then with more speed and force, picturing the way her head would bob up and down, taking my significant mass deep into her throat. The way she would groan and whimper, the way she would touch herself, unable to resist.

“God, Sloane...” I mumbled. “That feels so—”

Suddenly, I was interrupted by a knock on the door. I froze, erection still in hand.

“Mr. Sutton?” my assistant called through the door.

I looked down at my rod, which had emitted several thick drops down its sides and my hand.

“Yes?” I called back, hoping it wouldn't be anything important and I could just convince him to go away so that I could finish.

“There's a problem, sir,”

Of fucking course there was. Couldn't have a problem five minutes later when I'd finished my wank. No, it had to come when I was seconds from doing the same.

I looked down at my member again, debating finishing myself off anyway, but I was already going soft, the fantasy killed in light of the job I'd sold my soul to. I couldn't even masturbate on my own schedule, let alone do anything else.

I grabbed a few tissues and some hand sanitizer to clean up the mess in my pants and on my hands as I called out, "One minute!"

Once I was presentable again, which didn't take long at all, I stood up and opened the door to find Tad looking highly anxious.

"What's wrong?" I asked quickly.

He wasn't one to fuss—I needed someone with a level head to keep things in order. I had far too much responsibility to leave my affairs in the hands of someone who couldn't keep up with my workload. So, for him to look this anxious, I knew it had to be bad.

"Um..." he said, running a hand over the back of his head nervously. "There's a problem on the fourth floor."

"What kind of problem?" I asked, wishing he would just come out with it and stop skirting around the issue.

"Well... it seems that there was an issue where a bathtub overflowed, and several rooms got flooded—"

"What?" I practically screamed. "How many?"

“Four,” he said, looking down at a post-it in his hand. “Including two executive suites.”

Executive suites?

The words caught me off guard, and like a ton of bricks, panic hit me even harder.

The executive suites on the fourth floor were where Kendal and Sloane were staying.

“Shit,” I said, taking the note and rushing out of my office before calling back to Tad, “Get maintenance up there as soon as possible. Tell them it’s the number-one priority.”

As I rushed through the halls, I tried to hurry without looking as panicked as I felt so that other guests didn’t suspect anything was wrong. If I knew one thing from working in this industry my entire adult life, it was that a single concerned guest could lead to mayhem before you even had a chance to temper the flames.

I made it up to the fourth floor and to the hallway listed on the note, dreading what I was going to find since I recognized the wing as being the one where I’d put Kendal and Sloane.

Dammit.

Of course, the day they got here, there would be some kind of issue where their things were potentially destroyed by either another guest or some kind of maintenance failure. Not exactly the warm welcome I had been hoping to present them with, and certainly not the first impression I’d been hoping for.



I turned the corner and immediately my feet began to squish on the wet puddled floor of the hallway. I could feel the water creeping into my shoes and tried to ignore the horrid feeling of it soaking through my socks as I approached the guests standing in the hallways.

Including my new intern.

“What happened?” I asked the group at large, hoping someone could clue me in. But one look around told me everything I needed to know.

While most of the guests were standing looking angry and put out, Sloane...

Sloane looked embarrassed.

“Sloane?” I asked slowly, hoping she’d just tell me.

She opened her mouth, but nothing came out. I took a deep breath, then ran a hand through my hair.

“Regardless,” I said, turning my attention to all of the guests in the hall, then motioning to one of my staff. “If you’ll all follow Danita down to the lobby, we will get you relocated into a dry room, and we will take care of bringing you all of your things.”

“What about things that were destroyed or soaked?” one particularly cross-looking man asked.

“We will leave it up to you as far as what you’d like to do with those things. We will compensate you for any destroyed items and will offer free dry-cleaning service for any clothes that were made unwearable by the incident.”

This seemed to mollify the guests, who all filed in behind Danita so she could go get them sorted into new accommodations, except for Sloane, who remained with me.

## *Chapter Four*

Sloane

**S**hit.  
Shit.

Double, triple, and quadruple shit.

I still had the knob in my hand when I threw my clothes back on and came rushing out of the room. I found the first employee I could, a member of the housekeeping staff around the corner, and she used her walkie-talkie to contact the desk. From there, it was a constant stream of resort staff coming up to survey the damage, only to have to call someone else to come help since I had apparently created an unprecedented situation.

Harry was watching his employees trying to siphon water out of the room and attempt to stop the flow of water, but it wasn't until someone from maintenance came running in with his tools that it slowed and, eventually, ceased.

“Alright,” Harry said in that unfairly charming accent of his, running a hand through his hair and turning to me. “Why don’t you come take a look at the damage and see what you can grab that the water didn’t destroy?”

The way he said it made me nervous like there were more than one or two things that the flooding had wrecked, and I almost didn’t even want to walk into the room and see. But he held the door open for me, so I stepped forward.

I poked my head in through the door of the room, and when I saw what had become of my things, I could have cried. The water had apparently come up to about knee-level at some point, and, of course, my suitcase had still been on the floor, so every single article of clothing I had with me was either soaked or ruined, in addition to all of my chargers and my actual fucking laptop, which had been on the floor next to the bed.

Harry seemed to notice what I had, and he put a hand on my shoulder.

“We’ll find you some new accommodations,” he said, “and we’ll figure out how to deal with your things.”

“There’s not much to deal with,” I said in defeat. “Pretty sure I ruined them all.”

But Harry just motioned for me to go inside. I handed him the knob, which he looked at in surprise. Then he got on his radio, mumbling something as I waded into the mess to pull out what I could. About half my clothes were actually ruined since they’d been vintage pieces made of leather or suede. I

started to pull the rest out, wringing them to get as much of the water out as I could. I set the things that were salvageable on the bed, then turned my attention to the laptop, which was still sitting in a small puddle. I groaned as I picked it up, watching a cascade of water fall out of it when I turned it to the side. I knew any hope of it being okay was gone.

I tossed it onto the bed and went into the next room to see how much of Kendal's stuff got ruined. But unlike me, he'd been smart and unpacked, so his stuff was hanging in the closet or up on shelves, and his computer was sitting on the desk.

I sighed and turned back to my own room, cursing myself for not being more organized, and went out to find Harry standing there with a box.

"I had one of my people bring this up for you," he said, handing it to me. "Thought you might want to put what you can in here."

"Thanks," I said, feeling even more embarrassed than before. He could have been furious at me, but instead, he was being really kind and sympathetic, which somehow made things worse than if he'd been an ass about it.

His walkie-talkie went off with someone saying, "Mr. Sutton?" He held up a finger to me to signal that he needed a moment, then held up the device.

"Go ahead," he said.

"Got the room you asked for. Suite five-oh-four."

“Great,” he said with a hint of a smile. “I’ll take the guest up myself. Thanks.”

He put the walkie-talkie back on his belt, then motioned for me to follow him. We walked down the hall, me in my soaked slippers, swishing as I went, as Harry tried to comfort me.

“It’s not that big of a deal,” he said, his cheeks turning red. I shot him a look and he said, “Well, yes, alright. It is a big deal, not the kind of issue we have to deal with every day. But look, accidents happen. It’s not like you meant to pull the knob off, right?”

“Of course not!” I said a bit too loudly. I readjusted the box in my arms to try to distract from my faux pas, but I nearly dropped it.

“Here we are,” Harry said with a grin as he caught the box before it could fall. He took it from my hands and began walking again, carrying my things for me. “Look, stuff like this might not happen every day, but there’s always something. It’s just part of management life. The part they don’t teach you about in school and you only really find out when you’re on the job. So in a way, I guess you’re lucky to get to experience it as an intern.”

“I don’t feel lucky,” I said, looking at my box of things, which were soaking through and making the cardboard dark and wet.

Harry hesitated for a moment, then said, “No, I don’t suppose you would. Well, I’m sure a girl like you has no

problem getting lucky, so it should be pretty easy to bounce back.”

I raised my eyebrow at him. Had he just said what I thought he said?

“A joke,” he said quickly, turning even redder. “And a poorly timed one, at that. You’re probably not feeling particularly lighthearted at the moment, are you?”

I shook my head, then lowered it, feeling terrible. I knew it wasn’t really my fault—it wasn’t like I was even strong enough to break off a knob like that if I’d wanted to. It had obviously been a timebomb waiting for some unfortunate guest to grab hold of the wrong way, and I just happened to be the unlucky person it happened to. But I still felt embarrassed. Even if it wasn’t because of me specifically, I still felt responsible and knew everyone else whose things had been ruined felt the same.

“Well,” he said, “I can’t imagine you would after what happened. But accidents happen, and our job is to deal with them when they do. Believe me, working in hospitality, there are much worse things you come across than a few flooded rooms.”

I nodded, feeling slightly better knowing he didn’t blame me, but not by much. We walked in silence a bit longer, with him trying to make conversation and me failing miserably at being a person. Finally, we took an elevator up to the top floor, where Harry guided me down a hallway with the doors much further apart than they’d been downstairs.

“Harry...” I said quietly, but I don’t think he heard me, because he suddenly stopped in front of a pair of French doors.

“Welcome,” he said, motioning to the room. “It’s one of our executive suites. I didn’t have any more adjoining rooms, so I figured it would be easier to just give you and Ken your own bedrooms in a single suite, which also gives you access to a kitchen and a living room area.”

My mouth dropped open. I’d destroyed a wing of the hotel and my punishment was an upgrade like this?

“Harry, I don’t think I can accept this,” I said, shaking my head. “It’s way too generous, given—”

“Given nothing,” he said, smiling at me again. God, he was cute. “As I said, accidents happen, and I should never have had my intern for the next month living in the standard rooms. You should have always been up here, where you could really make yourself at home.”

I was dumbstruck, but I managed to nod. This was so generous of him.

“I...” I opened my mouth to argue, but Harry simply handed me my box and turned to unlock the door.

“No arguments,” he said. “This is your room now. Go ahead and make yourself at home.”

I nodded blankly, then turned to walk inside, but right then, the dampness of the cardboard finally gave way and everything inside fell through the bottom, crashing to the floor.



I could have cried right then and there, but before I could, Harry bent down and started picking up my things. It only took me a second to help him, and we had it all picked up in about a minute. He helped me bring it inside and set it on the kitchen counter.

“Until you figure out what you want to do with it,” he said. “Shall I leave you to it, then?”

I looked around at the suite and my jaw dropped. It was the same kind of basic décor as the rest of the hotel, with absolutely no personality or warmth. Nothing real. But I’d be lying if I said it didn’t have a feeling of luxury under all of that. It was spacious and well-equipped in a way that a standard hotel room would never be.

“Uh, yeah,” I said, looking back at Harry, who looked like he wanted to say something but didn’t know what it was or how to. “Yes?”

“Nothing,” he said, shaking his head slightly as if to clear it. “Nothing. Actually something.” He pulled out his phone and started typing something. “What’s your email?”

“Sloane Riley zero one zero one at gmail dot com.”

“Perfect,” he said, typing for another few moments, then putting it into his pocket. “I’ve sent you two gift cards to your email. One is for an electronics shop where you can pick out a new computer, and the other is to the gift shop downstairs for you to replace the clothes that got ruined.”

The very idea of buying clothes at the soulless corporate resort gift shop could have made me puke, but it was so generous of Harry that I just nodded.

“Thanks,” I said. “You didn’t need to do that.”

“I’m doing it for everyone else who was in that wing. Why wouldn’t I do it for you, too?” I nodded, and then Harry turned to leave. “Let me know if you need anything else, okay? And I’ll bring you up your own keys in a bit.”

“Okay,” I said as Harry walked out with a wave.

I pulled out my phone and checked my email, totally not expecting to see that many zeros or such a high number at the front on either of the gift cards, but he’d given me enough to buy something top-of-the-line at the computer store, and probably enough to buy one of everything in the gift shop.

My jaw hit the floor, and it took me a minute to recover my senses. I was still holding my phone, and I’d had a text from Kendal earlier checking on me, but I hadn’t responded yet in the chaos of the day.

I dialed his number and waited for him to pick up.

“Hey, Chippy,” he said. “Hell of a wait on a reply to that text.”

“Well, it’s been a day,” I said. “We, uh... well, our rooms got moved.”

There was a brief pause, and then Ken said, “Why?” in an exaggeratedly slow voice.

“Um... there was an accident with the bathtub, and I might have accidentally pulled the knob out of the wall and flooded our rooms and a few others.”

“How the hell did you do that?” he asked with a bit of a laugh.

“It wasn’t my fault,” I said quickly. “It just... broke off in my hand. But Harry came up and tried to help. A bunch of my stuff got ruined, but yours all seemed to be okay. You’ll have to go get it when you get back from... Where the hell did you go?”

“Skiing,” he said, and suddenly the sound of wind on the other end made sense.

“Gross,” I said, laughing. “You have fun with that. I’ll be in our cozy new executive suite making some hot cocoa.”

“Executive suite, huh?” he said in a suggestive way. “What did we do to merit that?”

“Again. Gross,” I said, though I really couldn’t think of anything gross about Harry other than him being Ken’s age. “He said it was the only way we could be next to each other, but I get the feeling he was just trying to be nice.”

“Might have been,” Ken said. “But that always was like him. He would give the shirt off his back, even if you already had one, just because he thought you deserved to have two.”

“No kidding,” I said. “You should see the dollar amount of the gift cards he gave me to replace my laptop and clothes.”

“And how much would that be?” Ken asked in an overly curious tone.

“Enough for me to redo my whole wardrobe in ski bunny gear and then use my new computer to fly a rocket ship where I can take my new clothes since I’ll have that powerful of a machine.”

“Damn,” Ken said. “Well, listen, Chip.” He paused and waited, but I didn’t say anything. “Harry is loaded, but he’s also really generous with his money, his time, and the way he takes care of people. Just do me a favor and make sure you don’t take advantage of that.”

“Does that sound like me?” I questioned, feeling hurt.

“No, of course not,” Ken said. “But I know how tempting it can all be. He was rich as hell in school, too, and a lot of people saw him as a target since he’s so kind.”

“Okay,” I said. “I’ll be careful with your friend.”

“Thank you. Now, to the important part... you gonna come out and ski with me?”

“Hell no,” I said. “Enjoy.”

## *Chapter Five*

Harry

I could barely keep my eyes open as I got dressed for the day. I'd been up most of the night, unable to sleep as conflicting thoughts of Sloane as both the sex goddess I'd imagined her as in my office and the bath-destroying disaster warred in my head for how I would perceive her moving forward.

Despite my exhaustion, my refusal to ever allow any time for myself won out over a desire for extra sleep. I knew that my employees ran the place like a well-oiled machine, but there was always the fear that it was thanks to my leadership rather than to anything else, which meant I was loath to ever relinquish my supervisory duties.

I just had to hope that eventually Dad would see my hard work and reward it.

I made my way up to the fourth floor, where I was met with several large fans placed at either end of the corridor to try to

dry up the floor where it had been soaked. It was clearly still damp as I walked along. It would take more than the space of a few hours and some wet-dry vacs to fix this issue.

I reached the room that had been Sloane's and saw the door was open. "Chance?" I called into the room, hearing the telltale clanking of metal on metal, letting me know he was in there, working.

"Yeah, boss!" he replied from the bathroom. I walked in, stepping around bags of tools, pipe parts, and faucets.

"Morning," I said as I entered.

"Morning yourself," he said from inside the bathtub, looking up at me. He was kneeling down in the bath with some kind of tool he was using to remove the faucet and knob fixtures. "You look like hell."

"Thanks," I said dryly, knowing that my hair was likely a mess and I could *feel* the bags under my eyes. "How's the repair going?"

He sighed and lowered his tools.

"It's going, I guess," he said, frowning at the wall. "Whoever was in here really did a number on the system in there. I can't even quite figure out what's actually broken so I can fix or replace it. Here, come take a look."

Great. Just the news I was wishing for.

Chance climbed out of the tub and let me get in, handing me a flashlight. I bent down by the hole and looked in. I wasn't sure what exactly I was supposed to be looking for, since I had

no idea how plumbing systems worked, so everything looked to me like it could be the problem. But I felt embarrassed to admit that, so instead of asking for help, I turned to Chance and said, “Yeah, I see what you mean. What’s your plan?” I asked, hoping he had some kind of steps he was intending to take to fix the issue that would have us up and running again before long.

“Well,” he said, wiping his forehead on the back of his arm. “Right now, I can’t do diddly unless I figure out where the hell the issue is. I’m basically doing exploratory surgery and hoping I find the problem before the patient bleeds out. I’m gonna need Geraldo to take a look, because this is beyond me, I think.”

I felt my body go tense. In his metaphor, the patient was my hotel, and it would bleed out if I couldn’t use these rooms and had to keep comping others to make up for them being unusable.

I looked down at my watch and sighed. I didn’t have much time left before I was going to have to start on the more routine tasks I had to do today. Plus, I had wanted to check in on Kendal, my friend, and Sloane, my intern—and the subject of several particular dreams I’d had the night before, but that was beside the point.



I walked through the hallways headed for the elevator up to the top floor, where I'd relocated Kendal and Sloane to an executive suite with two bedrooms since there were no other adjoining rooms available. I'd spent half my evening the night before going over profit and loss sheets and figuring out exactly what this ordeal was going to cost the hotel—especially knowing that I would be letting someone stay in an executive suite for a whole month without pay.

The worst part was that I knew I was going to have to report the loss to my father, and that he was going to think I wasn't capable of running the resort. I'd been busting my arse for thirteen years in this place, and one incident could be all it took to destroy any good credit I'd built up by leveraging any kind of social life for the betterment of his property.

And that wasn't even including the board of directors for the company. Dad was the president and could pull the strings he wanted to, but ultimately, the board could decide that I wasn't fit to run the hotel and fire me, eliminating my life's work in one fell swoop and making all of the sacrifice I'd put into the place meaningless.

I mentally went down a list of everything I'd have to own up to in regards to this whole debacle. Destroyed property, both for the resort and for guests. Loss of revenue for compensating guests and offering them free upgrades. Loss of revenue for the upgraded rooms which could no longer be rented out. The executive suite which would be out of the rotation for an entire month while my new intern stayed on property. A new intern who, through no fault of her own, mind



you, had already broken something which led to a huge cost that I still didn't have an exact number for. Hell, I didn't even have an estimated number because Chance hadn't figured out what the actual problem was yet.

I was so fucked.

While in the elevator, I checked my phone to see what my itinerary for the day was, as if I needed to. Every day there were tasks based on the day of the week or month, and today was supposed to start with a ski lift inspection. That would be an easy one to bring Sloane along to. I knew she wasn't really interested in running a ski resort, but it was more about the procedural aspect of the task that would be beneficial for her to learn.

I walked up to the door and rolled my shoulders back, feeling a wave of butterflies settling in my gut. Why did this girl have me so tied up in knots so fast? Sure, she was beautiful, and she had a certain joie de vivre that I hadn't had since I was a teenager. But was that really enough for me to be this enamored with her so fast? It didn't seem like it should be possible, and yet here I was at her door, wiping my hands on my pants because they were sweating from nerves and chewing my lip. I was like a schoolboy about to see his crush outside of school for the first time.

I swallowed the jittery feeling and knocked on the door.

"Who is it?" I heard Sloane call out.

"Harry," I said back.

“Oh,” she said. “Hang on.” She shuffled around inside for a moment, then opened the door, and my jaw dropped so hard and fast I thought I might have bruised it on the floor.

Sloane had come to the door wearing absolutely nothing but a towel, her curls somewhat tamed as they were soaking wet, and I could even see little droplets still on her shoulders. I couldn’t help but picture her standing beneath the rainfall showerhead I knew was installed in her bathroom, completely naked, washing herself.

She stood there for a moment as I tried to remember exactly what it was I was supposed to talk to her about, but I kept coming up with a big, fat nothing because all I could think about was that little slit in the towel where I could see up her thigh to her hip, and—

*Stop it. Bad Harry.*

“Yes, Harry?” Sloane said, looking at me with a bit of a glint in her eye as she watched me eye-fucking her. She was enjoying this. Had she come to the door in a towel on purpose, just to get this kind of reaction out of me?

*Well, good show, darling, it worked.*

“Er... well, erm...” I said, sputtering.

Sloane stared at me for a moment with an expectant smile, then said, “Kendal isn’t here.”

“Oh,” I said, unsure what that had to do with anything. Then it dawned on me that she thought I was there to see him. “Oh, right. I’m actually here to see you. I have to do an inspection

on some ski lifts today, and I was thinking that you might benefit from coming with me. Are you ready to get started?"

She smirked at me, looking me slowly up and down, then shrugged.

"Sure," she said, tossing some of her hair over her shoulder. "What else am I going to do? I came here to shadow you, didn't I?"

"That you did," I said in a voice that sounded oddly boisterous and full of false bravado. What the hell was that?

Sloane gave a little one of her tinkling laughs, though I could see in her eyes that she was amused at my behavior, and not because she found it particularly humorous. It was funny because I was making an absolute idiot of myself.

"I'll be right out," she said, turning her back. "I just need to get dressed. You can wait on the couch if you want to."

"Alright," I said, afraid to say more in case that horrible voice came out again. I followed her inside, trying not to focus on the incredibly long legs I could see almost all of beneath her towel. I took my seat on the couch and looked away, willing myself to not get hard like I did yesterday.

Thankfully, I was successful this time, which was good because I wasn't going to have a chance to relieve myself now. Not that I'd had much of a chance for it the day before, with the bathtub disaster, but I'd been able to finish the job last night when I got to my room.

I looked all around the suite. Other than bringing Sloane up here, I hadn't been in one of these suites since they'd been redone. I'd hired a designer to come in, and I felt like she'd done a good job. At least until I saw Sloane walking through it. Seeing someone with so much free spirit energy in this place made it feel cold and impersonal. I started making mental notes to bring to my designer when we had our next renovation.

After several minutes, she came out of the bedroom dressed in a fresh pair of vintage-looking jeans with some faux fur-lined boots and a rust-colored sherpa-lined jacket. She looked like she'd stepped right out of the seventies, and it suited her so well that I couldn't help but smile.

“Alright,” she said. “I'm ready. Where to, boss?”

## *Chapter Six*

Sloane

**I**t was absolutely freezing as Harry led me out into the grounds. Thankfully, there were pathways created by some kind of machine so that people could easily get from the resort out to the lifts, so I wasn't up to my ankles in the snow.

It was about a ten-minute walk out to the ski lifts, and when we got there, Harry turned and walked toward a building up on the side of the hill.

"I hope you've brought good gloves," he said with a smile.

"Uh..." I replied. My gloves were pretty standard, and I wasn't sure what I'd need something "good" for, until he reached for the ladder coming down out of the bottom of the control room. "Wait. We're climbing up there?"

"That's right," he replied, looking down at me with a smile as he held on with only one hand. He looked like some kind of

sexy pirate, only he was dressed in a thick wool coat instead of some flowing linen shirt.

I watched him climb for a minute, enjoying the view, but once he was up at the top looking down at me, the show was over, so I grabbed on and climbed as carefully as I could, gripping each rung like my life depended on it.

Thankfully, my gloves were enough to stay sturdy on the ladder, and when I got to the top, Harry opened the door into the control room and led me inside.

Harry had said that he thought it would be a good idea for me to see the control room and how it worked. I honestly couldn't figure out what about this was going to be useful to me since I had absolutely no interest in running a ski lodge or some bougie resort in any capacity, but doing this meant I was spending less time with the stuck-up snobs staying at the hotel, and *that* made it worth it.

“Harry!” said the woman working the controls. She was probably in her mid-forties with close-cropped hair she'd dyed blue, and a warm, welcoming smile. “Wasn't expecting to see you today. Inspections usually aren't until the fifth.”

“You're very right,” he said, clapping a hand on her shoulder. “Sorry for the surprise visit, but I have a new intern for the next month, and I figured it might be fun for her to see the ski lifts and how they run.”

I raised a hand in a small wave. “Hi,” I said. “I'm Sloane.”

She turned all the way around in her chair and held out a hand to me. “Lisa. Nice to meet you.”

“Can you show her how all of this works?” Harry asked, leaning over Lisa and pointing to the control panel. He turned his head back to me. “I don’t even need to be in here much, but it’s the kind of knowledge the general manager should have in case of emergencies.”

“Sure,” Lisa said. She looked up at me and asked, “Do you have any experience with anything like this?”

“Not even a little,” I replied with a laugh.

“No worries,” she said, chuckling as well. “Why don’t you start by watching how it works out there, then I’ll show you how I make the magic happen.” She spread her hands out in a jazz hands type of gesture, which made me laugh more.

“You can come sit over here by me,” Harry said, pointing to a third swivel chair between him and Lisa.

I could feel myself blush a bit and cursed my fair skin for showing every time that happened. But I went to the seat, which was quite a bit nearer to Harry than to Lisa, and I could feel the warmth coming off his arm with how close he was. It wouldn’t take much for me to just lean in, and...

“Alright,” Lisa said, snapping me out of the daze I’d fallen into. “So, you can see right now, the lift is stopped, but that’s not normal. We try to keep it moving as much as possible so we can get as many people up the mountain as we can. That

way, the guests feel like they're getting their money's worth staying here."

"Makes sense," I said.

"Now all I have to do is flip this lever here... and it starts back up." Sure enough, the minute she switched it on, the lift began to move again.

I watched as people went by, and it was like watching people on a carousel. Some of the people were wearing grins so wide they almost looked cartoonish for how excited they were to be going up. Others were more neutral, almost like this was a normal day for them. Then there were the ones who were holding onto the seats for dear life, looking around them for some kind of escape because they were absolutely terrified.

Lisa showed me the controls and which ones made it speed up and slow down, where the emergency stop was, and even how to make it go backward. It wasn't a super complicated system, and it didn't take long before Lisa asked me questions to make sure I knew what to do, and I was getting them all right.

"Well," Harry said. "What do you think, Sloane? Do you want to try it out?"

I gave a nervous giggle but nodded. "Sure," I said, and Lisa scooted over so I could move my chair to the center of all the controls. I looked down at them, worried that even though I'd gotten all the questions right that I'd somehow mess something up.



And if ever there was a case of the universe manifesting my fears, it was in that very moment.

I barely had my hands on the controls when suddenly the lift, which had been moving at a slightly higher speed, lurched to an abrupt stop, sending several people sliding off their seats into the snow, which thankfully wasn't a far drop.

"Shit," Harry said, jumping up and reaching for the emergency brake to release it, but it wasn't activated. I hadn't touched it at all, so I had no idea how I'd managed to stop the lift. "What the hell happened?"

"I don't know!" I said, backing away to let him and Lisa figure it out. I watched them for a few minutes, but they couldn't figure out what I'd done, so Harry turned to me, running a hand through his hair.

"Alright," he said to me. "Lisa can work on this, but right now, I need your help with the people on the lift. We need to get out there and help people off the lift and back down the mountain safely. There are pathways, but they're not super easily seen so that people don't just jump off and go to them. We need to guide the guests to them and show them back down, then help get them set up with some kind of compensation for the lost ski time."

I nodded as he spoke very quickly, moving toward the door to climb down the ladder. I looked back at Lisa. "I'm so sorry," I said.

"It's fine," she replied, and with that smile of hers, I actually believed she meant it, and I felt a little bit better.

I followed Harry out into the cold again, and he was already helping a family off the lift. He offered his hand to each of them, then pointed the way to the pathway back down. “If you go right over there, you’ll find a walkway that will take you back to the resort.”

The first family was understanding, but that wasn’t the case with all of them. As Harry helped each group of people climb down and find their way back to the resort, I watched each person react differently. Some were grateful for the help. Others seemed angry with him for their inability to make it to the top and go skiing.

Then there were those who’d fallen out, including a little girl who was sitting in the snow crying as I approached.

“Hey there,” I said, bending down to her level. “You okay?”

“I fell,” she said, pointing to her knee, which I supposed she landed on.

“Hm... Let me take a look.” I ran my hand over the knee, checking to make sure nothing felt broken, not that I was an expert, but I figured a broken leg would be pretty obvious. But she didn’t even wince when I touched the leg, so I figured she was just surprised and maybe would have a bruise. “Well, I bet it hurts, but I think you’re gonna be okay. Do you think you can walk down the mountain with your parents?”

She nodded, and I helped her to her feet. She sniffled a couple of times, then followed her family to the path.

The worst were the ones who had this entitlement vibe about them, who felt like they were owed something because of the accident, as though Harry was somehow responsible.

“Don’t worry,” he said to one such couple. “If you head back down, there’s another lift at the next hill over that can take you up.”

“We already waited in line for this one for almost half an hour,” the man complained.

“And I’m terribly sorry,” Harry said, putting out a hand to motion to where the pathway was. “It was an unfortunate occurrence, but if you see my front desk staff after you’ve enjoyed your day and tell them I sent you, they’ll see to it that you receive a complimentary gift.”

The couple exchanged looks, and I could tell they were pleased with the result, but they tried not to show it, perhaps hoping for even more, but Harry simply smiled at them and continued to point the way for them.

It took over an hour to get everyone safely off the lift and back down the mountain. By the time we did, Harry’s nose was red with the cold, and the second the last guest’s back was turned, I watched him sigh and deflate.

“You okay?” I asked, approaching him.

“Yes,” he said with a forced grin, pulling himself up to his full height.

“You sure?” I asked. “Because it seems like that took a lot out of you.”

His face relaxed into a more sincere expression, tired but with a kind smile. “All part of the job. Not the fun part, certainly, but still part of it.”

I shook my head with a soft snort. “Not the part I’d want to deal with,” I said. “Definitely think I’d prefer working with smaller crowds. Or no crowds. Just individuals and small groups. I can see why maybe some people would like it. There’s definitely a rush from dealing with a situation like this, but I think for me it’s more stressful than thrilling. I prefer to deal with people one on one, especially if something’s going wrong.”

“Seems like that happens a lot around you,” he says, and I was about to get offended until I noticed that he was laughing. “I’m kidding. Well, I’m not. But accidents happen, and sometimes you just get unlucky, which seems to be the case for you.”

I was sure my face was already bright pink from the cold and wind, but my cheeks suddenly warmed as I blushed in embarrassment. What was it about this guy that made me so nervous to do the wrong thing that I couldn't help but *always* get it wrong?

I rubbed my arms, which were starting to go numb, then looked at Harry with a smile. “Hey. It’s fucking freezing out here. Do you want to head inside and warm up? We could talk a little. Doesn’t have to be about work, either. Just might be nice to get to know the guy I’m interning with.”

He lit up at the suggestion, and I got a hint of butterflies at the expression on his face.

“That sounds fantastic,” he said before putting his hands to his face and breathing into them to warm them. “We could get a drink in the lounge. I happen to know the owner, so we’ll get a great deal.”

I laughed at the joke, then followed him inside to hopefully figure out why Harry managed to get me so tied in knots.

## *Chapter Seven*

Harry

**I**t was surprising how many plumbers there were on Google within a five-mile radius. Even more surprising was the fact that it took me forty-five minutes to find one who had availability for today to come fix the broken tap. It seemed a numerical anomaly that fifteen plumbers were totally booked through the weekend.

Once I'd managed to contract someone though, I had to check in with my head of maintenance, Geraldo, to find out what he had fucked with so far.

Geraldo was a great guy. A grandfather to about fifteen grandkids and one of the friendliest men I'd ever known. But he was getting on in years and his hands weren't as dexterous as they once were. Dad wanted me to let him go years ago, but I'd pay for a little extra work out of my own pocket for a guy who had devoted the last forty years of his life to this place.

“Hey, Gerry,” I said, ducking under a metal pipe that hung low in the work room. “I got a guy to come out and look at that tap later. What have you guys done with it so far?”

Geraldo turned to me with a smile, holding a length of copper pipe and a blackened cloth. “Oh, I tinkered with it a bit, but it’s not going the way I’d want it to.”

I put a hand on his shoulder, despite the grease that lingered there. “No worries, mate. I’ve totally got this covered.”

“Thanks, Harry,” he replied. “You’re a lifesaver.”

Geraldo had no idea to what extent I was a lifesaver, but it didn’t really matter. Seeing this guy take pride in his work and be able to provide for his family was more than worth the extra money.

I headed back for my office, knowing Sloane would be there any minute and I didn’t want to leave her alone with my things. Not that I thought she’d break anything on purpose, but it seemed like she might be a bit accident prone.

I walked into my office and had hardly sat down when the door opened again and Sloane walked in. At least, I thought it was Sloane. The woman before me had her gorgeous ginger hair pulled back into a professional-looking updo, her tattoos tucked behind a floral blouse, and she wore a black pencil skirt that looked like it might be couture.

“Uh... hi,” I said, sounding like a bloody idiot.

Sloane looked at me then walked over to the chair that sat before me, her heels clicking with each step. “Why do you

look so surprised to see me?” she asked with a giggle.

I’d be damned if I was going to tell her that my gawking was due to the fact that I was picturing what those clothes would look like on my floor, so I simply said, “I thought I had another ten minutes before you got here. Sorry about that.”

Sloane gave me a look that clearly expressed her disbelief. “You thought I was supposed to be here at”—she looked at her watch—“ten twenty-seven a.m.?”

“Uh...” I scrambled. This girl was making me lose my composure. “Yes. I don’t know what I was thinking. Anyway, you clean up nicely.”

Sloane’s grin broke into a full-on smile at this, bending her head in embarrassment. A piece of her sunset hair fell forward and she reached up with what looked like freshly manicured nails to tuck it back. “Thank you.”

“Of course,” I replied. I was happy to have gotten in the compliment without coming off like a creep. “I hope you’re ready for—”

“I’m really sorry.”

“What?” I asked, looking up when she interrupted me.

“I’m sorry about the bath. I’m a bit clumsy sometimes and it has a tendency to cause... accidents.”

I didn’t have to try to put on a fake smile this time. She was positively lighting up my office with her radiance. “Honestly, it’s not a problem. Well, okay it is a problem, but don’t worry about it at all. Things break around here all the time.”



Sloane nodded and I could see a small hint of her smile vanish. It damn near broke my heart to see her spirits dampened. “Is there anything I can do to fix it?”

I walked around my desk until I was standing in front of her and grabbed her chin. “Listen here,” I said, pointing a finger at her in what was meant to be a playful way, “I’ve told you to stop worrying about it and you will do as you’re told. Got it?”

My heart thudded as the full weight of my own words hit me. Doubly so when I noticed a dusty rose blush creep over Sloane’s nose. Fuck, this girl was going to be the undoing of me.

I quickly took a step back and took my seat to avoid her seeing how turned on I’d gotten. The last thing I needed was an issue with HR over inappropriate conduct. “Sorry,” I said. “I was being playful. I can see that—”

“I know,” Sloane said, fumbling for her words. “We’re good.”

I nodded in thanks and then picked up a stack of papers on the desk. “If you want to help me sort through these work orders so I can get them to Geraldo, that would be great. Let me explain the setup to you.”

I slid a work order across the desk and she leaned forward to look at it. As she did, the second button on her blouse gently popped open. It wasn’t violent enough for her to notice it had happened, but it was enough for me to see right down the front.

She was wearing a lacy red bra, a balconette I believe was what they would call that style. It only came up to just over her nipples and the way it was cut rounded her full, natural breasts to the point that they almost looked fake.

In moments I was rock solid, imagining those breasts in my face, and my—

“So, what does this do? This checklist?” she asked. She pointed to the box which indicated who should be billed for the work. “I understand most of this but I’m not really sure why the billing is on the work order.”

I willed some of the blood that was filling my cock back to my brain and shook my head a little to clear it. “Oh, right. That’s so we know whether to use in house supplies or whether a separate company is going to be responsible for that.”

My heart and hardness throbbed in tandem as I noticed the front of her balconette cups was a see-through mesh, revealing adorable tan nipples. I was ready to drown in Sloane right here, right now. Only I had to behave. I had to be the adult here and help her with her internship. Pretty sure she wouldn’t get extra credit for sleeping with me, even if that was how it worked.

“That makes sense,” she said nodding before she grabbed the stack of papers and sat up. “Do you have a pen?”

I nodded like a schoolboy sweating in church and I pulled open the top drawer of my desk to rifle around for a pen. I found the one my father had given me for graduation and

eagerly handed it to her. Worrying about her breaking my stuff be damned. She was breaking me with those long legs and that bra.

We worked in silence for an hour then I told her she could go get lunch and we'd resume in forty-five minutes. I had to get her out of here before I did something stupid and ruined every aspect of my life.

No sooner had she left than I jumped from my leather chair, careful not to hit my agonized dick on anything, and rushed to lock the door.

I immediately turned my back to it and unzipped my pants frantically. I could feel a light sweat forming on my brow as I pulled my eight inches forth in my hand and groaned with the first stroke.

I pictured Sloane on the floor of my office, stripped naked and wrists tied to the base of my desk. Her gorgeous legs met at the apex of a dripping wetness. The pink flesh swollen and eager for me.

She wore that dusty rose embarrassment as I stood over her, stroking my cock like she was begging for it. Ready myself for her.

“Fuck...” I hissed under my breath as my real cock pulsed and a thick drip slid down my hand. “Fuck, Sloane...”

I was feral with need and began to thrust up into my own hand.

Meanwhile, the version of me that was having his way with the young intern poised his cock at her entrance and she whimpered.

“Don’t worry, darling,” I said to her, my hand going to her stiff nipples. “I will make this feel so, so good.”

Her whole body shuddered with arousal and I moaned loudly.

Then I pushed myself inside her, inch by inch, each section of her insides giving way to the thick intruder that now touched every place that made her scream. She was tight and wet and longing, and the curve of me tucked nicely into a little spot within her that brought forth an immediate orgasm.

Her fingers went to my shoulders and her nails dug in deep. I growled into her neck, taking the skin between my teeth and purpling her beneath my lips. My hand went to her soft, curvy waist and I hoisted her up so I could stand, Sloane still riding my cock.

I slammed her into the plexiglass window that was six inches thick. It overlooked one of the busiest areas of the resort and I imagined people looking up and seeing us.

My back to the door and my ass on the carpet, I pumped my length furiously meeting each stroke down with a thrust up.

I was obsessed. I needed to feel her tighten around me, I wanted to come inside her and watch it drip down the window across the room where my fantasy continued to play out.

The fantasy version of myself was getting close like I was in real life and I looked down to see my cock bulging her stomach with each delicious insertion.

People below were staring now, several women were watching, hot blushes of their own pinking their cheeks, and I could see their nipples poking through their shirts. Even some men had pulled out their cocks and began to stroke.

From where I sat in my office, I frantically looked for something appropriate to finish into so I didn't make a mess, but it was too late. I was coming to the thought of my red-haired intern and there wasn't a damn thing that could stop it now.

I spilled out across my pants, several wet spurts that seemed to go on forever. I bit my lip to prevent myself from crying out with desperate ecstasy, but my brain kept repeating over and over again—

“Sloane.”

Even as I came down from my orgasm, I knew that this would happen again... and again unless I could make her mine. I wanted to feel that freckle-dotted skin beneath my fingers, needed to taste the taut skin of her nipples. I wanted to fuck her on every inch of this hotel.

A knock came on my door and I scrambled to my feet, dashing behind my desk, pants unzipped and quickly softening cock hanging free.

Thirty seconds later, Sloan entered with a smile. “I’m sorry, I forgot my phone.”

She pointed to my desk where, indeed, a smartphone sat held in a purple case.

“Oh,” I said, hyperaware of my sweaty face and messy hair. “That’s no bother.”

She approached and leaned over the desk to grab her missing device. If she moved two feet to the right, I would be exposed to her and I prayed that she would be in and out quickly.

Thankfully, it seemed my prayers were answered because she took the phone and said, “See you soon.”

I nodded and waited for her to exit the room before refastening my pants and cleaning up my mess. I would need to get the carpet cleaner after hours to get the ejaculate out of the carpet. I’d come far enough to nearly hit my desk and it had been smeared in when Sloane walked across it.

I wondered if she noticed the sticky wet and smell of sex as she’d entered. If she had, she certainly didn’t say.

But one thing was for sure.

I wanted Sloane and I was willing to do anything to try and get her.

## *Chapter Eight*

Sloane

I had to be wrong. There was no way I'd walked in on Harry jacking off. Right?

There had to be any other explanation for the way he was sweaty and flushed, the way he leaned so that he was hidden behind his desk... not to mention that odd slick spot on his carpet that my heel dragged through.

And had it been about me?

I realized after I left the room that my bra had been exposed, and I got a thrill knowing that he might have seen it. I should have been disgusted if some older guy was wanking it over my tits, but I couldn't summon anything other than a feeling of pride and slight arousal. It was definitely a character flaw. I liked knowing that I had this power over people—particularly men, who seemed almost unable to resist their more primal urges.

When I came back forty-five minutes later as he requested, I noticed that the spot on the carpet was gone, along with any trace of him sweating. Of course, the lingering evidence remaining that something had happened while I was out of the room was the fact that his pants had very clearly been changed. It was entirely possible he spilled some food on them, but with the other stuff, it seemed really likely that I'd just missed him having a personal grand finale.

I very nearly brought it up, but figured it would be better left for another time, maybe if it happened again or when he least expected it, since he seemed just a little nervous. Like he knew I knew, but didn't want to say anything in case he'd gotten away with it.

Instead, I let him carry on with our day as if nothing had happened, which seemed to give him just enough relaxation to take me on a tour of the resort without sounding like an anxious schoolboy. It was almost disappointing since I found the nervousness both amusing and, if I was being honest, a little sexy.

Our first stop for the tour was to maintenance, but when we arrived, the place was in a little bit of chaos since they were still dealing with the fallout of my bathtub incident. So, after a quick chat with Geraldo, Harry's head of maintenance, who seemed like an incredibly nice person, we ended up taking a detour to the kitchens. I was supposed to see them later that day, so they weren't exactly ready for me, which meant I had to work hard to stay out of the way.



Thankfully, the staff were really accommodating, and it didn't take long before I was able to fall into stride with some of them in order to ask questions about their jobs. I met the head chef and sous chef, as well as several of the food runners, bussers, and a couple of servers who'd come in early to do their side work before their shift to reduce their load during the dinner rush.

To say the kitchen was a well-oiled machine was an understatement. Even with the occasional call of "behind" or "hot coming through," the staff all functioned like a synchronized dance team, moving around each other as though they anticipated each other's movements before they happened.

As impressed as I was, I was once again hit with the realization that this likely wouldn't come in handy for what I wanted to do when I graduated, but I could still appreciate the level of leadership it took to make something like this happen. It also didn't escape my notice that Harry kept jumping in to help. It happened most often when he and I were left alone to talk for more than a couple of minutes, like he was avoiding me, which, if I was right about him touching himself over me, made a lot of sense.

Before long, though, he was recommending that I offer to help in some of the less complicated or difficult areas, so I ended up at a food prep station with a guy about my age.

I was just about to ask him what I could help with when I noticed him humming a tune I recognized.

“Is that VOILÀ?” I asked as he got to the chorus, which I could clearly hear was one of their songs I was a big fan of.

“Yeah,” he said, looking at me and smiling. He had blond hair that would have flopped into his eyes if it wasn’t being held back by a hair net and a hat and these big, gentle brown eyes above a smile that could make any girl swoon. “You know VOILÀ?” It wasn’t until then that I heard the accent—very clearly Irish, which made him about ten times hotter by default.

“I *love* VOILÀ,” I gushed. “It’s a crime that they aren’t that well known, but it makes it a lot easier to get cheap tickets for their shows.”

“Seriously,” he said, nodding. Then, he held out his gloved hand before laughing and pulling the glove off. “I’m Finn.”

“Sloane,” I said, shaking his hand and moving to stand beside him at the prep station. “I’m Harry’s new intern.”

“Lucky girl,” he said, raising his eyebrows. “Not an easy position to come by. I don’t think he’s ever had one before. At least, not as long as I’ve been here.”

“And how long is that?” I asked

“Seven years or so. My folks moved here when I was sixteen, and I got a job here straight away to help with the bills. Ended up making enough to move out on my own.”

So, he was twenty-three. That was definitely a more appropriate age for me than Harry’s thirty-something. Not that I minded that much, and the idea of it being taboo because he

was not only my boss but also my brother's friend was a huge turn-on. But it wasn't like he and I were together. I could play with anyone I wanted, and right now, I wanted to play with Finn.

I leaned forward to grab a glove, realizing about halfway through that my cleavage was on display again, but I couldn't say I was upset about it. In fact, when I noticed his eyes drift to my shirt, it gave me a rush.

Harry came over at one point and put a hand on Finn's shoulder. "Ah..." he said with the same forced smile he'd worn while helping people off the ski lift. "I see you two have met."

"Yeah," I said cheerfully. "I was about to help Finn..."

He laughed and held up a knife. "Julienne some frites."

I had no idea what that meant, but I looked back at Harry, still smiling. "Yup. That."

He gave me and Finn an odd look, then said, "Alright. Well, once you've done that, we should really get a move-on so we make sure you get to see everything here and around the resort."

"You got it, boss," I said with a silly little salute, which made Finn snort with laughter.

Harry nodded and turned away to go check on something elsewhere in the kitchen, and I turned back to Finn and smacked him playfully on the shoulder.

“He’s gonna think I’m making fun of him!” I scolded, unable to keep from giggling myself.

“Nah,” Finn said, grabbing a pair of gloves and a hair net for me. “Well, maybe, but that’s your fault. You made the joke. I just laughed.”

I gave him a look halfway between annoyed and amused, crinkling my nose, and took the supplies from him, pulling them on. “How do I look?” I asked, turning in a circle to give the full effect of my wild red curls in the net.

“Sexy,” he said, leaning against the kitchen counter, looking like some kind of James Dean type, and I got a little bit of a pulse between my legs.

“I strive for the height of fashion,” I replied, and he laughed.

“Careful, girly,” he said with a crooked smile that looked like he was up to something. “Or I might just have to ask for your number.”

“What?” I asked. “Too chicken to?”

He scoffed and handed me his phone. “Put it in, then.”

I ignored the potential double entendre, thinking about all the ways I could use that exact phrase with him. Instead, I took the phone and put in my number. He took it back and sent me a text. I looked at my phone and it read: *Hey, love.*

I nearly melted, but didn’t have time to before Harry poked his head back around the corner.

“You two doing okay?” he asked.

“Perfect,” I said, grabbing the knife on the counter. “About to julienne some frites.”

“I guess I’ll leave you to it, then.”

He disappeared again and I laughed.

“Is he always that weird, or is it because of me?” I asked.

“No,” he said, furrowing his eyebrows. “Why do you think he’d be weird because of you?”

“Because... I kind of broke the bath... and the ski lift...”  
*And because I’m pretty sure he was masturbating over me earlier.*

“That was you?” He laughed.

I pointed the knife at him casually. “Don’t mock a girl with a weapon,” I said, letting it hang limply so he knew I wasn’t being serious.

He put his hands up in surrender. “I think I learned my lesson.”

It didn’t take long for me to realize “julienned frites” just meant slicing potatoes to make French fries, but apparently, that’s not a fancy enough way to say it in a place like this. I also realized that I wasn’t very good at making even cuts, and Finn had to throw away my whole first potato and stop me from taking a second.

“I think that’s good enough,” he said with a chuckle.

“Yeah, probably.” I shrugged. I pulled off the gloves and hairnet, then started to walk away, but stopped and smiled at him. “If I don’t hear from you, I know where to find you.”

He looked at me, and I could see the excitement in his eyes.

“You got it.”

Harry finished my tour, most of which was pretty dull after getting to meet Finn. I still enjoyed those moments where I caught Harry staring, but I also couldn’t help checking my phone every ten minutes to see if Finn messaged me yet.

It wasn’t until I was back in my room that he finally did.

**F:** *Hey, there, Yankee.*

I laughed and threw myself onto my bed, pulling my knees up and reclining against my pillows.

**S:** *Hey, there yourself. Did you have fun slicing up your relatives?*

**F:** *Oh, I see how it is. Potato jokes?*

**S:** *What can I say? I’m hilarious.*

**F:** *Seems like it. Sexy and funny and smart? You’re the whole package, aren’t you?*

Sexy? Oh, he was going to jump right in, wasn’t he? Well, two could do that.

**S:** *Speaking of packages... how’s yours after staring at my tits all afternoon?*

There was a long pause before I even saw the three dots that meant he was typing.

**F:** *Could be better if you were here.*

Fuck. I loved a good steamy text exchange, and I reached into my underwear and began to touch myself gently. I was already wet just from thinking about him possibly touching himself over me, not to mention thinking about how Harry had almost certainly done the same in his office earlier.

**S:** *I wish I could, but I have an early day tomorrow. Doesn't mean we can't have a little fun, though. What are you doing?*

**F:** *If I said I was julienning some frites, would you believe me?*

Clever. I liked that. But I also liked to get right down to it.

**S:** *That depends. Is that a euphemism for playing with your cock?*

I had a mental image of him doing a spit take before he replied.

**F:** *I suppose it is now. What are YOU doing?*

I laughed at the eagerness he clearly had about this. This was my kink—getting people to want me and knowing they couldn't help but touch themselves thinking about me.

**S:** *I suppose you'd like to know?*

**F:** *Hell, yes, Yankee.*

I felt a pulse as my finger hit the sensitive spot between my legs that had me panting within seconds.

**S:** *I'm playing with my clit and thinking about how good you were with your hands earlier...*

**F:** *Fuck... Yeah, I'm stroking myself, thinking about your gorgeous red hair bouncing all over the place... among other things.*

**S:** *So you'd like to see me bouncing?*

**F:** *Yes, hell, yes, please.*

**S:** *Guess I'll have to make that happen sometime.*

I was getting closer than I thought I would this quickly, but I didn't mind. I knew most guys could get there pretty quick if they wanted to, too. So when he didn't reply for a minute, I asked: *Are you throbbing for me, Finn?*

There was a long pause, then he finally replied.

**F:** *So hard, Yankee girl. I want to be in you so bad.*

**S:** *Me too... just the thought has me about to come. Are you close?*

**F:** *So close.*

I was full-on gasping for breath as I typed one handed, knowing I was seconds away.

**S:** *Good. Come for me then, big boy.*

I came, my whole body tensing and my center throbbing and pulsing with ecstasy. Once I was on the come down, I looked at my phone, waiting for Finn to respond. There was an even longer pause than before, then the little dots appeared.

**F:** *Holy shit, that was intense. Are you even real, Princess?*

**S:** *Guess you'll have to find out. See you around.*



I put down my phone and leaned back, ready to go to sleep now that I had my release. Finn might be replying to me now, but I wouldn't know because I set my phone to silent, leaving him to sweat a bit.

And hoped Harry was sweating over me, too.

## Chapter Nine

Harry

It had been a week since Sloane and Kendal had arrived, and while I'd spent individual time with both of them, we had yet to meet up as a trio.

I checked the reservation website to find that bookings were a little low for several of our restaurants tonight so I figured it would be a perfect night to have some quiet social time.

My phone sat across my desk from me and I grabbed it, punching in a text to Kendal that read something like:

*Dinner with your sister?*

I felt a small twitch below my belt remembering Sloane's phone sitting right there and the way she had looked that day.

*No. I told myself. Totally off limits, especially to you.*

Kendal texted back within a few seconds with a thumbs-up emoji and I took that to mean he was speaking for both when he agreed to the dinner. Our Brazilian steakhouse was

phenomenal, and usually a highlight for people, so I decided it was the place we would go.

Typically, a dinner for three would be close to two hundred dollars, so I was sure they'd get a great meal.

A knock came on my door, though, I wasn't expecting anyone.

"Come in," I shouted, and Sloane's gorgeous everything strolled in.

"Hey," she said. "I was talking to some of the housekeeping staff and they said there was shortage on laundry detergent and...what?"

I must have been staring weird cause she suddenly looked very suspicious of me.

"Your brother didn't get in touch with you yet?" I asked.

"No..." she said apprehensively. "Why?"

"Oh. I invited you both to dinner. I assumed when he sent a thumbs-up it meant that he'd already asked you."

Sloane shook her head. "No, but that's fine. I don't mind coming."

"Great," I replied a little too enthusiastically. "And I will speak to Kim about the detergent."

Sloane smiled and pushed her hair behind her ear. "Thanks Harry," she said, and I nearly swooned at the way she said my name. Fuck me for the obsession she gave me.

“Make sure that ruffian of a brother of yours shows up in something nice. There’s a dress code and never in all the time I’ve known him has Kendal followed a dress code.”

Sloane laughed and shook her head. “You really do know him, don’t you?” She giggled.

“I would say unfortunately yes, but I really do love the bastard.” I ran my hand through my hair and crossed my feet, looking down at my scuffed Oxfords.

“Yeah...” she said with a heavy but playful sigh. “Me too. I’ll go get ready then.”

Now?

“You still have three hours ’til dinner.” I chuckled.

“Well, I wanna look good,” she replied with a modelesque look over her shoulder at me.

I had to bite my tongue to keep from saying what I wanted to, that she always looked good. Sloane was a daydream who had floated into my life and became a walking nightmare. I was constantly trying to find reasons to talk to her, and yet, I knew it could never go anywhere, so why was I bothering?

Seven o’clock came faster than I expected, and I found myself scrambling to be ready in time to meet the Riley siblings in the lobby.

Thankfully, it seemed as though Kendal’s college days habit of being late was still going strong. He and Sloane finally came out of the elevators at ten past seven.

“There you are,” I said cheerfully. “I was worried I would have to come up and get you.”

Kendal chuckled. “You’re welcome in my room anytime, big boy.”

I blushed knowing that Sloane was watching, and while this was mine and Ken’s typical dynamic, it still felt weird to know that she was observing our stupidity.

“Shall we go?” I asked, trying to ease my own embarrassment.

“Let’s,” Ken said, pointing for his sister and me to go first.

I nodded my head and led them both to Rodeio, our Brazilian barbeque. It had been visited by Gordon Ramsay—an old friend of my father’s himself—and had nearly perfect reviews at all our resorts.

When the siblings stepped into the dining room, Sloane’s jaw dropped open and I felt a tingle of pride at her awe. So far, Sloane had made it known that she wasn’t impressed with commercial vacationing, so the fact that she liked what she saw was nothing short of a miracle.

We were seated at the chef’s table, a cozy little cabana tucked toward the back with a private waitstaff.

“This is incredible, man,” Ken said with delight. “I knew you were running this place for your dad, but I had no idea the scale of it all. The responsibility you have to ensure everything is running smoothly through this whole property is immense.”

He had no idea.

But right now, my focus was on trying to ignore how bloody beautiful Sloane looked.

If I liked her in her work clothes, then her evening wear had turned me into a flipping mess. She looked like a game show model in a tight blue mini and heels to match. It was all I could do to keep from staring, let alone drooling.

I was supposed to be moving away from my schoolboy obsession, not indulging it.

The food was incredible, of course, and Sloane seemed very impressed by the naturally sourced menu, which included allergy-sensitive items.

“Our chef goes a long way to make sure everyone is comfortable here at Rodeio,” I said proudly.

“I can see that,” Kendal replied with a grin. “If you two don’t mind, I’m gonna hit the little boys room.”

“Of course,” I said with a laugh. “We’ll be just fine here.”

Sloane didn’t look up but instead poked around at her food, eating tiny bites of it, so when Ken had fully left us alone, I attempted to strike up a non-work-related conversation.

“So, you want to run Airbnbs. That’s quite an undertaking.”

“I know,” she said, brightening a little. “But I really believe that education is power. That’s why I’m trying so hard in school because when I get investors who want to go in on this with me, I want to know what I’m doing.”

Clever girl.

“I’d invest,” I said, my other brain doing the talking for me. I had no inkling if she even had an ounce of business acumen.

“Really?” she asked, looking up at me.

“Sure. I like the idea of the un-vacation vacation.”

Sloane’s eyebrows went up. “That’s a really good tagline.”

“Yes, well. If you remember, I went to business school, too.”

Sloane giggled and went back to her food, eating with more excitement now.

“You know,” she said, happily. “You investing in my passion is almost enough to forgive you for looking at my tits while we were working the other day—”

“What?” I asked in horror. There was no way she could have known. How could she?

“Yeah, I saw you adjust yourself like eighty times, and when I looked up, I saw you working really hard to look anywhere but my bra.”

My heart began to pound and I felt like I might be sick. Was this about to be a shakedown? Was Ken going to hate me after this?

“Don’t worry,” she said, clearly catching sight of my horrified face. “I wouldn’t have left my shirt unbuttoned if I didn’t like the attention. It was kind of hot.”

I burst up from my chair like I was on fire and mumbled something along the lines of, “I have to go.”

Then I rushed to the lobby, passing Ken but not stopping when he called my name. Not until I was in the safety of my office did I even breathe.

Shit. Shit. shit.

She'd seen me and said nothing. Did that mean she knew what I was doing in my office after she left?

I had to get over Sloane, and I had to do it now.

I pulled my phone from my pocket and scrolled through my contacts looking for someone, anyone who I could take out and sleep with. As to be expected, Sloane's flippant behavior had once again gotten me painfully hard, and nothing I could think of would block out the way she had looked at me as she called me out.

"Hello?" answered the voice on the other end of the line. I had desperately dialed my ex who I sometimes still hooked up with in the hopes that a shag might do the trick.

"It's me. Any chance you want to meet up and... well..."

"Yeah, sure," she said. "You want to come over here or do you want me to drive up to you?"

"I'll come to you," I said. "I'm the one who asked for the favor."

"See you in an hour?"

"See you in an hour," I replied, ending the call.

Then I tried sitting down at my desk to do some work, my hand constantly sliding down beneath my trousers to massage



myself a little. But I'd be lying if I said I wasn't watching the clock tick by.

When the time finally came, I got a quick cold shower to eliminate any remaining erection and to make sure I smelled okay. Then I headed down to the entrance and had the valet bring around my car. I genuinely hoped Alana had wanted a long night, because I was about to give her one.

## Chapter Ten

Sloane

“**W**hat the hell was that?” Ken asked as he sat down.

“I have no clue,” I replied, taking a sip of wine. “One second, we were talking about my goals career-wise, the next minute he was dashing out like he was gonna vomit. Maybe he ate something bad?”

“Hard to believe,” Kenny said. “This food is amazing. So, are we supposed to leave, too?”

“Nah,” I replied, waving my hand. “Let them throw us out.”

Kendal laughed and I smiled at him. He always loved when I acted like a little rebel since I had a habit of being a goody-two-shoes a lot of the time. “I’m down if you are,” he agreed.

By the time we left I thought *I* might vomit. The food had been amazing, doubly so since it was free. “If it’s free, it’s for me” was what I always liked to say.

We were almost at the door when I ran into someone. “Oh excuse—Finn?”

Finn broke into a smile, his blond hair flopping into his eyes as he stopped. “Sloane!” he said with excitement. “You’re looking incredible tonight.”

I felt a blush creep over my ears and I bit my lip without meaning to. “Thank you,” I said to him. Then I turned to my brother, “I’ll meet up with you at the bar later. Cool?”

Kendal raised an eyebrow but nodded. “Be good,” he commanded.

“You’re not my dad,” I sassed playfully.

After Kenny had gone, I looked back to Finn, batting my eyelashes in an unnecessary attempt to flirt. “So, what are you up to?”

“Actually,” he replied. “I was just about to head home. But now you’re here and that seems a lot less exciting.”

The blush that sported on my ears crept down onto my cheeks, and goosebumps crawled across my arms. “Oh really? So, what is interesting to you now?”

“Oh, I can think of a lot of interesting things,” he said quietly in a gravelly voice that shot through me. “But I’ll need to get some stuff from my car. Want to come with me?”

“Hell yes,” I replied.

In moments I was swept off my feet and Finn was carrying me through the lobby. I couldn’t help but giggle-scream as he

half jogged through the packed atrium.

What I hadn't anticipated, though, was running into Harry.

"Oh," he said as he spotted us. Finn stopped in his tracks and his eyes went wide as his boss looked him up and down. "What are you two up to?"

Finn delicately put me down on my heels and we both looked at him like guilty children who'd stolen from the cookie jar.

"Oh nothin'," Finn said in his thick brogue. "Just meeting with some of the other kitchen staff. If that's okay."

"Yeah, of course," he said, not meeting my eyes. "Why wouldn't it be? Have a nice evening."

He hurried away without saying any more and Finn looked at me with a questioning face. "Okay," he said. "That *was* weird."

I nodded with vigor. "Why don't I meet you wherever you're going once you get your stuff?"

"Sounds good," he replied. "Bring a swimsuit and meet us at the spa. It's closed to guests right now, but I have a key."

"Cool!" I squealed with enthusiasm. "Great. See you soon."

I almost hadn't packed a swimsuit at all, not having any idea why I might need it in January. But Kendal had reminded me about the pool so I packed the skimpiest bikini I owned and now I was thankful I had.

I burst into the suite and ran for the door to my room as fast as I could.

“What are you doing?” a voice asked, breaking through the silence. It startled me so much, I actually fell out of my heels.

“Damn it, shit, Ken,” I muttered as I got to my feet. “I thought you were at the bar.”

He shrugged. “Felt like coming back here instead.” I gave him a questioning look, and he raised an eyebrow. “What are *you* doing here?”

“Changing,” I said.

“Like permanently? Good. You’ve been insufferable for a \_\_\_”

“Changing my clothes, you ass,” I said, throwing a shoe at him.

Thankfully he caught it because if he hadn’t, it might have knocked over the expensive-looking vase behind him. “Oh...” he said as if he had thought he was right. “Well, that’s a lot less interesting.”

I stuck out my tongue at him and he gave me the finger. But I didn’t waste more time in our sibling banter because I had a hot Irishman waiting for me.

I changed into my swimsuit at the speed of light and pulled a sleeved cover-up over it.

I checked my phone to see if I’d gotten any texts and I found that Finn had sent me a picture. I opened it excitedly

and came face to face with a very nude shot of Finn from the waist down.

And he was glorious.

How the hell did he expect me to keep my hands off him now? Or maybe that was the plan.

A few seconds later, a second text came through which read: *We're waiting.*

Who did he mean we? He and his friends, or him and his...

It didn't matter either way. I grabbed my bag and practically ran out of the suite.

"Are you coming back tonight?" Kendal asked.

"None of your business," I shouted in a sing-songy voice as I closed the door behind me.

When I got to the spa, I saw Finn and a few other of the kitchen staff I recognized huddled in a group next to the doors that led outside.

"Damn," I said. "It's freezing here. Can we move away from the door?"

Finn laughed. "Unfortunately, princess, we're going out there."

Outside? Now? There was five inches of snow on the ground.

"You're not serious, right?" I asked. "Like, that would be literally insane."

Finn shook his head. “Not insane. There are hot tubs right outside those doors and we are gonna get in them.”

“All of us?” I asked, looking around at the group of ten people.

“Maybe not all in the same one. In fact,” he said, lowering his voice. “I was hoping to get you in one alone.”

A shiver ran down my spine that had nothing to do with the cold and I nodded, eager to find out exactly what that meant.

“Well then, you better brace yourself,” said a girl I didn’t know who spoke with a thick, eastern European accent. “This is gonna get chilly.”

I nodded and pulled my coverup tighter around me.

“Three... Two... One!” shouted Finn, and we all burst through the door like a bunch of kids leaving for summer break.

It really was freezing, but thankfully that only lasted seconds as we each jumped into a hot tub.

The tubs themselves were immaculate, just like every other inch of this place. Gorgeous marble with a wooden pergola over the top of it, and a view that was worth every penny this place cost people, I was sure. I found myself suddenly rethinking my opinions on commercial vacations.

The warm water felt incredible against my skin and I relaxed back into it just as I felt a body slide up against mine.

“Good, yeah?” he asked.

I opened my eyes and found Finn's gorgeous brown eyes staring back at me. I nodded with a happy grin and he leaned down and kissed me.

It was like fireworks exploded in my brain and suddenly all my senses were electric.

I sat up and he pulled me into his lap.

"So, tell me more about Sloane Riley," he said. "That's a good Irish name."

"I guess." I shrugged. "I don't know... what do you want to know about me?"

"What kind of pizza do you like?"

"I don't."

"What?"

"I don't like pizza," I confessed, genuinely thinking he had misheard me.

"You're mad." He chuckled. "Pizza is amazing."

"I think the first time I had some, it was some horrible pineapple garbage and I... what?"

Finn had started laughing and I raised an eyebrow.

"I'm one of those pineapple monsters. It's so good, though. Don't knock it 'til—"

"I've tried it, yeah, yeah."

By this point, Finn and I were close enough to merge and his hands were snaked around my waist. I saw him look



around before slipping his long fingers under the cup of my bikini and toying with my nipple.

I moaned. I hadn't been touched like this in a while and Finn really seemed to know what he was doing.

“What do you say we get out of here?” he suggested as I felt him harden beneath me.

I nodded, and stood, my nipples taut against the frosty night air. “Should I run for it?”

Finn nodded. “Where's your room?”

“My room?”

“Yes. You know the place where you stay here?”

“It doesn't really matter where my room is because I share it with my brother and I will definitely never hear the end of it if I bring someone back to sleep with.”

Finn wrinkled up his face as he attempted to force himself flaccid. “Fine then. Let's go to the staff showers. Does that work for you, princess?”

I nodded, reminding myself exactly where the staff showers were before counting down. “Three... Two... One... *Go!*”

He and I both jumped from the hot tub, water splashing everywhere, and made a run for the door which was mercifully close by. Finn grabbed the handle, which stuck to his skin as he pulled it open to let me in.

“Ow,” he cried. “The bastard nearly ripped off my skin.”

I laughed and continued my jog to the staff restroom and showers, eager to find out exactly how many angles he'd used to take that picture he sent me earlier.

Turned out he hadn't used any. His cock was gorgeous.

Once in the showers, Finn reached up and turned on the hot water, then began to tear at my bikini like he was a hungry wolf. I allowed him to have me, totally turned on by his dominance and the thrill of potentially getting caught.

Finn hoisted me up onto his hips and tugged down his swim trunks, his thick length springing forth. He wasted no time getting me engaged, and plunged two fingers deep inside me from where I was pressed into the tile wall.

"Yes..." I whined. "Oh, fuck yes."

"How's this for a holiday fuck, Yankee?"

"Hell yes," I gasped, feeling the gorgeous, shimmery orgasm from within caress me from the inside out. "Fuck yes."

Moments later, he grabbed ahold of his cock and guided it to my opening, sliding it deep inside me. I gasped so deeply I nearly choked as his impressive size slammed into my walls again and again.

He began to use his leverage to bounce me up and down on him, leaving me to essentially balance on his cock. The feeling of coming down on it, hitting my G-spot every, damn time, was mind-blowing. I'd never been fucked like this before in my life.

Certainly not by the college boys I was used to taking me to bed.

“God yes!” I screamed. “Holy fuck.”

“Take my cock, Yankee. Take it and come all the fuck over it.”

I was a good girl and did as I was told, my arms flinging over his shoulders as my arms wrapped around his neck and I held on for dear life.

A minute later, with a few groans, I felt his cock pulse, then he pulled it out of me, spilling white streams of sticky cum down the side of the shower. His teeth bit into my shoulder, sending chills down my arms.

“Fuck,” he said when he stopped shaking. “That was definitely worth having your brother potentially kill me.”

I laughed and he gently let me down. We both washed ourselves clean and put our swimsuits back on.

Then I bid him goodnight as I wrapped myself in a towel and headed for the lobby. He kissed me and we parted ways, leaving me feeling like a million bucks.

## *Chapter Eleven*

Harry

I knew even before I opened my eyes that it had been a mistake. Alana and I had been a breath away from getting married when I learned from a mutual friend that a night out may have turned into something more for her.

While there was never any cold, hard proof, the fact that I believed she would cheat on me—plus the pair of men’s cufflinks in our bathroom that were not mine—led me to reevaluate our relationship.

I never stopped loving her, but I stopped trusting her. And once the trust was gone, eroded like a house on a cliff, the rest of our relationship followed.

When I arrived the night before, she was waiting for me in the living room. I let myself in with the key I still had and found her sitting on the marble countertop of the kitchen in lingerie that could barely be considered clothes.

Alana's body was perfection. Anything she hadn't been born with she bought, and with a boyfriend of five years who was a billionaire, I made sure she always had the best surgeons.

I stood, stunned, from the doorway, staring at the scraps of fabric we pretended hid anything from sight and the tiny black bows that covered her nipples.

"You sure know how to knock the wind out of a guy," I said, loosening my tie.

"You sure know to bring inspiration to a girl," she replied, shifting her perfect blonde waves from one shoulder to the other.

She watched my eyes as they roved down her body and I could have sworn I was drooling as I traced every inch of her curves. When my gaze reached her hips and thighs, she spread them for me, which literally brought me to my knees.

She was perfectly groomed and incredibly wet, and even from where I knelt, I could smell her clean, delicious scent.

Her eyes sparkled as she realized the hold she still had over me. "What are you waiting for?" she asked, biting her lip.

I didn't need to be told twice and I scrambled to where she sat, tucking my arms under her thighs and pulling her hips toward me. My mouth went straight to her center and my tongue lapped at her like she was the only drop of water in a hundred-mile radius.

Alana began to moan and the sounds she made put my hair on end. Alana had a way of sounding like a porn star without it sounding fake. She was loud enough that you could tell she was unbothered if the neighbors heard but soft enough that it wasn't obnoxious.

Her fingers went to my hair and pulled, and I wondered why I had ever left her side in the first place. She was a goddess and I was worthy of a goddess.

"Yes..." she hissed. "God, Harry," she said, pulling my hair hard enough that it gave me a semi-facelift. "You motherfucker, you use that tongue like you're trying to bore a hole right through me."

That was exactly what I was doing and I could feel her dripping down my chin as I became more and more engrossed in the taste of her. It was sweet like a gentle, natural sweetener and salty like the sea. My brain was going six hundred miles an hour just trying to figure out how to consume her faster.

My cock, which was still restrained in my pants, was aching for desire, and I started to get impatient the moment that I thought about penetrating her soaked flesh.

"I need you," I groaned into her skin, my face dampened by the mixture of saliva and her wetness.

"Then fucking have me you, beautiful bastard," she replied.

In moments, I was on my feet, my arms around her waist. I lifted her from the counter and carried her to the bedroom, up

a flight of stairs, my hard cock bouncing against her ass from within its cloth prison.

When I reached what used to be our room, I threw her down on the bed and freed my trousers from my belt, using it then to restrain her wrists. Once they were firmly secured, I flipped her over onto her stomach, my fingers getting a firm, tantalizing grope of her nipples.

For a moment I stood and stared at her beauty, of this scene before me. But that only lasted until the deep, animalistic need to fuck her took over my feral masculine brain.

My hands went to my zipper and in seconds it was opened. I toed off my shoes and stepped out of my pants and underwear, tossing them aside, my throbbing arousal so turgid it didn't even bounce when freed.

Then I was on top of her, my six-foot frame massive against her, and her quivering wet pussy ready for me to do with as I pleased.

"Tell me you want my cock," I whispered in her ear from behind her.

"Please," she whimpered. "I need you inside me. I feel so —"

In one swift movement, I shoved my full length into her tight slit and placed each of my hands on top of each of her wrists. She was pinned beneath me to the fullest extent, and I couldn't help as a growl was summoned forth.

"Yes..." she groaned loudly. "Oh, God yes. Fuck..."

The sound of my skin slapping against hers as I fucked her with reckless abandon echoed around the room. In this moment, she was mine, this pussy was mine.

The pitch of her moans spiked into whines and I leaned in to bite down on her shoulder while I continued to penetrate her like this would be the last time I ever had the chance to be inside anyone.

Suddenly it wasn't her beneath me though.

It was Sloane Riley.

If I thought I was driven by instinct before, I lost my damn mind once I pictured the petite, curvy redhead pressed into the mattress beneath me.

"Ah, fuck..." I roared into the darkness, the force of my thrusts moving the very bed we were on.

I could feel Sloane writhe against my touch and I wanted nothing more than to be inside her all the time.

"Yes..." I said, all thoughts of Alana forgotten.

I felt Sloane climax on me and because I was so deep into my fantasy, I didn't have the wherewithal to stop my own finish.

I tumbled into a heaving orgasm, my body collapsing onto her, pulsing against her sweat-dampened back as my hips went on autopilot and secured my finish.

The comedown from it was a lot less pleasant.



“That was amazing,” Alana said, and when I opened my eyes to remember it was her, my heart sank.

The rumors.

The late nights.

The cufflinks.

“Uh... yeah,” I said rolling off her and immediately getting up to go clean off. “Thanks for being willing to get together.”

She gave me a confused look like she wasn't really sure what I was thanking her for. “Harry, you and I are endgame. You know it and I know it. I'm just waiting for you to get past the situation.”

Something about the way she assumed that there was a chance at us ending up together grated me, and suddenly nothing about where I was felt right.

This was how I ended up lying in bed for hours until she fell asleep, holding the woman I had once loved and now could only be seen as a stand-in for someone I had yet to really know.

At about five a.m., I rose from the bed and dressed, gathering my things and quietly slipping away. I felt bad that she would wake up alone, but only because she still clearly held a torch for me. One that I no longer shared.

The drive home was pensive. Thinking about my life, thinking about where I saw it going.

Thinking about whom I saw it moving forward with.

It would be premature to consider Sloane for the job but it was more about what she represented than her herself. She was free, she was wild, she had goals and dreams that didn't revolve around having a ring on her finger and I liked that someone like her would never need me. In that, I would be able to spend the rest of our lives caring for her because I wanted to. Totally free of obligation.

Nothing was more attractive than that.

When I pulled up to the front of the lodge, a valet welcomed me back, and I didn't miss the way he scanned my disheveled hair, noticing the same clothes I'd left in the night before.

"Steady on, Pete," I said with a laugh. "Every man needs a night out now and again."

The valet, Pete, laughed with me, and it wasn't until my back was to him that I let my forced smile drop. My mind was too full of thoughts to properly find joy at the moment.

I went back to my room to shower and change, feeling like stinking of sex wouldn't be the best look, particularly not when Sloane was meant to be shadowing me today.

My mind went back to the fact that I'd seen Finn carrying her the night before and the spike in my blood pressure nearly had me calling him to my office with some falsified scolding about fraternization.

Almost.

Instead, I decided that honestly, it was for the best. Finn was a much better match for her age-wise, and if she was with the

Irishman, it didn't potentially affect my friendship with Kendal. That would be a relationship I was loath to risk.

When I sat down at my desk, I found a small stack of papers that indicated that the work order had been completed and that the block of flood-affected rooms had been completely finished. It was such a relief to have that out of the way that I *actually* laughed.

There was a knock on my door and I shouted for the person on the other side to come in.

Sloane entered, looking as radiant and professional as ever. Her face was glowing in a way that I'm sure my own would have been as well if I'd spent the night with someone I even liked, and I calmed the jealous beast that wanted to demand to know what she'd been doing.

"Fun night?" I asked with a smile that was as genuine as I could manage.

"Uh..." She looked at my face, measuring for a correct answer. "Yeah. The hot tubs are amazing."

I nodded. That made sense. I knew that a lot of the employees enjoyed hanging out at them after hours. "Yeah, they're one of my favorite parts of the resort too. And considering you don't ski, I think I'd have a hard time convincing you it's the slopes."

Sloane's shoulders relaxed and she laughed. "I don't think you could get me on one of those death traps if you paid me."

“We’ll see,” I said with what I hoped was a brotherly grin. “I’ve still got hope that you’ll break.”

Sloane shook her head. “Fat chance.”

We shared an entertained smile and then I opened my desk to pull out keys for the three different types of rooms we had for guests.

“Right,” I said. “How do you feel about seeing some of the more domestic parts of the resort?”

Sloane shrugged and I stood, gesturing toward the door.

“After you,” I said, and she rose as well, her heels digging into that one spot of the floor that I would likely never be able to forget had been smeared with my emissions.

We walked to the door together but before we could leave, Sloane stopped and turned to face me. “I slept with Finn.”

Good God, why was she telling me this? I could have assumed as much but I wasn’t really wanting to hear about it. Especially when my crush on her was just beginning to wane with logic.

“That’s fine,” I said. “I don’t need to—”

“Is that against the rules?”

It definitely was not, though I was tempted to say differently. “No. You’re not employed here, so who you... spend your free time with is up to you.”

Sloane nodded and I noticed her sigh. “Okay, good. I didn’t want to risk the internship.”

Her words said one thing but her body language another. Could it be that she regretted her nighttime encounter as much as I regretted mine?

“Right,” I said, trying to pull my brain away from the plethora of possibilities that might present. “Let’s go see those rooms.”

## *Chapter Twelve*

Sloane

I couldn't quite get a read on Harry after I told him I'd slept with Finn. Was it just wishful thinking that he seemed jealous? Or was there something there that I had potentially given up on with my little shower rendezvous?

"Well," he said as we took the elevator up to the second floor. "I think we'll start with some of the more standard guest rooms."

"Wasn't I staying in one of those when I arrived?" I asked, thinking about the room I'd flooded.

"Not exactly," he said with the hint of a grin, though I could still feel tension from him that I couldn't quite figure out. "Your room was one of the deluxe rooms. The even-numbered floors have regular rooms, both standard and deluxe, and the odd-numbered floors have the suites. There are the family suites on the third floor, and the top floor, as you know, has the higher-end suites, such as the executive suites, which you are

familiar with, the master suites, and the penthouses. There are two, one of which is my own personal suite where I live.”

I nodded as he told me all of this. It was a good system, so you always knew which kind of room and customer you’d be dealing with depending on the floor you were on.

“So, we’re going to see the basic rooms now—the ‘value’ accommodations,” I said to confirm my understanding.

“Correct,” he said, opening up one of the rooms and stepping aside so that I could walk in ahead of him.

I looked around the room and noticed that it was indeed a bit smaller than the one I’d originally been staying in, and it was missing a couple of amenities, such as a microwave and a mini fridge. There was, however, an ice bucket and a Keurig machine with a handful of flavors set beside it. The one thing that was no different was the décor. It had the same soulless, corporate feel as the rest of the hotel, not that I’d said anything to Harry about how I felt about it.

Yet.

“So,” he said, stepping up beside me and looking around the room. “This is the standard room. What do you think?”

I glanced sideways at him, unsure how much of my opinion I wanted to share. I might have been more inclined toward unrestrained honesty before, but he seemed so... cordial today compared with before.

“Well...” I said, trying to decide exactly what to say. “I, uh... I think it’s a great way for people who don’t have the

income to spare on one of the higher-end rooms to still get to enjoy the resort.”

He raised an eyebrow and gave me a smile, looking at me from the side. “You hate it.”

“No!” I lied quickly, but he turned to face me full on, and I couldn’t help but laugh at the expression on his face. “Well, okay... Yes, I do hate it. But it’s just a personal thing and has nothing to do with the room itself. I just... I hate the interior design in here. I want to run really unique places that have a lot of heart and personality to them, and this just feels so... generic.”

He pursed his lips and furrowed his brow, looking around the room and nodding as though he was thinking about what I’d said. “I see what you mean,” he said. “Can I be honest with you?”

I shrugged slightly and nodded to indicate I was open to whatever he had to say.

“I hate it, too,” he said, and I felt my jaw drop. “I brought in a designer to do the whole hotel, and at first, I thought it was a really classy look, but once I met you and heard about your ideas for your own business, I couldn’t help but notice how little soul this place has. It’s classy, for sure, but it doesn’t feel homey like somewhere I’d want to stay. Even my own suite feels this way.”

“Really?” I said, almost unable to believe that someone as interesting and sexy as Harry would allow his own personal space to be so void of any kind of spirit.



“Really,” he said, motioning to the door. “Here, come with me. I’ll show you.”

He took me up to the fifth floor and past my suite, where I swear, I could hear Kendal still snoring from the hallway. We went to the very end of the hallway, where I hadn’t been before, and he pointed in each direction.

“To the right is the penthouse that can be booked by guests. Mine is this one here to the left.”

I thought for a moment that he was going to show me the guest penthouse, but he didn’t. Instead, he turned left and unlocked his door to show me inside.

I felt a slight thrill at the idea of being in his own personal suite. A part of me had been wanting to be here pretty much since I arrived, though taking a tour of the resort wasn’t exactly the context I was hoping to be here in. I’d been wanting him to bring me here to tear my clothes off and throw me into his bed.

“I see what you mean,” I said, trying to distract from the blush I could feel creeping into my cheeks. It was true. As I looked around his suite, I could see that, aside from having a different layout, it had exactly the same style as the rest of the hotel—even down to the pictures on the walls and the vase on the mantle over the electric fireplace.

“You know,” he said after a moment where we both examined the décor. “I was going to have my designer come in and redo the place after I realized how basic it all looked, but I

think, if you're up for it, I'd like to hear your ideas to incorporate before bringing her back."

"Really?" I asked, unsure I'd heard him right. Was he giving me the opportunity to redesign his resort to be more interesting and appealing?

"Really," he confirmed. "I know you're not a design student, but I think you'd probably have some really good ideas for how to make things a little better in terms of visual appeal."

I giggled in delight and saw his face crack into a smile, showing all of his perfect teeth. "That would be amazing, and a great addition to my portfolio."

"I bet it would be," he said, guiding me through the rooms to show me the layout. "There are three bedrooms in each penthouse. To be fair, I probably should have taken a master suite for myself, since I don't really need three bedrooms for just me, and they come with just one bedroom, but it seemed like a good idea at the time, and I don't really feel a strong urge to move at this point."

"I mean, you own the place," I said, looking around the massive guest bath, which had a huge tub set against the center of the far wall. "You should get to have whatever room you want, right?"

"Not really," he said. "I mean, yes, I get to choose my own room, but I don't really own it. My dad owns the resort. I'm just the manager."

I hadn't realized that, and suddenly I had even more respect for all the hard work Harry put into this place. He gave his all to every situation, and it wasn't even his hotel.

I opened my mouth to say something, though I wasn't sure what it was going to be yet, but I was interrupted by the buzzing of Harry's walkie-talkie.

*"Hey, boss,"* said a voice on the other end.

"One second," he said to me, motioning with a single finger for me to wait while he addressed whatever he needed to. He pulled the walkie from his belt and said, "Harry here."

*"Hey, Harry,"* the employee said. *"We have a little bit of a problem down in the lobby."*

"What kind of problem?"

*"Code Second Horseman."*

"Bloody hell," Harry said, rubbing his forehead.

"Second Horseman?" I asked, unsure what that meant.

He looked at me with a wearily amused expression.

"War."

My eyes went wide, concerned about what could possibly be so bad as to earn the name "war," but I realized quickly I was going to find out when Harry picked up his walkie and said, "We're on our way."

He said "we."

Which meant I was about to find out what "war" meant.

When we got to the lobby, I could tell that there was some kind of commotion immediately because people were standing in a way that made it seem like they were trying to mind their own business while still being able to observe what was happening. The closer I got, the more I could hear the raised voice arguing, but it wasn't until we made it through the crowd that I realized the issue.

“... and your kitchen staff is clearly not up to standards, and needs to be fired and replaced!”

As I walked toward the desk where the guest was yelling, I realized I had a vague recollection of who this person was. Some minor reality TV star who clearly had some kind of entitlement complex, just based on the type of things she was saying.

“Hello,” Harry said, approaching and stepping between the guest and the poor employee who looked like she was trying not to cry. “I’m Harry Sutton, general manager here. What exactly seems to be the trouble?”

I was impressed with how calmly he approached the situation, considering I would have been nervous as hell to walk up to someone who was yelling like that. But he did it as casually as if he was walking up to order a drink at a bar. He even leaned on the counter, which made him seem incredibly at ease.

I'd read about this technique in school when we were studying how to deal with conflict in the workplace. You try to convince the guest to mirror your demeanor simply by acting

how you want them to act. Not that it seemed to be working on this person, who seemed to want nothing more than to create an issue and get something out of it.

“The trouble is that I ate at your restaurant here last night and I have food poisoning now,” she said.

“That sounds terrible,” Harry said calmly. “Are you certain that’s what happened?”

“Am I certain?” she shrieked. “Are you insinuating that I don’t know food poisoning when I have it?”

“Not at all,” Harry said, still oozing a sense of serenity, though I had no idea how he was doing it at this point. I would have already started getting irritated, if not outright mad at this idiot’s antics. “I just want to make sure we’re on the same page. What exactly can I do to help you in this situation?”

The person sputtered a bit, and I marveled at Harry’s genius. By putting the ball in the guest’s court, he could find out exactly what it was that they wanted instead of trying to guess and ending up giving away more than he needed to.

“Compensation of *some* kind,” the guest finally said. “What can you offer to make up for this?”

Harry smiled. So, she didn’t know what to ask for, which allowed Harry to start small. “I can offer you a free meal on us, so that we can have the chance to prove that our kitchens are actually top-notch.”

“And when I end up in agony on the bathroom floor again, I’m just supposed to be in my tiny little suite as I writhe in

pain?”

Good lord, the dramatics were over the top. But Harry saw right through it. They went back and forth for a few more minutes, and eventually, the guest walked away happy with an upgrade from a junior suite, which was akin to a studio apartment, to a master suite, the one Harry had mentioned upstairs as being a one-bedroom. They were also given a free night to make up for the one where they “got sick” and weren’t able to enjoy the resort how they wanted.

As the guest walked away, Harry turned to the employee who’d been dealing with the issue first. “You all right?” he asked.

“Yeah,” she said. “Thanks for stepping in.”

“Anytime,” he said, smiling and putting a hand on her upper arm. She smiled, and he turned back to me. “Well, that was unexpected. What did you think about that?”

I was still piecing together my thoughts about it, but the one that I kept coming back to was how well he handled that and how amazing it was that he stepped right between the guest and his employee. The more I got to know Harry, the more I realized he was just a genuinely kind person, and it made me question my decision to fuck Finn even more. What if there could have actually been something with Harry and I ruined it?

“I think... I’d really like to see more of your resort,” I said with a smile. “I think you run an incredible system here, and I’d love to finally get my tour of the grounds.” He looked

happy, and I couldn't help but reflect on his expression. "If you're up for it."

"Of course, I am," he said. "Best get bundled up, though. It's pretty damn cold out."

## *Chapter Thirteen*

Harry

Once Sloane and I bundled up so that we didn't risk losing limbs to the frost, I led her out around the areas designated for skiing and down to an area that I was convinced only I knew about. I'd found it when I was about nineteen and had been going there when I needed to think ever since.

It would be bold to call it one of the most beautiful places on earth but it was one of the most beautiful places I'd ever been, especially in the winter. The way the path spiderwebbed out to a dozen smaller, barely-treaded directions was fascinating. Almost like it would be out of a Tolkien novel or something.

At the bottom of our descent lay the enormous lake that all the paths led to. This time of year, it was frozen so solid you could have skated on it but I never dared to try. Above it, set a hundred feet up at least, was a semi-frozen waterfall, that gracefully cascaded into the deep waters below it in the spring.



“Jeez,” Sloane said, looking out over the vast water before her. “This is actually really beautiful. I would love to drink some hot cocoa down here.”

“You’re in luck,” I said, pulling out the thermos I had packed for us. “It’s not cocoa but it is tea. I’m British after all.”

She laughed and I couldn’t help but smile at the way the bright noise echoed around us. “That sounds great. Anything to warm me up now that we’re here.”

I gave her a confused look. “This isn’t our final destination,” I said. “This is just the scenic detour.”

Sloane’s face looked impressed and I felt incredibly pleased with myself for surprising her.

I handed her the thermos cup full of hot tea and she drank from it happily, clearly enjoying the way I prepared it with milk and sugar.

“It’s like a dessert,” she said with a happy little dance in the snow.

I laughed and nodded. She wasn’t wrong. The way I prepared tea had been called a monstrosity by my extremely English father, and an act of the devil by my Scottish mother.

Tea wasn’t meant to be so sweet.

But if that was so wrong then perhaps whoever decided the right or wrong way for tea to be consumed shouldn’t have made it so delicious to prepare the way I preferred.

A light snow began to fall on us and I noticed Sloane's cheeks begin to pink. It was time to move to our destination because at least at the place there would be no wind.

"Let's go," I said to her, tugging on her arm. "You ready to see something really special?"

Sloane nodded like a child who was told they were going to Disneyland and I smiled at how cute she was like this. The sassy, bossy Sloane was a flame of a woman, but this version, this soft girl with the eagerness of a child, was just as lovely.

"I hope you are ready for something a little physical," I said as we grew closer to the spot. "Because we can't get there via traditional methods."

"Oh?" she said apprehensively. "What do you mean?"

I stopped and turned to face her. "Have you ever been spelunking before?"

"Cave exploring?" she asked with a squeak to her voice. "Yes! I love it."

I nodded in approval. "Excellent. Because that is how we get where we're going."

Forty more feet and we approached the entrance of a cave that went straight down about ten feet. I peered to the bottom, wondering if the equipment I brought was sufficient when it was this cold. I typically didn't do this drop unless it was warmer.

"Can I help you set anything up?" Sloane asked, holding out her hands.

I was caught off guard by her desire to help. I had only gotten Alana to come here once and she refused to help set up any of it. “Yeah,” I said. “Sure.”

It took us about fifteen minutes to set up the rig, and once we’d agreed that she felt comfortable getting down there on her own, I went first to be sure the area was safe.

I loved cave exploring. I had ever since I was a boy in northern Scotland. It was a love instilled in me by my force of nature mother and an activity shared by our whole family. Every time I strapped up to drop into an abyss my heart began to pound with excitement.

This time was no different, and when I finally cleared the area where my feet could touch the rock at the mouth, my adrenaline was roaring in my ears.

The thrill was short-lived, of course, because it was only ten feet. But nonetheless, it had been enough to remind me exactly why I loved it.

“You’re good to go,” I called up to Sloane, using my high-powered torch to look around the rotunda of the cave.

As she descended, I moved to a place where I could assist in her drop, and I was surprised by how gracefully she managed.

Still, feeling her soft, strong body drop into my arms was thrilling, and I had to fight the old visions of having her right here, right now, from reemerging.

“That wasn’t too bad,” Sloane said cheerfully. “And it’s a lot less cold down here.”

I nodded and disconnected all her stuff. “One of the reasons this place is great,” I said. “The other reason is just down that path straight ahead.”

Sloan looked at me with curiosity and I smiled. I knew she was about to lose her mind over what I knew to exist ahead of us, especially with her dream of owning unique vacation stays.

It was only about a three-minute walk to the location, and when she saw it in the light of my torch, she gasped.

“What... is... this?”

I turned slowly, enjoying the sight I’d seen so many times before, and chuckled. “This,” I said dramatically, “is a mining shelter. A historian I had evaluate it said it dated back to around the gold rush in—”

“Eighteen forty-nine,” Sloane said, venturing further into the little bunker, carved into the natural walls of the cave. “I took high school history, too.”

I laughed a little, impressed with her quick wit. “Well, for your information, Madam, I did not have American history, so I was impressed.”

Sloane seemed not to hear me and hardly cared what I was saying. She was enamored by the setup, a near-perfect replica of living quarters that should have been up above, and I couldn’t help but stare as her beautiful face lit up.

When I first found this place, I was keenly aware that people had likely died down here. There wasn’t an aspect of it that seemed safe or up to code. But it was interesting

nonetheless, and I'd always tried to figure out something I could do with it.

“This is amazing,” she said. “Holy shit and there’s original furniture! Look at these trunks!” She knelt down in the dusty stone to touch a wooden trunk that looked like it hadn’t been open in at least a century. “God, this is antiquing to the next level. I love it, Harry. Thank you so much for showing it to me.”

I nodded with a grin, thrilled to bits that she was so approving of it. “I’ve always tried to think of something I could do with it that the health department would approve of. Maybe I’ll turn it into an Airbnb,” I said with a wink to her.

She giggled and opened her mouth to say something else, but was interrupted by a low rumbling noise. “What was that?” she asked.

I shook my head in confusion, I was as clueless as she was. “I have no idea,” I said. “Might have been some of the snow above us shifting. It can tend to make some frightening noises when it’s moved and tiny avalanches happen all the time.”

I hoped that my tone of voice portrayed the picture of confidence I was trying to be, but deep down I was as worried as she looked. All of these underground caves were virtually untested, and one of the biggest issues that came with building on top of abandoned mineshafts was the slight possibility that the world could just open up and swallow an acre of land whole.

“You ready to head back?” I asked, trying not to seem nervous. “We can always come back and have lunch or something.”

Sloane nodded, her attention having been drawn away from the makeshift shelter and redirected toward wherever the noise was coming from.

I grabbed my bag from the ground and gave her a hand to climb out of where she’d settled.

“I really appreciate you bringing me down here,” she said. “It definitely gives me some interesting ideas for remote vacation stays that I might want to build—if I ever get an investor.”

“Hey,” I said, “I told you I want to invest. I really meant it.”

“Yeah?” she asked, looking at me like she still wasn’t sure.

“Of course,” I said with a chuckle. “I don’t say stuff I don’t mean. You graduate and—”

Another rumble actually shook us enough that Sloane nearly tipped over. “Okay, that didn’t feel good,” she said, and I could see real fear sprout in her eyes.

“I’m afraid I’ll have to agree with you,” I said, nodding. “Let’s get to the exit.”

We took the three-minute walk back to the entrance just in time to watch as the biggest chunk of rock that hung over the cave entrance collapsed in on itself, and I was forced to grab Sloane and dive out of the way to avoid being crushed.

“Shit,” I said as more bits crumbled. “Shit. Run, Sloane!”

She got to her feet beside me and we ran back to where we had just been, hearing as the tunnel collapsed in behind us. It felt like we were in an Indiana Jones movie, only there were no cameramen to yell “cut” after the scary part ended.

We were trapped.

We were trapped and no one knew we’d come down here.

I grappled for my phone as I flung my body down against a rounded corner, shaking as I heard the crumbling rocks stop, physically feeling the air get thinner.

“What are we gonna do?” Sloane whimpered, and I looked up to see her clutching a bloody arm against her chest.

“Oh fuck,” I said, jumping to my feet once more. “Oh God, Sloane, I’m sorry. I thought you were right behind me.”

Her arm was definitely broken, and the cuts along the length of her arm where her coat had been torn open were bleeding freely.

“What are we gonna do?” she repeated.

I scrambled to grab my cell phone where I had dropped it once I noticed her wounded arm and held it up to my face.

No signal.

Of course there was no signal.

This was quickly turning into a nightmare and I had no idea why I ever thought coming down here was smart let alone without telling anyone where I was going.

“I guess,” I said, looking around and trying to look braver than I felt. “Now we try to find our way to another exit.”

“Is there another exit?” she asked.

“I have no fucking idea,” I said with exhausted frustration. “But I hope to God there is.”



## *Chapter Fourteen*

Sloane

**H**oly fuck, it hurt.

It took everything I had in me not to cry, but I couldn't stop a couple of rogue tears from prickling at the corners of my eyes, only to be frozen in place.

“What are we gonna do?” I asked Harry not once, but twice. In the back of my mind, I knew what I sounded like. I sounded like the girl in a horror movie who didn't have two brain cells to rub together and relied solely on the men in her life to make decisions and keep her alive. That had never been me and never would be, but right in that very moment, I struggled to remember that I was supposed to be a strong, independent woman. Instead, I became a scared, hurt little girl.

“Now we try to find our way to another exit,” he said, swinging his phone around, looking for a signal he didn't find.

“Is there another exit?” I asked.

“I have no fucking idea,” he said, and I could hear the fear in his voice. “But I hope to God there is.”

He looked at me again, then down at my arm. I couldn't say for sure, but in addition to the giant gash, I was fairly certain it was broken, if the way it was simultaneously numb and agonizing with every breath was any indicator.

Harry seemed to panic for a moment, unsure what to do, then began to walk around the cave, holding up his phone, looking for a signal, but I couldn't get invested in that because the only thing I could focus on was the blood which had soaked through my clothes and was beginning to drip freely onto the cave floor beneath me.

“Harry,” I said weakly, my heart racing and pounding painfully against my ribcage.

He didn't hear me. He was mumbling to himself. I couldn't make out all the words, but he seemed to be cursing himself for coming down here without making sure someone knew where we were.

No one knew?

My breathing began to come in short, tiny bursts, and the thrumming of my pulse sent a thicker sanguine cascade streaming from my arm.

Oh, God. Was I going to die in here?

The agony was unbearable, and after a few moments, I went to the wall of the cave and slid down so I was sitting, a pool of my own blood forming beneath me. I tried to cradle my arm in

my opposite hand, but just the tiny bit of pressure from my fingers as I touched it was enough to make me gasp in pain.

The noise jarred Harry out of whatever trance he was in about his phone, and he suddenly noticed me on the side of the cave.

“Sloane...” he said, rushing to my side and kneeling beside me, not caring at all that his knee was in a puddle of red that had dripped from my wound. “God, this looks bad.”

“I think it’s broken,” I whimpered, trying to hold it out to him but finding the simple act of moving it made me want to scream.

“Alright,” he said, looking lost as far as what to do. But despite being clearly out of his element, he seemed determined to help. “Let’s see if I can figure out how to...”

He pulled off his backpack and dug inside, pulling out a first aid kit. He took out some gauze inside and tried to gently wrap my arm, but just the pressure of the soft fabric pulled a shriek of pain from me, and I jerked away from him. He reached for me tenderly, but it didn’t take long before we both realized the gauze wouldn’t be enough. It was soaked through crimson within minutes, and he went white as we both realized that I might be in worse trouble than either of us thought.

Without hesitating, Harry pulled off his coat and his sweater, then put the coat back on. He reached into his bag again, and this time pulled out a pocket knife. He stabbed into the sweater, which was a thick cotton knit, and began cutting

thick strips loose. Once he had a nice pile of them, he looked me in the eyes.

“This is going to hurt,” he said as calmly as he’d been speaking to the crazy guest earlier. “But I need you to hold as still as you can, all right?”

My pulse skyrocketed again, but I nodded. I knew I had to be brave and do what he said or I wasn’t going to make it out of here. Once he had my confirmation, he picked up a strip of fabric and laid it over the wound, then reached around with both hands to grab the ends from the other side. Then he pulled them around and, fast as lightning, tied them tightly.

“Ah!” I screamed as he tightened the knot. Spots burst in front of my eyes as the pain shot through my entire body, and I finally started to cry. “Fuck...”

“You did great,” he said, reaching up to stroke my hair to help calm me. “But we need to do a couple more.”

“No,” I whimpered, shaking my head. “No, please...”

“You need to, Sloane,” he said, pleading with me. “If we don’t get you bandaged up, you’re going to bleed out.”

After another moment of begging him not to do it, I gave in, knowing he was right and that I had to stomach the pain to survive. I took a deep, shaking breath, then held my arm out again. I could see the way it was hanging just a bit wrong where the bone was broken, and I hoped it wasn’t bad enough to require surgery when we got out of here.

*If we got out of here.*

Harry made quick work of bandaging me up with the rest of his sweater, despite the way I screamed every time he wrapped a new strip of fabric around my arm.

Eventually, he finished, and I slumped against the wall of the cave, sweating from the pain and anxiety even though it was freezing in here. I felt several droplets harden into ice on my face, then I began to shiver.

“We need to make a fire,” I said, looking around for anything that might work as kindling, and seeing nothing except for what had crashed through the hole when it caved in, which looked like mostly rocks and snow. “There has to be something in here we can use. If we can’t stay warm...”

I didn’t need to finish my sentence. I could see in Harry’s face that he understood completely. His cheeks were flushed with the cold, and his fingers, which didn’t have his gloves on since he’d taken them off to wrap my arm, had gone white at the tips.

“We could look through the rubble...” he said skeptically, but I nodded and forced myself to my feet. I hadn’t realized how much blood I’d lost, because I hadn’t been expecting to be lightheaded when I stood up, but I nearly passed out immediately. “Easy there. Why don’t you sit and let me take care of this?”

“No,” I said, recentering myself. “I can help.”

He sighed, clearly wanting to argue but not doing it. Instead, he just nodded and pulled his gloves back on to start digging through the wreckage.

We spent a solid fifteen minutes moving rocks and digging through snow before we came up with a handful of pinecones and a couple of evergreen saplings that had gotten caught in the cave-in. It wasn't much, but I knew it would probably be enough to get us a few hours of light and warmth.

Harry built a pile of the materials we found, but then looked at them nervously.

"I haven't got a lighter or matches," he said.

Shit.

I took a deep breath, which sent a particularly painful throb through my arm, then nodded.

"That's okay," I said, suddenly more grateful than ever for my odd life experiences so far. "I've done a lot of roughing it in remote areas. You can get a fire going using a couple of rocks. You just need to find ones that are relatively dry, and you need to make sure they're flint materials, like quartz."

"Quartz?" Harry asked, turning back to the pile that was still blocking our way out of here. He began to dig through the stones at the base. "How the hell am I supposed to come up with gemstones in a—wait... holy shit."

He turned back to me holding a larger rock that had what was very obviously quartz sticking out of it.

"Perfect," I said, breathing my first sigh of relief since the cave-in. "Now I'm sure you've seen how to strike the fire on TV. It's pretty much exactly like you'd expect, except you're going to use your knife instead of another rock."

He nodded, then moved back over to our pile of tinder. He looked nervous as he stood over the pile of organic materials, but he held out the stone, ready to try anyway. He took a deep breath, and began to strike the quartz with the blade of his knife. It took a few minutes, but eventually, he hit it at exactly the right angle to create a spark, which fell into the pile of wood and leaves and ignited it slowly. He bent over and began to blow on it to help it spread, and within moments, we had a decent fire to sit by.

I scooted closer, crossing my legs and hunching over them, fatigue, blood loss, and the slow ebb of my adrenaline making me suddenly exhausted. I thought I might fall asleep sitting up, but as the little bit of light we had from the outside began to wane, so did any chance I had of remaining awake.

“You need to rest,” Harry said.

“We both do,” I said weakly, looking at him and seeing how very tired he looked. “Why don’t we both try to get some sleep and we can see how we both feel in the morning?”

He nodded and sat down across from me. We both lay down on the cold floor, but it didn’t take long for that chill to creep in through my clothes to freeze my skin, even with the fire only a couple of feet away.

“Sloane?” Harry said before I could figure out what to do about it.

“Yeah?” I responded.

“Are you as fucking cold as I am?” he asked, and I nearly laughed at how ridiculous this whole thing was turning out to be. I’d had a huge crush on this guy, and here we were in what could be a movie scenario where the couple had to cuddle for warmth and ended up making out because they just couldn’t help themselves.

If, you know, I wasn’t nursing a serious injury.

“Yeah,” I admitted anyway, knowing that staying warm had to be as much of a priority as keeping my wound wrapped and clean. “Do, uh... do you want to get closer?”

There was a long, pregnant silence before Harry said, “Do *you* want to get closer?”

“I think we should,” I said after giving him another minute to think it through. “I think at this point, we’re going to need to do everything we can to stay warm, and body heat is going to be the best way besides the fire for us to do that.”

He sat up and looked at me, a torn expression on his face. “I think so, too,” he said. “Here, let me come to you. Don’t move.”

He stood and walked over to me, then sat down beside me. He looked awkward in a way that would have had me delighted at how much he was squirming if we weren’t in this situation, but as it was, I just wanted him to take charge and do something.

Thankfully, he seemed to read my mind, because he lay down beside me, then opened his coat and scooted closer so



that I was lying against him back to front, and he pulled me tightly against him, making sure to avoid my arm as he wrapped his coat around the both of us.

I must have been exhausted, because I realized multiple times that I was dozing off, and each time, I noticed that Harry was still there, holding onto me tightly. Because I couldn't see his face, I had no idea if he was asleep, but either way, he wasn't letting me go.

And I had no desire for him to.

## *Chapter Fifteen*

Harry

Sloane's lips were on my neck and I was moaning into her ear.

We were naked, she was naked, a glorious sight to behold as she rocked back and forth on my hips. The tiniest whimpers I'd ever heard crept across those glorious lips, as she used my body to pleasure herself. I could hardly believe this was happening in the midst of this cave-in but here we were, next to the fire we'd painstakingly made ourselves.

The sound of the crackling echoed off the walls as much as our own panting did, as Sloane's hips gyrated at a torturous pace. I wanted to grab her and take her for my own pleasure, but I knew I had to be delicate about this.

My hands ran up her body, over those glorious curves, to her full breasts which bounced as she rode me.

“Yes...” I dared to breathe, and the whisper itself echoing off the walls.

The crackling of the fire seemed to dance along with her, mimicking her movement as we became one in a way that I swore to myself I wouldn't dare.

My fingers tightened around her waist as she began to accelerate her gyrations. I felt a pull deep inside me and I tilted my head back, my eyes rolling in ecstasy.

I was getting closer.

And then suddenly I wasn't.

I woke up from a chill that ran through my body like a draft through an abandoned house. I was hard, but that quickly went away at the reminder of my current situation, despite the fact that I was pressed against her.

Sloane, mercifully, appeared to be sleeping still which allowed me the time to settle things down, and detach myself enough to evaluate our situation.

I had never ventured this far into the cave before, and I wasn't really sure if this would get me in more trouble or perhaps be my salvation.

As I moved far enough that Sloane was out of sight, the only sounds became that of my breathing and some dripping of water. At least I knew there was a source of it nearby if we needed it.

The cave led a bit downward, and then up again, but for the most part was pretty straightforward. I could see where there

had once been mine tracks, but I guessed that they may have all been pulled up when they left this place depleted of resources.

I'd walked for about fifteen minutes when I decided it was probably best to turn back. Even if there was something up ahead, I wouldn't want Sloane to wake up afraid. If I was nothing else to her, I was her brother's friend. Therefore, it felt like my duty to be sure she made it out alive.

I felt a yearning ache in my stomach to call myself more than that to her. She was a masterpiece and I, a simple admirer of her beauty. Yet given the chance, I'd worship her every day of my life.

When I got back to the camp, Sloane was still sleeping and I watched her for a moment.

What would it be like to wake up beside that beautiful face every day? To know that when her eyes opened, it was me they were looking for.

I crouched down beside her and brushed a piece of her hair back from her face. "Sloane," I whispered. "I hate to do this to you but you have to wake up."

Sloane's eyes fluttered open and she looked up at me like she was confused, but then slowly I saw recognition, remembrance, and disappointment.

And then I saw the pain.

The pain which had been suppressed by sleep no longer dampened the ache of her injury. Now she was awake and she

was here and it was all my fault.

“Fuck...” she uttered, groaning as she sat up.

I helped her to her feet and she nodded in thanks, using her non-injured arm to brush herself off. “I’m sorry about all this,” I said, realizing what a sorry excuse it was considering we might be facing down starving to death.

Sloane acknowledged what a lame excuse it was too with her eyes, a slight deadpan if not a downright glare. “Well, I just hope the rescue crews get here soon, I’m cold.”

I stared at her in confusion. “Sloane, no one knew we were out here. We’re going to have to save ourselves if we want to survive.”

“Save ourselves?” she asked like I was crazy. “Where the fuck do you think we’re gonna go?”

A weird wave of anger washed over me. “I don’t know, but I’m not just gonna stay here to die.”

“No, you’d much rather go further from the entrance to die.”

“Or where there might be a second exit,” I insisted. “We have to try, Sloane. Our supplies are limited and I have no cell service. I’m sure you don’t either.”

Sloane furrowed her brow and looked at the ground. “No,” she said.

“Then we’re gonna have to either find a way out or find a place where we can get a signal. There’s no point in delaying

because no one knew we were down here, you absolute pop tart.”

Sloane’s eyes got wide and she looked startled. “Absolute what?”

“Pop tart. I dunno. It’s an English thing. Absolute waffle. Absolute fencepost. I dunno.” I began to laugh and so did she. “It’s like a friendly insult.”

“Whatever, you absolute crumpet,” she said back to me.

That made me burst out laughing, and I pulled her into a hug. God, I wanted to keep her safe from all this. If I couldn’t though, at least I was stuck with a girl who knew how to have a laugh.

“Now you’ve got it,” I said. “Come on. Let’s go that way. I scouted it out a bit earlier.” She nodded and went to pick up her bag, but I dove beneath her and yanked it away. “No way. You’re not getting more injured when I can carry these both.”

She looked up at me and sniffled. “Thanks,” she said. “I’m really scared.”

I wanted to hug her again but I felt like two might be a lot for “brother’s friend.” So instead, I nodded. “I’m not too keen on this myself to be honest. Best we can hope for is that we will get lucky and there is a ladder at the end of this tunnel.”

I was hoping to elicit another smile, but it was too much. She was as aware as I was that this wasn’t going to be easy.

Sloane and I walked at least a mile into the caves, occasionally having to squeeze through small spaces, before

we stopped to rest. Sloane was looking a sort of seasick green so I suggested we have some water and maybe a snack.

I had tried to be clever and packed a bunch of protein bars plus a few satchels of dried fruit, but it was never going to be enough. Not if no one even knew where to look for us.

I pulled open my bag and hers, dumping the contents where we had stopped to rest. If we were going to make it as long as possible with the hope that someone would find us or we'd get cell signal (I dreaded to think which would happen first), we would need to survey what we had available.

I was immediately taken back to my days as a boy scout when that was a common thing, and my brain furiously calculated two weeks' worth of supply divisions. That was one bar and one handful of fruit for each of us. There were four bottles of water, but I had heard water coming from somewhere that could possibly change things.

But until then, it was a quarter of a bottle a day for each of us. Even thinking about it made me incredibly thirsty.

I guess you never really appreciate the convenience of things like water until it is unavailable.

Sloane took a little nap while I sorted everything out and I was impressed by how fast she fell asleep. I was lucky enough to have at some point packed a little first aid kit, so I dug out the pain reliever that would do virtually nothing and set them aside for her. As bad of a time as I was having, I was sure it was worse for her.

That was when I had the idea to remove half of the clothes keeping me warm and make a sling for her. The position she was lying in just to keep her arm in a comfortable position made me ache all the way through my body. So, without thinking about it, off my jumper came.

The application was shotty to say the least, but it would hold her arm up, and by the time I woke her up, I was only half frozen to death.

“Hey,” I said, touching her face softly. “Can we go a little further today? I made you a sling to help with your arm.”

Sloane yawned and stretched. “You made a what?” She reached out her hand on her good arm and I pulled her to her feet.

“A sling,” I said, holding it out. “Look I know it’s shit but it will keep your bloody arm still. Just take it.”

She rolled her eyes. “You really didn’t need to do all—”

“And,” I said, interrupting her to reach for the small packet I’d put aside. “I found you aspirin.”

“Oh, thank God,” she said, accepting the little white pills as I dispensed them.

I handed her a water bottle which at first she began to gulp down.

“Whoa, whoa, whoa,” I said, pulling the bottle slowly away from her lips. “That water has to last us a while. Let’s take it easy.”



She nodded and swallowed the mouthful of water she currently had between her cheeks, making sure to pop the pills in there too.

“So which direction?” she asked, looking ahead of us where the path forked. “I can’t imagine one path is that different from the other.”

“You’d be surprised,” I said. “But let’s get moving. I wanna make at least another mile before we rest for the night.”

Sloane nodded and scrunched up her nose, looking left and then right.

“That way,” she said, pointing down the darkened path, and I nodded in uncaring agreement.

“One path is as good as the other,” I declared, taking her uninjured hand and leading the way.

At first, she looked a little surprised, but then she clung to my hand as well, both of us needing comfort so badly that we were willing to be like children on the playground to get it.

Sloane took a deep breath and nodded slowly. “One path is as good as the other.”

## *Chapter Sixteen*

Sloane

I wish I could explain the level of comfort having Harry's hand wrapped around mine brought to me, but it was so overwhelming that it defied description.

I had never been the type of person to defer to someone else in time of need, or even not in such times. I liked to be in charge. Independent. But the way Harry guided us through the cave system, giving me just enough say in how we proceeded to truly make this a joint effort while still making sure to take charge and keep us both safe, made me feel taken care of in a way I don't ever remember being cared for.

We walked through the tunnels, hitting dead end after dead end and having to backtrack over and over. After the fifth time we ended up back in the same place, I started to cry, starting to truly believe we were never going to make it out of here.

"Hey," Harry said as I began to whimper, tears spilling over my cheeks and creating frosty trails on my face. "Hey... I

know.” He grabbed me and pulled me against him, stroking my hair and whispering soothing things to me. “I’m worried, too. But we have to keep trying. Eventually we’ll find the right tunnel.”

“What if there is no right tunnel?” I asked, voicing the fear I’d had from the beginning of this disaster. “What if they all lead to dead ends because the only one that actually goes out is the one we came in, which we can’t get out of? What if we’re actually stranded down here, Harry? What if we starve to death in here?”

His fingers paused against my head, and his arm tightened around me, holding me tightly, and it would have been the most comforting thing ever, if not for the fact that my arm was sandwiched between us in the sling he made for me. Pain shot through my entire being as our bodies pressed together around it, and I gasped.

“Shit,” I said, pulling sharply away, more tears spilling over. I’d been in lots of situations that could have been dangerous or deadly, but I’d never come as close as I was right now. And at least most of the time, someone knew where I was. No one had any idea except for Harry, and he was right here with me, possibly days from death as well.

Harry watched me for a minute, then put his hands on my shoulders. It still hurt, but it wasn’t agony like when there was pressure on my arm.

“We are going to find a way out,” he said firmly, tilting my chin so I was looking up at him. “If I have to burrow my way

through the damn walls to find you a way out, I'm getting you out of here."

I snorted a wet, sobbing laugh at the idea of Harry digging through the rock wall with his hands like some kind of animal. I don't know how he managed to make me laugh when things felt so dire, but I was grateful.

We went on a while longer, but after about six hours of walking, the way every step jostled my arm began to become unbearable, and when we reached yet another dead end, I collapsed against the cave wall and sank to the floor.

"I can't go anymore," I said, my eyes closed against the pain.

I heard Harry's steps come toward me, and when I opened my eyes, he was kneeling in front of me, his hand extended toward my face. He paused, but then brushed a sweaty strand of hair away from my eyes.

"Then we won't," he said. "We can set up a little camp here for a while. I'll make a fire, all right?"

I nodded and leaned my head back against the cave wall, gritting my teeth against the pain. It was worse than it had been yet, and the wound was beginning to feel hot, something I knew meant nothing good. I didn't want to freak out Harry before I needed to, though, so I didn't say anything. If we were going to get out of here, I'd get to a doctor for some antibiotics. If not... it didn't really matter, did it?

I listened to the soft sounds of Harry pulling the kindling out of his bag and the crack as he struck the flint with his knife. From what I could hear, he was getting better at it, because it only took a few hits before a fire began to crackle. Warmth spread quickly in my direction, and as soon as it did, I felt Harry sit down beside me. I opened my eyes and looked over at him. It was worrying that it took so much effort to open them, and even more worrying that the simple act of turning my head in his direction was almost enough to put me to sleep.

“Feel better?” he asked.

“Much,” I lied, but I could feel my face twisted into a wince as I tried to adjust myself and pulled at my broken, infected arm.

“Your arm?” he asked.

“Yeah,” I said through gritted teeth. It wasn’t a lie. It still hurt really bad. It just wasn’t a whole truth because I wasn’t ready to tell him just how dire my situation was. I knew he’d probably do something stupid, like spare way more of the supplies than he should to try to help me, and I wanted to make sure he had enough if for some reason I wasn’t going to make it out of here.

“Hang on,” he said, digging in his bag for a moment.

“I’m okay,” I said. “I’m not really hungry or thirsty.” Half lie. I really wasn’t hungry, but I was parched. I just didn’t want to use more water than I absolutely had to.

He looked at me with a smile. “Not what I was looking for, Darling, though you’ll need some water for... this.” He pulled out the first aid kit, and I wasn’t sure what exactly he was going for, but then he produced two little white pills, which he put in my good hand. “Aspirin. For the pain.”

*And for a fever,* I thought, though I didn’t say it out loud. “Oh, wow,” I said instead. “Thanks.” I didn’t want to take them just in case he needed them at any point, but I was in agony, and knew I wouldn’t be any good to keep moving if I didn’t do something to help the pain in my arm.

He handed me a water bottle, and it took all of my willpower to only take as much as I needed to get the pills down, since I wanted to gulp down the entire thing. But I managed to keep to the promise I made myself to conserve as much as I could for Harry. Even when I handed him back the bottle, and he gave me a questioning look.

“You don’t need more?” he asked, holding the bottle back out to me.

“No,” I lied again. “I think I had enough.”

“You’ve had almost none today.”

Shit. He noticed. “Oh, alright,” I said, taking the bottle from him and opening it. I could have just drunk like he wanted me to, but I knew if I could distract him, I’d be able to get away with taking less. I nodded at the first aid kit. “You’re a regular boy scout, aren’t you?” I paused, thinking for a moment. “Do you guys even have scouts in Britain?”

Harry laughed and pulled out a bottle for himself, which he took a tiny sip of. “We do, as a matter of fact. It’s over a hundred years old as an organization, and the two years I spent in the program were among the best I had as a child.”

“Only two?” I asked. “Why didn’t you do more if you liked it so much? Do they only have it for that long?”

“Not at all,” he said, and for the first time, I could sense a hint of bitterness to his voice. Obviously, I’d stumbled upon a really sensitive topic without meaning to, and I nearly took back my question, but Harry took a sip of his water and continued. “Even as a boy, I spent most of my time shadowing my dad when he’d go to visit his resorts around the world. Even school got in the way sometimes of him making sure I knew how he ran his business so I could take it over one day.”

“And did you always want to do that?” I asked, suddenly feeling a little bit bad for him that it seemed like he’d never had much of a say in his own future.

“I still don’t know if I want to do that,” he said with a dry laugh. “But even if I did, it’s not like I have a whole lot of experience yet.”

“You seem like you know what you’re doing,” I said. “I never would have been able to handle some of the things you have, just since I’ve been here.”

“You mean the things you caused?” he teased.

“Ha. Ha,” I said sardonically. “But yes. Also, things like that VIP you upgraded. I don’t think I could have handled that

half as well.”

“Maybe not today,” he said with a smile. “But someday. I’ve just been doing this for thirteen years so far, so I know a few tricks.”

“And yet, your dad is just having you run the one single hotel?” I asked. “How many does he have?”

“A few dozen,” Harry said, and my jaw dropped. I knew he owned several, but I had no idea there were that many.

“Do you want to run more?”

Harry paused, his smile suddenly going lifeless before fading entirely. “I... don’t know. I thought I did at one point, but when you’ve had your entire life planned out for you, sometimes you just wish that you had a choice beyond what tie you’re going to wear.”

“I don’t think I’ve seen you wear a tie once,” I said, trying to instill a little levity in the conversation, but knowing that he was being open, so I backtracked. “Kidding. That sounds really rough. I had the opposite issue. My parents had been so strict and structured with Ken, that when I came along, I don’t know if they got bored with it or if they treated me differently because they were older or maybe because I was a girl, but there was almost nothing structured about my upbringing. I did activities, but there was never any kind of encouragement to stick with them. I did a lot more creative type stuff and was encouraged to go with the flow of what I wanted, but if I’m being honest, a little structure would have been nice. It felt like they wanted me to be such a free spirit that they forgot how to



actually parent a child, and I ended up kind of raising myself. Well, not entirely. Kendal helped a lot. That's why we're so close."

Harry listened the entire time I spoke, and when I was done, he waited a beat before nodding and saying. "That sounds rough."

"So does your deal," I said.

We both smiled at each other sadly. Our upbringings could not have been more different, but we somehow had both ended up right here, in this same place, fighting for a way out and for our lives.

## *Chapter Seventeen*

Harry

**W**hen I woke up the next morning, I knew something had changed. Sloane barely moved when I pulled away and her face looked far rosier than it had.

I put my hand to her forehead to confirm what I was afraid of, and as I suspected, she was burning up.

“Fuck...” I uttered to myself. This meant either she’d developed a chill from the damp, cold cave floor, or her wound was infected. “Sloane,” I whispered, trying my best to pull her into a sitting position. “Come on, sweetheart, you need to sit up so I can get you some water.”

She was barely responsive and now I really started to freak out.

I propped her up against a rocky wall and fumbled for the full bottle of water that hadn't been opened. The fact that she wasn't sweating indicated severe dehydration, and even if it

meant a few days less for me, I would be damned before I let her die like this.

I gently tilted her head back, sliding my body in behind hers to support her, and poured a little of the water into her mouth.

“Swallow it for me, babes,” I begged. If I hadn’t been so afraid, I would have laughed at how unsexy something that raunchy sounded in this context.

Sloane struggled but did as I asked, her lips dry and quivering.

“That’s a girl,” I said, pressing my face against her brow. “Can you do some more?”

Weakly, Sloane shook her head no and I set the bottle down to the side. While my first aid knowledge of what to do for injuries might have been good, my comprehension of what to do with a person who was ill was sorely lacking.

“Am I gonna die?” she asked, her voice a hoarse whisper.

“Nah,” I said. “I won't let that happen. Now I'm gonna have to have a look at that wound of yours, okay? This might not feel very nice.”

I lifted her arm away from her body and she whimpered, biting down on her lip to keep it from being more of a scream.

“Sorry,” I said sympathetically, wishing I had something to help with the pain. Then I slowly unwrapped the blood-soaked cloth and pulled it away from where it was stuck to her skin.

“Ow, fuck...wait,” Sloane said. “Please use some water to wet it. It feels like you’re pulling my skin off.”

I nodded and grabbed for the bottle of water that sat next to her, slowly pouring the water over the wound to loosen the bandage. It worked to an extent, but I still saw a tear run down her cheek as I removed it.

Dear God.

I didn’t know what was worse, the smell or the look of it. Either way it was clearly infected. I was certain that in her fall, Sloane must have gotten debris in her wound and I hadn’t been clever enough to sanitize the shirt I wrapped around it.

“Hang on a moment,” I said, then scrambled for the first aid kit one more time, hoping that there was something inside that would help me.

Sure enough there were plenty of things to work with. In the little red pouch there was gauze, alcohol swabs, Band-Aids, iodine swabs, even a sling.

I immediately got to work.

I had always heard it was good to sweat out a fever so I pulled out the emergency blanket and put it over her, the shiny surface reflecting light against the cave walls. Then I grabbed a few of the alcohol swabs and soap wipes and began to gently clean the infection.

Sloane, who was in and out of consciousness, winced with every swipe and I felt terrible as I saw it begin to bleed again.

I wanted to vomit at having to hurt her, at knowing she was fading and that her life rested in my barely capable hands. I knew it wasn't right, or fair, but if she pulled through this, I was going to tell her how I was feeling about her.

She was perhaps the most perfect specimen of a human I'd ever met. Wild, beautiful, smart, clever—such incredible traits all wrapped up in one small ginger. She was fire and I was a stupid moth drawn to her flame.

When I'd managed to disinfect and rebandage her wound, I set to work trying to ensure she drank water every hour.

I watched as our limited supply of water dwindled, and hoped that this would turn out okay. Ultimately, as I'd already decided, if someone had to go without, it would be me for bringing us down here.

The night, or what I assumed was the night, dragged on, and at some point my own exhaustion consumed me.

I had put a cold, damp cloth on her head and had emptied an entire bottle of water through the night before falling asleep, and when I woke up, I turned quickly to check on my patient.

Her breathing was shallow and I panicked, putting my hand to her head. Seemingly, thank God, the shallow breath was from her restful sleep rather than the fever. It appeared to have burned itself out and now she was sleeping peacefully.

I breathed a sigh of relief and only now considered a little water for myself. I also unwrapped a protein bar and split it in

half, putting one half in my mouth and the other half aside for Sloane. She would likely be hungry when she woke up.

I laid back against the wall for a few minutes as I ate, and pulled out my cellphone to look for any signal again.

Nothing.

My battery was down to fifty percent and I decided to shut it off until we found somewhere that could viably have a signal.

Then I got to my feet to examine the path before us. There was only one to choose from this time, and somehow that felt more dismal than if there had been five of them. If there was only one path, this one led to our salvation or nothing at all.

I breathed in the dampness of the cave and could have sworn I felt the tiniest bit of air movement, but I was perfectly ready to accept that I was delusional and hallucinating things I wished were there rather than things that actually were.

I headed back to Sloane and crouched beside her, brushing some of the sweat-damp hair from her forehead.

“Darling,” I said, softly. “Wake up. You need to eat.”

Sloane’s eyes opened like she’d just had the best night’s sleep of her life and she stretched her good arm wide before sitting up.

“Whoa,” she said, arching her back and pushing on a spot that was clearly tender. “What the hell happened?”

“Well,” I said slowly, not trying to cause undue fear where there was none. “You may have had a little bit of a fever. But not to worry, I patched you right up.”

Sloane touched the new bandages on her arm and her eyes widened. “Where did you find all this stuff?” she asked.

“Turns out, it was in the first aid kit,” I said. “I was so panicked that I missed it all and boy was I bloody grateful for it last night. I don’t know what I would have done if I hadn’t had this. Probably half boiled your arm in an attempt to get rid of the infection.”

Sloane wrinkled her nose in distaste. “Well, I’m glad you didn’t. That sounds like a rather unpleasant experience.”

I actually managed to choke out a laugh as I tossed her the other half of the protein bar. “Eat. We have to get moving again, unfortunately.”

Sloane groaned as she stuffed the protein bar in her mouth and got to her feet. “I really do feel a lot better, thanks.”

I nodded. “I hope that you would have done the same for me,” I said. “Besides, this is all my fault anyway.”

Sloane shrugged. “I came with you. I’m no dummy. I know how dangerous cave exploring can be and I chose to follow you. You can’t blame yourself for this happening.”

“Watch me,” I said with a sheepish chuckle, rubbing the back of my head. “Shall we be off?”

Sloane nodded. “Which way shall we go? That way?” she said pointing toward the only direction. “Or that way?” She

again pointed to the only path and I laughed.

“Dealer’s choice.”

We hadn’t walked thirty feet though when Sloane stopped, yanking my arm backward and pulling me to her.

And then our lips were touching.

For real this time.

My hands went to her hair and I tucked my fingers into it as I kissed her. She was soft, and warm, and still smelled unbelievably good for what we’d been through.

A fire rippled through me, and I couldn’t get enough of her lips. She was an amazing kisser and I matched each press of tongue, each opening and closing of her lips with my own.

When we eventually pulled away, I caught my breath and stared at her. “What was that, Sloane?”

I didn’t dare hope for more than a desperate kiss. She was so young and vibrant and I’d had the life sucked out of me before I was even her age.

But she smiled. “It was a thank-you. You’re the only reason I’m alive right now and to be honest, that makes me feel very close to you. I—”

Before she could continue, I pulled her back into another kiss, wanting her mouth again, feeling incomplete without it.

I was breathless with desire and yet, so conscious of where we were and the fact that I’d only barely saved her life last



night that I couldn't bring myself to make a proper move on her.

This time our separation was much slower, and I gave her a smile. "You're kind of amazing," I said, remembering my promise to myself to tell her how I felt. While it was only half the truth, it was what felt appropriate. Particularly because I was half hard against her and there was no way she didn't feel it, despite having the grace to pretend she was unaware.

"Right," she said, clearing her throat and pulling away. "Let's do this. One way is as good as the other."

"One way is as good as the other."

## *Chapter Eighteen*

Sloane

**I** kissed him.

I could hardly believe myself but I had kissed my brother's old man best friend.

Harry and I walked in silence for a while, holding hands and climbing over a bunch of rough terrain. Walking through a cave was nowhere near as easy as it sounded like it would be, with all the slopes and protruding rocks blocking your path. It involved a lot of climbing and squeezing through places you'd rather not squeeze through. Luckily, when you'd been eating as little as we'd been, that wasn't much of a task. Not an ounce of bloat existed on our bodies right now.

Apparently, eating half a protein bar a day would do that to you.

We spent most of the day walking, at least I assumed it was day. There was absolutely no way to tell this far down and

especially without any peek to the outside world.

That was, until we got to the hole.

Harry and I hadn't stopped for two hours straight and I was starting to ache. I'd taken the last of the aspirin this morning and I wasn't sure how much longer I'd be able to keep traversing this rocky area with my arm hurt like this.

But then Harry and I squeezed through a small passage that opened up into a giant stone rotunda, and at the center of it—a massive hole that was a school bus wide.

“Oh, my God,” Harry said, his voice cracking like he might just break down. “We're saved. We have to be able to get a signal from here.”

He and I both grabbed our phones and turned them on, each action feeling like it was taking a thousand years to complete.

When they finally powered up, we grinned at each other but our smiles quickly faded.

No signal.

“How is this possible?” I asked him with worry. The opening was at least fifty or sixty feet up, and there was no way we could get out if we couldn't get someone to come get us.

“I don't know,” said Harry with a slight shiver against the cold. He was now down to wearing just a shirt and coat since he'd torn up his sweater for me to create a makeshift sweater-sling before he replaced it with the small sling from the first

aid kit. “Why the fuck didn’t I bring a walkie talkie?” he lamented.

“It doesn’t matter now,” I said. “All that matters is that you and I are gonna put our heads together to try and figure out how to get up there and out of that hole.”

Harry looked at me with frustration. “And how do you propose you climb up there with your arm the way it is?”

I was taken aback by the bite of his words and took a few steps away. “I don’t know, I was hoping we could figure it out together.”

But Harry didn’t seem to be listening. He was pacing, rubbing his temples and biting on his lip with focus. Well, if he was too lost in thought to even be polite, I would have to figure this out on my own.

I walked away from him and to the side walls of the giant opening. I marveled at the fact that to me, it seemed like this must be what the inside of a volcano looked like. Only this space was totally hollowed out, with a big, flat surface that stretched wide beneath the opening.

It was significantly less rugged than the rest of the cave had been, and I wondered to myself if that had anything to do with the opening. If water could pour down here via snow melting or rain, then after a few thousand years of erosion, you’d probably get something that looked a lot like this.

It was a shame we were in such a dire situation. Any other time I would have found this really beautiful, even mystical.

The me who wasn't severely injured and cold would have loved to have a fireside meditation here.

I ran my uninjured hand along the rocky wall as I walked, feeling each curve and crevice that had been etched into the stone over the years. But it wasn't until I was about three-quarters the way around that I suddenly came across something unusual.

About thirty feet ahead of me, there were what looked like footholds in the wall. And while they looked extremely dangerous to climb, they didn't look impossible.

"Harry," I shouted, nearly crying from relief. "Harry! Oh, my God there's a way up."

Harry snapped out of his deep well of thought and looked up to where I was pointing.

"No bloody way," he said, rushing to my side. "Do you think the miners made those?"

"Who cares?" I laughed from the sheer weight lifted off my shoulders. "Just climb them and we will get the fuck out of here. Assuming we don't get eaten by a bear or something the moment we emerge."

Harry chuckled now, too. "God, that would be our luck, wouldn't it?" Then he pulled off his gloves, shivering as he did. "I think I'm gonna get a better grip without them on. Hopefully, my fingers don't freeze and snap off."

I giggled. "That would put a damper on things, wouldn't it."

Harry walked to the wall and put a hand on the carved-out gap that someone had made just big enough for a foot to go into. “Yeah, these look pretty sturdy. I’m gonna give it a go.”

I shook, and not just from the cold. The weight that was riding on his success was immense. “Please be careful,” I said, noticing that he wasn’t putting his foot all the way inside the hole. “If you break your neck, that’s it for me.”

“I’m fine,” he said sternly. “Just let me concentrate.”

It was odd to be bickering like a couple, though I’d be lying if I said that I hadn’t considered it. With the amount of times I’d felt him hard against me, I could only assume he was amicable to the idea. I wasn’t too opposed either. He was strong, smart, sexy, and kind. Harry was literally everything I would have ever looked for in a man, plus he saved my life. I couldn’t even pretend that wasn’t swoon-worthy.

I watched as he delicately moved from one divot to the next, and even from where I stood, I could see him begin to sweat when he got about ten feet off the ground.

Closer and closer he drew to the halfway point and I could feel myself holding my breath.

That was when it happened.

Harry slipped.

I was sure I screamed, though my ears heard nothing through the ringing as time stood still. Harry had been at least twelve feet up when his foot hit some ice and I watched helplessly as he fell to the smooth cave floor.

I ran to him, calling out his name, trying to figure out if he was conscious. By some miracle, he'd managed to land partially on his back, but his shoulder was definitely dislocated.

"Fuck!" he screamed out, and it echoed around the cave. "Fucking ice."

I knelt down beside him, my injured arm making me damn near useless. "What can I do? Oh, dear God."

The angle at which his shoulder now sat was uncomfortable at best, gag-worthy at worst.

I'd once seen this happen before, at band camp. I was part of the color guard, particularly the rifle line. I'd tossed it too high, and the rifle came down on me, knocking my shoulder out of the ball joint. The pain was blinding, but not as much as when my marching band instructor came over and forced it back into place. Then it had been so agonizing that I literally threw up on the ball field.

I had some small satisfaction knowing that the football players would end up running over that spot, but it definitely wasn't worth the pain.

I tried now to help Harry sit up, and between the two of us we managed to get him into a sort of propped up position.

"We're not—" He winced and audibly moaned in pain. "We're not going anywhere with me like this. I should have known it would get icy the higher up we went. There's far more wetness gathering there."

“You had no way of knowing, and you tried to save us—me—once again. Now stop blaming yourself and let’s figure out how we’re gonna fix that shoulder.”

Harry grimaced and got to his feet awkwardly. “There’s really only one thing for this and by God I don’t want to do it.”

I didn’t like the sound of that and raised an eyebrow at him. “Do I dare ask what you mean?”

“Probably not,” he said, pulling back from the rotunda and into the passageway once more. I followed him in and watched as he leaned his bad shoulder against the stone wall. “This is gonna be nasty. If you’re squeamish, look away.”

I didn’t have enough time to consider whether I was or not before I watched Harry slam his entire body weight against the shoulder and into the rock.

I shrieked in surprise and there was a sickening crack that echoed around us, followed by the sounds of Harry violently retching. I was glad he hadn’t told me what he was about to do, or I would have definitely tried to stop him.

Harry dropped to his knees, clutching the now replaced shoulder and whimpering.

It was odd to see someone so tough and cocky so debilitated, but I knelt down beside him anyway. “Are you gonna be okay?” I asked.

“Well,” he panted. “My pride is definitely hurt, and we’re likely going to die down here, but yeah, I’m gonna be okay for a little while.”



That was as depressing a statement as I ever heard but I knew he was right. My brain couldn't fully wrap around the idea of it, but in theory, it was likely true.

“Should we make camp for now?” I asked, feeling a chill wash over my skin.

Harry nodded, still rubbing the hurt shoulder and picking up our bags.

“Harry,” I said feeling guilty. “Let me carry one. We're both injured now—”

“I was injured. Now I'm not. There's a difference.”

I sighed as he walked back into the tunnel a bit so we weren't getting hit by any of the cold wind, and watched as he began his routine to set up camp.

This was honestly the worst thing that had ever happened to me in my life and I'd be surprised if it wasn't the last one. With no cell signal, and no way to safely climb up, we were stuck, and once again at the mercy of there being another cave opening somewhere.

Once the fire roared to life, I sat down next to it, exhausted and I almost immediately drifted off. I knew Harry would wake me soon to eat, but until then, I was going to take relief in the form of unconsciousness.

Because that was all I had now.

## *Chapter Nineteen*

Harry

I was getting really good at setting up camp by now, and I wondered if I'd found my new calling. Of course, our rations were dwindling and the water supply was nearly gone, but hey, if we made it out of here, I had a promising future as a park ranger.

This of course seemed much less likely when I attempted to scale the wall using the oddly carved footholds and then promptly proceeded to fall, but hey, you never knew.

Maybe the rations would magically double—and the water, too. Maybe a giant Pegasus would drop out of the sky and fly us up out of here. I was becoming delirious with the doom I was now facing, and the still immense ache in my arm.

Our phones still hadn't picked up a signal, even beneath this enormous gaping hole above us, and I had no bloody idea how psychologically we were going to get through this. Seeing our

escape so near and yet so far away was torture in the highest regard. I had to do something or I was going to lose my mind.

When I stood, Sloane, who had drifted off, opened her eyes. I grabbed for the bag and tossed her a protein bar.

“I’m restless. I’m gonna see if I can go find us some water, okay?”

She raised an eyebrow, questioning whether I really wanted to do that. “Let me go with you,” she said, starting to get to her feet.

“Nuh uh,” I said, pointing to the ground. “I won’t be gone long and we can’t risk you hurting your arm again.”

“And what about your arm?” she asked, giving me a challenging look. “It’s not like you’re exactly well.”

“As I said before, I’m fine. It hurts, yes. But there is nothing physically wrong with it, unlike you, who likely has a broken arm.”

Sloane sighed. “I feel useless,” she said, a pout on her beautiful lips.

“That’s because right now you are, darling,” I said with a chuckle. “But don’t worry. I owe it to you to at least risk life and limb to get water. I did bring you down here after all.”

Sloane gave me a look. “I told you to stop bringing that up. And you already did risk life—and limb!”

I took a step toward her and pulled her into my arms. “And you will have to tell me at least five more times. I will never

forgive myself if we die here.”

“Well,” Sloane said with a shrug. “I mean, we’ll be dead, so...”

I rolled my eyes and shook my head at her. “You are a ridiculous woman.”

“I’ve been called worse. Hurry back, okay?”

I was sorely tempted to kiss her again but I wanted to be sure it wasn’t a heat of the moment thing and I probably tasted like throw up after knocking my shoulder back into place and promptly vomiting.

So instead, I bowed dramatically and stepped away. “My lady.” I then bent and gathered all the empty water bottles into my backpack. “I shall return.”

Sloane giggled and it made me happy that I could bring a smile to her face amidst all of this.

I turned my back to her and headed deeper into the cave, past the opening and down into a part of the tunnel where the walls narrowed in. It was a claustrophobic nightmare but I managed to squeeze through and just on the other side I heard the trickling of running water.

I took off in a sprint to find the source, dodging several stalagmites and crossing a narrow rock ledge.

That was until I reached the pathway to the water.

Clearly the miners had been here before as well because there was a highly suspect-looking rope bridge—if you could

call it that—connecting one side of the cave to the other across a large drop.

It was the stuff of Indiana Jones's nightmares and I almost threw up again at the thought of having to cross it. If someone were to fall into that hole, it would be instant death, no question about it.

But this was for Sloane. For her survival and mine, not that it mattered as much right now. If it had only been me I was saving, I probably would have just lain there until the supplies ran out and then died. But for her, the girl I was slowly falling in love with, it was worth it every day of the week.

It was odd to me how love was growing out of obsession. Typically, I either loved a girl or put her up on a pedestal too high for even myself. Sloane started on that pedestal but now, I was going to earn her love, too, if I could.

I approached the rope bridge and put one foot on the worn rung. It sank down under the weight of my foot and I nearly lost my balance entirely there.

“Fucking damn it,” I shouted in terror, and the sound of it echoed around me as though the cave itself was mocking me.

However, instead of making me give up, it only made me more determined.

I took a deep breath and put the full weight of my body down on the rope piece that held the two sides together. I was man enough to admit I was sweating like a sinner in church, but somehow, the bridge held together.

One step down, nine to go.

The water looked so refreshing from here, and I attempted to use that as motivation to keep going.

I attempted to trick my brain into believing this was just the same as the rope bridges at play parks. Kids walked across them all the time, so I certainly should be able to.

But with each uneasy step I could hear the ancient fibers strain and threaten. This was life or death and my fate rested in the hands of men long dead now.

I was almost to the end of the bridge, my heartbeat slowing immensely when a new creaking sound broke through the silence. I looked down just in time to see the rope rung beneath me give way.

My hands instinctively clutched the sides, giving me terrible rope burns and shoulder pain as I slid, and I only barely managed to catch myself and prevent plunging to my death. But I was left hanging there by the strength of my hands, too far away to use the ledge as leverage.

I wanted to call out for help but there was no one around to hear me, and I was keenly aware that it would be up to me to strong arm myself to safety.

I swung my body forward, foot up, trying to latch it onto one of the sides of the rope bridge to pull myself up. Every attempt made my muscles scream and I was keenly aware of the dizzying feeling that was pounding through my head, and I

realized I hadn't been eating nearly enough to exert this type of effort.

With one final push of my abdominal strength, I managed to get my legs up high enough to put my foot on the other ledge. Now it would just be a matter of getting my hands to it. I walked them along the side of the rope like a kid climbing monkey bars, and within a minute, I was entirely on solid ground about a foot away from the clear pool of water.

I couldn't help myself; I left out a happy cheer. I had survived. I had faced down death in a horrible way and kept cool to make it to the other side.

So of course, I rewarded myself with as big of a drink of water as I wanted.

The pool was surprisingly clean, though I supposed without dirt that made sense. I knelt beside it and dipped my hands in, washing the sweat off my face and dumping some over my hair. It wouldn't wash it but at least it could remove some of the debris. I had been walking with bits of rock tangled in my hair for days now.

Then I use my hands to pull cup after cup of water to my lips and quenching my aching thirst. If we get out of here, I will never take the availability of water for granted again.

Once I'd had my fill and filled our bottles, I was faced with the impossible feat of getting back over despite a large chunk of the bridge missing and hands that were rope-burned to fuck.

I evaluated my situation and determined that the only option I had was to put a foot on either side and sort of spider climb across. I felt like I was auditioning to be on *American Ninja Warrior* or something.

One foot and hand and then the other, I moved at a snail's pace to keep my balance, and once the fabric rungs were within reach, I tentatively put my foot down on it, my arms screaming. My hands were bleeding at this point and I propelled myself across the rest of the bridge at a frightening speed.

Once I reached the other side, I collapsed onto my knees and began to cry. I hadn't realized how ready I was to be out of here, this damp rocky hellscape with nearly no light and food running short. Consequences be damned, I would climb that hole if I had to, even if it meant risking my own death. Cracking open my skull would be far better than wasting slowly away here.

I practically ran back to Sloane, my adrenaline powering me through the various aches and pains that my voyage across the cavern had left me with. I couldn't have been prouder of myself, and even if tomorrow I ended up killing myself in an attempt to save the woman I... well...

Even then it would be worth it. I'd faced serious fear and overcame it. Was I becoming an adrenaline junkie?

As soon as I saw the light of the dying fire, I shouted out to her. "Sloane!" I cried. "I got it."



I rounded the corner to find her sitting and staring at me, face stained with tears.

“I—” I froze, completely unsure about whether I should ask her why she was upset. “Have you been... crying?”

Sloane nodded. “I’m just scared is all. This was really not what I had planned for my internship.”

I laughed sardonically. “Believe me when I say this wasn’t what I had planned for your internship either, babes. But look,” I pulled out the water bottles. “I had to do some death-defying feats, but I got us more water. It’s pretty clean, too.”

Sloane took a bottle from my hands and smiled at me. “This is amazing. Thank you for taking such good care of me.”

“Why wouldn’t I?” I asked her sincerely.

“Because I’m no one to you,” she replied. “I’m just your frat brother’s sister.” She looked at me with one of those girl looks that dared you to answer.

But I didn’t, at least not the way I think she expected to.

I dropped to my knees and crawled over her, looking down at her. Her hair was splayed out like a sunset and the color was doubly vibrant in the glow of the fire.

Slowly, I lowered my face to her neck and pressed my lips to the skin there. She shuddered and inhaled sharply.

“Is this okay?” I asked in her ear.

She nodded and put her hands on my waist.

I proceeded to kiss along her neck, my pulse starting to race with each inch of her I tasted. She was salty and sweet all at once, and I allowed my tongue to dance over the spots that I noticed made her squirm. Sloane dug her nails into my side when I reached the soft spot behind her ear and I smiled against her skin.

“Still okay?” I asked. I wanted to be sure that if Ken showed up right now, I could tell him this was extremely consensual.

“Yes, damn it,” she said. “I want you.”

She didn't have to tell me twice.

I was hard in moments, and my kisses went from her neck to her lips, my hand roving under her white shirt and beneath the sports bra she was wearing. My fingers gripped around her breasts, the mass of them being too great for one of my hands alone.

I groaned and pressed my hips against her, my length digging into her soft belly. Her good hand traced my chest and slid down my abdomen until it rested on my tip and I nodded in confirmation that I wanted her to touch me.

Sloane unzipped my jeans and pulled them plus my boxers down far enough that she could pull my raging hard-on free and begin to stroke it.

“You're uncut,” she noted.

“Most people in the world are.” I laughed through immense pleasure. “It's just you silly Americans who insist on lopping off your children's bits.”

Sloane giggled. “Is it true that you get more sensation than guys who are cut?”

I shrugged, thrusting my cock up into her hand with feral desire. “I’ve never been circumcised so I don’t know. But from what I understand, yes.”

Sloane closed her eyes and moaned. “I love that,” she said.

“Good,” was all I could manage to reply as I slowly fucked her hand.

While she pleased me, I was busy working with her gorgeous breasts, and I flipped up her T-shirt to give me better access. With a tug up on her bra, two massive, lovely tits came free, and I buried my face in them.

“Hell,” I said, my cock twitching and dripping. “Could you be any more attractive?”

Sloane didn’t answer, only continued to work me with skill I wouldn’t have expected.

I pulled back to evaluate her gorgeous, tan nipples, before leaning my head down to take one in my mouth and suck. I loved having a nipple in my mouth. There was something so tantalizingly raw about it.

I gently bit down until she groaned.

“Harder,” she whispered.

Dear God I had no idea how I was going to survive this goddess.

I did as I was asked, taking the sweet flesh more firmly between my teeth and relishing in the noises she made.

“You like a bit of pain, huh?”

With flushed cheeks and short breaths, she nodded. “I guess I’ve just never found someone who could play like this without being selfish.”

As if that was my go word, I grunted with desire. “Well, you’ve come to the right place, darling. As mild as I may seem in my day-to-day life, I identify as a pleasure dom. Do you know what that means?”

She shook her head and I pulled back to smile mischievously at her.

“It means that I get off on your pleasure. And because it’s your pleasure that does it for me, I will make it last exactly as long as I want it to. Make sense?”

Her eyes widened and she nodded. “I think I would like that very much.”

“Good,” I said, beginning to move away from her breasts and moving down the length of her body. “Now you’re gonna be a good girl and lie still for me. I don’t want you hurting your arm while I lick you ’til you scream.”

A shiver ran through her, and I tucked my thumbs around the band of her panties, pulling them and her jeans free from her hips.

I stopped momentarily to remove my coat and place it beneath her. I wouldn’t want her to get cold from her bare skin

on the cold stone while I was enjoying the taste of her.

Then I leaned in to smell her scent. She smelled delicious, extremely natural and sweet. She had a fine layer of red hair that was dusted across her pussy lips and I buried my face in it.

The feeling of the soft hairs against my stubbled face was orgasmic, and Sloane seemed to be enjoying herself too if the volume of her moaning was any indication. The sounds echoed off the cavernous walls so that the entire space turned into an echo chamber of pleasure.

“Mmmm...” I growled against her skin. “Good girl.”

I ran my tongue the length of her slit and slid it between her lips. She instantly arched up against my mouth and I used a firm hand against her lower belly to keep her held down.

I continued to tease her this way until she was nearly crying, begging for me to put my tongue against her aching bud. And when I finally did, I felt her wetness begin to drip down my chin immediately.

I had been with many women across the years, but by far, Sloane was the wettest. I licked up every tasty drip from her dripping hole and sucked on her clit to propel more.

I lifted her hips, pulling her to my face and holding her there so she couldn't squirm away from my intense touch, then prodded a single finger into her entrance. “Still all right, darling?” I asked.

“God yes,” she whined. “Please don't stop.”

I had a special little trick I'd picked up about ten years ago when I realized I was disproportionately good at pleasuring the women I slept with, that would induce waves of orgasmic pleasure upon a few small thrusts of my fingers.

Indeed, when I pushed one, then two fingers inside her, she tightened against me in seconds.

With a motion like I was scooping inside her, and several well-placed flicks of my tongue, she spilled over into a screaming orgasm and rode my face in delicious agony.

I didn't stop her. This was my favorite part. The moment where I made a woman lose her mind with pleasure so that all that remained was feral need, and when she slowed, my hand ran up her body once more, giving one of her nipples a pinch.

“Good girl.”

I was so hard it was painful. I wanted to be in her so fucking badly, and yet, I knew the value of getting her completely relaxed first. Sex with me wasn't fast and loose like most men I knew. I wanted it slow; I wanted it tantalizing. And now that I was finally going to have the woman I so desperately wanted, I was going to make it last.

I had no way of knowing whether her attraction to me went beyond this cave and her perception of me as a hero, but I wasn't going to question it now.

When her body went limp in my grasp, I watched for a moment as she shook from the intensity of her orgasm. While I enjoyed this post-climax splendor, I took my cock in my

hand and began to stroke, groaning low under my breath as I teased myself with as much intensity as I'd teased her.

“Do you want more?” I asked, reaffirming her consent.

“Yes...” she panted, her eyes not even opening. “God yes.”

“Do you want me inside you?”

Her eyes opened now and she watched me touch myself, biting her lip and nodding.

“Then you'll have it, darling,” I said to her, more ready for this moment than I'd ever been for anything in my entire thirty-five years of life.

## *Chapter Twenty*

Sloane

**M**y breathing was short and ragged and perfectly in rhythm with the pounding of my heart, which I could still feel pulsing in my clit from where Harry had brought me to a screaming orgasm.

And he wasn't even done yet.

I'd been with plenty of guys up until this point, but almost none of them had any clue what they were doing when it came to pleasing a woman. I guess that was the downfall of fucking college guys who only cared about getting their dicks wet and not about the actual experience.

And after Finn, I didn't think that there was much more I could expect out of sex. He'd been so attentive, and my pleasure had seemed to matter to him as much as his own.

But with Harry...



God, Harry took it to a new level that I doubted I'd ever come across again. He had taken me to a place I'd never even been on my own, with just myself for company, and he'd done it because *he* enjoyed my pleasure.

I had thought I wanted to fuck Harry when I met him. Now... I knew I didn't want to fuck anyone else. Like, ever again.

I was still reeling from the mind-blowing climax he'd given me when he asked if I was ready for him to be inside of me.

More? There was more?

If you'd described to me how I felt after he'd gone down on me and pleased me with his fingers, I'd have told you I would be done—unable to take any more.

But it was exactly the opposite. I was insatiable. I wanted more of Harry. All of him, over and over, without reprieve.

I watched him stroke himself as he neared my entrance, and my entire being felt like it was made up of butterflies who were restless with the need to feel his magnificent cock slide into my entrance.

When I felt his tip press against my slit, I gasped and arched into him, but he held me down.

“Careful of your arm,” he said, running a hand through my hair to settle me down, but I didn't want to be settled. I wanted him to ruin me. To destroy me.

But my arm was still in its sling against my chest, and as he tried to position himself over me, we both became very aware

of how in the way it was. His tip was still poised at the opening of my pussy, and I prepared myself for the pleasure that I hoped would overcome the pain in my upper body, but he stopped and sat up.

“Come here,” he said, pulling me up along with him as he stretched out his legs in front of him, a slight bend in his knees, and setting me in his lap so I was straddling his hips. “That’s a good girl,” he growled. “That’s a very... very good girl.”

I moaned as he positioned me over his length, pressing it up into me to the point of meeting resistance at my lips, then looking at me. I nodded enthusiastically. In this position, I could always pull back if I needed to for my arm, but it allowed him to go so deep that, when he finally entered me, I didn’t know I could feel so full. He stretched me as he slid inside, and I moaned loudly.

“Fuck...” I whimpered, and he took that as his cue to begin to rock me back and forth and up and down on his lap, creating friction and motion that had me coming again within a minute. “Harry,” I said, throwing my good arm around his neck while leaving enough space for my hurt arm to not be crushed. “God, Harry...”

“Again,” he said, and I opened my eyes to look into his. They were hungry and demanding, controlling and domineering, and I felt my entire body sink into it because it was all so fucking powerful and erotic that I thought I might just die.

“Again?” I said, once I regained control of my vocal cords.

“Again,” he repeated. “I want to hear you screaming my name again... and again... and again... because I want to know that *you* know who’s making you come like that.”

“Okay,” I whimpered, but he wasn’t having that.

“Yes, Harry,” he corrected me, and I giggled a little before he leaned back and began thrusting up into me.

Fuck...

“Yes... Harry,” I obeyed. Harry had earned every single syllable and decibel of me calling out to him in need and thanks for what he was doing to me.

“Good girl,” he said to me again, the words he’d now made me associate with him and the way he made me feel pushing me over the edge once more.

“Thank you, Harry... oh, fuck, thank you...”

He didn’t stop to praise me this time. This time, he wrapped his arms around my waist to cup my ass in both of his hands. From his reclined position, he began to move us both so that when he slammed me down onto his cock, he thrust back up into me to deepen the impact, making me scream.

“God, you feel incredible,” he said, sitting up once more to bring our bodies closer together while still pumping up into me and keeping me coming as he did. “I could feel you come on my cock all day...”

As if on command, another wave of pleasure overtook me, and despite what he said, I could tell Harry was getting close himself. His movements were quick, eager, needy, and his breath was ragged and short.

“I’m almost there,” he breathed, not slowing down. “Think you can come again for me?”

I nodded, feeling another orgasm building up inside of me and knowing that if I just let go, it would overtake me completely.

“Do you need me to pull out?” Harry asked suddenly, but I shook my head.

“No,” I panted. “I’m on birth control.”

Harry moaned and leaned forward to kiss me. His tongue wrapped around mine, pulling me in even more tightly before he separated us. “You are absolutely incredible.”

“So are... so are you.”

He chuckled, but the sound didn’t last long as he growled low in his throat and began to rock us back and forth in a frenzy. I could feel it coming, and I let go of everything in my body with even a little bit of tension, and—

“Ah...” Harry groaned, burying his face into the side of my neck as I gasped and cried out.

“Yes, yes, yes! Oh, God, yes!”

I felt him spill everything inside of me, and the feeling kept my climax going and going for longer than it would have on

its own, until finally, it faded out, and Harry and I simply stared at each other for a moment, before we separated and I slid to the side before collapsing onto the cave floor.

The orgasm was mind-blowing, and I lay there for a solid ten minutes before I even reached for my clothes. Then once I had them in my hands, I lay there for another ten minutes before getting up to put them on. Harry was a god amongst men and he wanted me.

I stood, awkwardly putting my clothes on, Harry watching me with a smile when I heard a clatter beside me where something fell out of my pocket—my cell phone. I was half tempted to kick it as far as I could for all the good it did, but instead I picked it up to stick in my bag.

And that's when it vibrated.

And a second time.

Then ten more times after that as every message that Kendal had sent me over the last four days came through.

We had signal.

I fell to my knees and started sobbing as I punched in the emergency number.

Harry scrambled to his feet, still naked, and dropped down beside me, totally unaware of what I'd discovered and I was crying too hard to explain.

“911, what's your emergency?”

Harry must have overheard that because his face lit up like a Christmas tree.

“Yes,” I said sniffing. “Hi. My... boss and I have been trapped in a cave just south of Sunset View Ski Resort. About a fifteen-minute walk directly south. There was a cave in and we got trapped. I broke my arm and we’re running out of food. Please help us.”

“Stay on the line, I will have someone to your location as fast as possible. Can you please put your phone where you are getting the best signal?”

“Yes,” I said with exasperated glee. “Yes.”

I finished shrugging on my clothes and didn’t even bother putting socks on before I dashed to the rotunda and placed my phone on the ground. We were going to be saved.

I rushed back to Harry, who was now dressing, and pounced on him, kissing him all over his face and crying against his neck.

“You kept us alive,” I said, whimpering through my smile.

“*We* kept us alive,” he replied. “Neither of us would have made it without the other.”

I saw a single tear roll down his cheek and he hugged me tightly.

“Now that,” I said. “I think we can agree on.”

## *Chapter Twenty-One*

Harry

I couldn't fucking believe it. We were saved. If I had thought I was the luckiest man alive getting to have Sloane Riley in a remote cave on the brink of exhaustion and starvation, then I was doubly elated when Sloane got a signal and called 911.

We huddled together for the hour it took them to find us and talked about silly things.

“When I get out of here, I'm gonna get the biggest grilled cheese that's ever existed,” Sloane said, grinning. It was only then that I realized how grimy we both were. I supposed the inevitability of our doom had sort of given me “cave goggles” if you will. Sloane looked rough, and I couldn't imagine that I looked much better.

The fire at our feet flickered and died a little, almost as if it knew that we wouldn't need its warmth much longer.

“I don’t think I’ll ever come back here,” I said aloud. “I think I’ve seen enough of this cave to last me the rest of my life.”

Sloane nodded. “I doubt I’ll ever come back to this resort altogether, and I certainly wouldn’t come down here if I did.”

My heart sank a little, and I struggled to keep my body firm against her as we sat. Sloane not coming back here meant that I would likely not see her again.

“You hate it that much out here?”

Sloane shrugged. “I’m more of a beach girl to be honest. The snow has never really held much attraction for me.”

I supposed she wasn’t a skier. She didn’t seem to enjoy the cold weather. It did kind of make sense.

“Are you at least gonna finish out the internship?” I asked her, trying to conceal the sadness in my voice.

“Oh, totally. I still need those credits,” she said with a giggle.

“I could just write you a letter or something. You can wrap it up here if you want. I can imagine you’re a bit traumatized.”

Sloane shrugged. “And miss out on getting to hang with my favorite hotelier? I think not.” She nudged me with her shoulder and I felt myself return to her brother’s older friend. It was like I wasn’t inside her an hour ago.

“Well, I can certainly make sure you finish your management internship,” I said a little more coldly than I



meant to. I could feel my insides tighten, and realized that as I'd suspected, I'd just been something to do in the cave, someone to warm her at night and play hero.

Sloane gave me an odd look and I looked away. I didn't want to sound like a grumpy asshole, but I thought we were really making a connection.

It was then that I decided to get to my feet and pace beneath the entrance.

"What's wrong?" Sloane asked me.

"Nothing," I said, frustrated.

"If you wanna say something, say it."

I turned to face her, looking into her bright blue eyes, filled with confusion. I couldn't stand how they were looking at me now. So full of confusion and uncertainty. I liked when they looked at me like I was a superhero.

"Nothing," I said, feeling a wave of fatigue hit me like I hadn't experienced since we'd entered the cave. "I—"

"There they are!" came a voice from above us, and I looked up to see a rescue team shining their light down on us. "How are you two doing?"

"Been better, to be fair," I called up to them. "Can you get us out of this frozen hell?"

"We will absolutely do that for you. Gather your things and we will pull you out."

I went back to where Sloane was sitting and helped her to her feet. Then I grabbed our bags and turned to head back to the opening, but before I made it far, Sloane grabbed me and hugged me, burying her face in my chest.

Dear God, this woman was confusing.

“Thank you,” she said to me with a snuffle. “For... well all of it.”

I tried my best to smile, but I wondered if I would prefer another day down here in the cold to having this moment in time with Sloane pass for good. “Even for bringing you down here in the first place?” I asked, pushing my luck.

Sloane laughed. “I dunno about that. But we did have some really close conversations... and other stuff, which was nice.”

She bit her lip and looked at me, and I was extremely torn between kissing her and turning away so that I didn’t have to break my heart further.

But thankfully, I didn’t have to choose because the rescue team was dropping in on ropes.

“Let’s get you guys outta here, okay? Are either of you hurt?”

I pointed to Sloane. “She has a likely broken arm, and the last time I checked, the cut on it was infected.” She was going to need some serious antibiotics and I hoped that they were planning to take us to the hospital so she could get them.

“Okay,” the responder said. “We’re gonna get Sloane out of her first, Harry, and then we will drop back in for you. Sound

okay?”

I nodded, happy that we were going to feel fresh air on our faces, but sad watching the last few moments of me and Sloane being together, slip away.

They strapped Sloane into a rope pulley, and I watched as they grabbed on to her like human shields, protecting her limbs as she ascended.

I went to the side of the open area of the cave and sat down next to a wall. I was exhausted, and it was all hitting me at once. I had also not eaten or drank today because I was worried there wouldn't be enough for Sloane.

Suddenly, the room was spinning. The dying fire was ripping at the air ahead of me and I felt myself tip over.

But that was the last thing I remembered in the cave.

Next thing I knew, I woke up in a hospital, a nurse taking my vitals, and someone sitting in a chair next to my bedside.

“Alana?” I asked weakly as my blonde ex came into focus. “What are you doing here?”

Alana grabbed my hand and pressed it to her face, and I saw her eyes dart up to the nurse to see if she was watching.

“Apparently, I'm still your emergency contact,” she said, kissing the palm of my hand. “And thank God for that—you wouldn't have had anyone otherwise. Your father is in Europe right now.”

“You were talking to my father?” I asked with confusion.

“Oh, sure,” Alana replied sweetly. “Leo and I talk all the time.”

Was she insane? We weren't together and she was having phone conversations with my hard-nosed father? “What... are you trying to become my next stepmom or something?” I asked with very little humor.

“No, silly,” she said with a fake giggle and tap on the shoulder. “I'm his future daughter-in-law. Why wouldn't I have the odd conversation with him.”

What had I done while I was unconscious?

“Alana, we're not engaged... right?”

Alana looked up at the nurse again, who had admittedly stopped what she was doing to listen to the drama. “You can go. I can handle him from here.”

The nurse bowed her head and scurried out, clearly not eager to endure the wrath of the blonde Barbie in front of her.

“Answer my question, Lana,” I said, my voice becoming tense.

“No,” she said with a nervous laugh. “But we will be. We were once before, we just needed... a little time to figure ourselves out. Right?”

I heard the vitals machine begin to beep a little faster and I sat up to the best of my ability to find that I was actually hooked up to rather a lot of tubes. One was presumably an IV, but I also had an oxygen tube in my nose as well as another line put in for God knows what else.

“Alana,” I said with as much sincerity and severity as I could manage in my state. “We are not together. We will never be together. I don’t think I could even manage a friendship with you. You cheated on me, remember?”

“I was confused,” she said, tears beginning to fill her eyes. “You said you wanted an open relationship—”

“It was a joke! I was totally pissed out of my face when I said that and you know it. We’ve had this conversation a million times, and no matter how often we hook up, that’s not gonna change.”

Alana’s jaw dropped open and her brow furrowed. “Fine,” she said. “Then you won’t be needing my number.” She grabbed something off my bedside table and I realized it was my cell phone. They must have gotten my things when they pulled me out. “I will just delete myself from your phone.”

I heard a series of beeps then a whooshing sound and she tossed my phone at me.

I picked it up and looked, and sure enough, she had deleted herself. I was surprised by how little I cared, and in fact, a wave of relief washed over me. Sure, I would have to find someone else for my nocturnal activities, but Alana wasn’t worth this kind of stress. Not after what she had done.

“Okay,” I said. “You can see yourself out I assume.”

Alana looked at me dumbfounded, despite the fact that it was her who had initiated this toxic exchange.

“Wait,” she said, “I didn’t mean it.”

“No,” I replied calmly. “I think you did.”

Alana scrambled for my phone but I was faster, and after I secured my phone under my pillow, I promptly hit the call button to summon a nurse to my bedside.

The girl from earlier came in, and with her was a tall, bulky orderly. I wondered if perhaps she'd heard the conversation and anticipated what I was about to ask her.

“Can you have this woman escorted out?” I asked politely. “She is actually not my emergency contact and I'd like to change that on my files.”

The orderly stepped forward and took Alana's bag in his hands, causing her to stand to grab it back. “Unhand my things, you ogre.”

“Time to go,” said the nurse with a satisfied look. “We need our patient resting.”

Alana shot me one last angry look and stomped out, and I mouthed, “Thank you,” to the two staff members. The nurse smiled back at me. “I had a feeling it might have been a situation like that. She seemed really surprised when we called her.”

“I appreciate everything you do here,” I said. “Can I ask, though, what happened to the woman I was brought in here with? Sloane Riley?”

The nurse, named Kimberly, looked around like she wanted to see who was watching. “I'm not really supposed to say, but

they said you two were holding hands on the helicopter ride here and I just think that's adorable."

My heart jumped. Maybe I prejudged Sloane's level of interest after all. She had been awake while I was unconscious. "So, she made it here all right?" I asked.

"She's with her brother now. She should be able to have visitors soon, and both of you will likely be released today."

My heart leapt with excitement. "That's amazing news. Thank you, Kimberly."

She nodded and excused herself from the room. I fell into my pillow feeling content, albeit sore from the whole cave experience.

Not only that, I was full of ideas about what I could do for Sloane to show her exactly how serious I was about her. Beyond the internship, even beyond investing in her business plan.

I wanted to invest in her. The most immaculate woman I'd ever known.

The age difference would likely be something she and I would have to overcome, and her brother will definitely want my bits in a jar. But she was worth it. All of it.

## *Chapter Twenty-Two*

Sloane

**H**ell, it was fucking agony. If I thought *getting* hurt and trying to make it through a whole fucking cave system with a broken arm and an infected wound was bad, I had no idea what was waiting for me when I finally got to the hospital and they started patching me up.

I stuffed the front of my hospital gown in my mouth to keep from screaming as they swabbed the wound. They'd given me a shot of an antibiotic and something for the pain, then sprayed this numbing cleanser on it. The cut was really deep, and they couldn't give me stitches without ripping through the scab that had formed on it and clearing out the debris that had settled in it from the cave. Worse still, they had to take care of the wound before they could take care of the broken bone underneath, which had resulted in a massive black bruise that ran the length of my forearm. Therefore, they were



manhandling my arm over the break, which no amount of morphine they gave me seemed to help with.

“Fuck!” I gasped through the fabric as they ran a thick cotton swab covered in some kind of antiseptic over the once-again open wound.

“Sorry, sweetie,” said the nurse, Tia, who I would have started swearing at because of the pain she was causing me if she wasn’t so nice the rest of the time she was treating me.

“It’s fine,” I tried to say through my makeshift gag, but it came out garbled. Right before it was cut off by a scream that even the fabric couldn’t dampen.

“Sloane?” I heard from the hallway as my voice tapered off. “Sloane!”

I looked up and saw Kendal all but running through the hall, moving past my room in his haste and doubling back.

“Thank fuck, there you are,” he said as he rushed inside and to my side. “Holy shit, Chippy...” His eyes fell on the wound and I saw him look away and take a deep breath before swallowing. Ken never had been very good with blood. He took care of my skinned knees for me when I was a kid, but the one time I’d needed stitches, he’d thrown up while wrapping me up to take me to the doctor.

Despite his fear of the red stuff, he seemed way more concerned with showing me how glad he was to see me, and he tried to throw his arms around me from the side, but he was stopped.

“Careful,” Nurse Tia said. “She hasn’t had an X-ray on that arm yet. She needs to stay as still and stable as possible until we figure out how bad the break is.”

“Break?” he asked, his voice much higher than usual. “You’re a mess, Chip.”

“I’m fine, Ken,” I said, though right as I did, Nurse Tia ran the swab through my wound again and I gasped loudly.

“Hey, take it easy!” he scolded her. He wasn’t usually like this, but I could see the fear in his eyes and didn’t blame him. I’d been missing for days, and he had to find me in the hospital to see me again, and this was what I was going through.

“Ken,” I said, trying to breathe through the pain. “She’s cleaning the cut so I can get stitches. It’s not her fault I’m hurt.”

“No,” he said, his eyes going dark. “I know exactly whose fault it is, and if they’d given me his room number, I’d already be there giving him a piece of my mind.”

Harry. He meant Harry.

“This isn’t Harry’s fault,” I said, confused about his extreme reaction.

“No?” Kendal said, scoffing like I didn’t know what I was talking about. “He was supposed to be your supervisor, making sure you were getting a good education on how to run a hotel by shadowing him. Not taking you down into some

cave for a little jaunt underground where you couldn't get out."

"First of all," I said, almost grateful Ken was deciding to be an ass, because arguing gave me a distraction from Nurse Tia's continued work on my wound. "Harry didn't *take* me down into a cave. He was showing me the cave because there was an old mining bunker down there that he thought I'd like to see because of my whole thing with doing unique Airbnb stays."

"And he couldn't have showed you pictures?" Ken asked. "He had to actually make you go down there?"

"Make?" I asked, almost laughing at his audacity. "No one *made* me do anything, Kendal. He asked if I wanted to go down, and I said yes, because I love an adventure, something you always say you admire in me."

"I trusted him to—"

"To what? Keep me safe? Take care of me?" I interrupted. "Because he did that better than I could have possibly imagined when I got hurt down there. He didn't cause the cave-in, but he kept me alive and moving, when I could have easily succumbed to the infection that really did almost get me in the cave. I had a fever and was delirious and unable to move, but he got me back to my feet and well enough to make it out of that damn hole."

"Why are you defending him when he's the one who got you into trouble in the first place?" Ken demanded, obviously not hearing a word I was saying.

I understood that he was frantic, scared, and worried, but it was starting to feel like I was taking care of him, when I was the one in the hospital getting my arm scraped clean from the inside out.

“Because,” I said, hissing as another stroke of the swab took out a bunch of gravel from the wound, “he deserves it.”

“He what?” Ken laughed humorlessly.

“Yes,” I replied, getting more frustrated by the second. “He does. He may have suggested spelunking into the cave, but I hooked myself up and dropped down. He didn’t hold me at gunpoint or push me or anything. He couldn’t have known a cave-in would happen, and when it did, he really stepped up. I thought he was just some fancy, pampered hotel manager, but he was perfect down there. He used his own clothes to make me bandages and a sling. He could have frozen to death to keep me going.”

“Yeah, but—”

“And he built a fire for us when I couldn’t, even though he had no idea how to at first. He fucking learned to get it done because he had to. He took care of me when my infection got so bad it could have killed me down there. He got me back up on my feet, and... and...”

I trailed off, knowing what I wanted to say but afraid to say it to my brother. I wanted to tell him that Harry had made me feel safe. Even down in the cave, even when we both knew there was a chance we’d starve or freeze to death, I felt safer with him in that place than I felt with most people out here.

“And what, Sloane?” Ken asked, crossing his arms, knowing something was up. I could tell by the look in his eyes. It was the same look he had when I had come home with a bruise under my eye in high school and had to tell him that it was some guy at school. Kendal was ready to go to jail to hurt this kid back then, but I managed to convince him to let it go. The guy ended up expelled anyway, and Ken’s life didn’t need to get ruined because of some douchebag.

“And... he took care of me. Like, really took care of me. He made me feel like I mattered. Like it mattered to *him* if something happened to me.”

“Probably afraid I’d kill him if he came back without you,” Ken growled.

“Or maybe it was because he likes me as much as I like him,” I finally spat out.

There was a silence as Nurse Tia finished her work and looked awkwardly between me and my brother.

“I’ll be back to get you for your X-ray in a few minutes, once radiology has an available slot,” she said, turning to hurry from the room, wanting no part of the fight that was about to occur.

“What the hell do you mean he likes you and you like him?” Kendal asked quietly once the door was shut.

“I mean that Harry is attractive and smart and funny and kind, and I now know that he’s also adventurous and resourceful and caring and selfless. He took care of me when

no one else could, and he made sure I made it out and back to you.”

“You’re telling me,” Ken said slowly, his face angrier than before, “that my friend, who I entrusted my little sister to, took advantage of her emotions in a high-pressure situation where their lives were in danger because he couldn’t deal with not being adored for a couple days while you two found your way back out of that cave?”

“No,” I said, now just as angry as Ken. “I’m telling you that your friend, who you got me an educational opportunity with, has been a great friend to me, a helpful and kind helper with making sure I know what I’m doing with my career, an enthusiastic believer in my vision for my future, and someone I realized I could rely on because he put me first down there when he didn’t have to.”

“And how do you know he likes you from that?” Ken asked, though his eyes told me he already had a guess. Maybe he didn’t know that we’d slept together, but he certainly could tell that something had gone down.

“Because we kissed,” I said, meeting his gaze with a hard stare of my own.

“He kissed you?” he snapped, raising his voice.

“Actually, I kissed him,” I said.

“That’s it,” Ken said, shaking his head. “This internship is done. I’m taking you home. He takes too many risks with you,

and now he's putting the moves on you like some kind of creep—”

“He is not a creep, and I'm not going anywhere,” I said. “I'm an actual adult now, Ken, and I make my own choices. Sometimes those choices are about where I'm going to work, and sometimes they're about going into a cave with my really hot supervisor. It was my own damn fault I got hurt. No one else's. No one makes me do anything I don't want to. Not Harry, and not you.”

There was a long silence, where Kendal just stared at me.

“So what?” he said. “You're just gonna start dating him now?”

“I...” For the first time in the whole conversation, I didn't have an answer. “I don't know. He got really weird right before we got rescued, after we... after we kissed.”

Ken's eyes flicked to mine, sensing something I wasn't saying, but I wasn't about to give up that information. Not to my brother, who was already itching to throw fists.

“So, he got what he wanted and decided it was enough?” he said, looking disgusted at the idea.

“No,” I said. “At least, I don't think so. It doesn't sound like him at all.”

“You barely know him,” Ken said, scoffing.

“Turns out,” I retorted, “you get to know someone pretty well when you're trapped with them for a few days. I probably know him better than you do at this point.” I took a deep

breath. “You don’t have to like any of this, but you can’t just blame someone for something that isn’t their fault. It was my own choice that led to me being in that cave, and my own choice that led to us kissing. So if I got hurt, physically or otherwise, it’s no one’s fault but mine.”

Nurse Tia poked her head into the room cautiously, and we both turned to look at her.

“They’re ready for you in radiology,” she said. “I’m assuming from your conversation that you’re the brother?” Ken nodded. “I’m going to have to ask you to step to the side so we can wheel her down the hall.”

“I can walk,” I said, trying to get out of the bed, but then gasping in pain and lying back down on the bed.

“I’m sure you can, but hospital policy says I need to take you in your bed,” she said, smiling at Ken, though there was a tension there where I could tell she was nervous about the way he was acting.

“Ken Doll,” I said, trying to bring my brother back to me how we always were. “It’s going to be okay. All of it. I made choices. I have to face the consequences.”

Nurse Tia began to unlock my wheels and push me toward the door, but Ken managed to get one final word in before the door shut between us.

“If Harry hadn’t given you the options, none of this would have happened.”



## *Chapter Twenty-Three*

Harry

I was nervous as hell to go see her. Not only did I still look an unwashed mess, but I was going to have to face down Ken knowing I'd slept with her.

I started by getting a shower. It was honestly the least I could do and since my room had one in suite, I decided it was probably a good idea.

The water didn't get warm as fast as it would have if I was back at the hotel but it got there eventually, and I stepped in like I was entering a damned rainbow.

The water felt incredible pouring over my body and I wished that I could text Sloane right now to ask if she'd washed up too. Likely, she would have needed the nurses to help her because of her arm, but it wouldn't have been impossible.

My mind wandered to helping Sloane wash and I was pleased to find that my ability to get hard hadn't been dampened by whatever exhaustion I'd experienced. It was probably best to rub one out now anyway because then I could walk confidently into that room with a clear mind and say what I wanted to from my heart instead of my dick.

I thought back to the cave, to the way she smelled sweet despite having not showered for days. The way it sounded when she breathed as she became aroused. The way she fucked in a perfect rhythm like she was making music instead of love.

The scene played out before me and I stroked myself, feeling the endorphins fill my brain and the oxytocin take over the rest of me.

Her breathing was short and ragged, her clit pulsing from where I had brought her to a screaming orgasm. "Are you ready for me to be inside of you?" I had asked.

As I had done in the cave, I now stroked myself, remembering what my tip had looked like sitting at her entrance. The way she had gasped as I entered her. I had nearly had to pin her down to keep her writhing body from hurting her arm.

"Careful of your arm," I said, running a hand through her hair to settle her down.

"Ruin me," she begged, and I was more than happy to do it.

While the cave had smelled dank and a little rancid, the smell of the floral soap now corrupted the memory, making each pulse of my cock more intense with the gorgeous smell.

“Come here,” I had said, pulling her up along with me as I stretched out my legs in front of me, bending my knees only slightly so that I could pull her into my lap. “That’s a good girl,” I growled. “That’s a very... very good girl.”

She moaned as I pressed into her over and over again.

“Fuck...” she had whimpered as I began to rock her, creating friction and motion that had me coming again within a minute. “Harry,” she gasped, throwing her good arm around my neck. “God, Harry...”

“Again,” I had demanded, and she looked at me with hungry eyes that I knew mirrored my own.

I could tell from the way my cock pulsed that I wasn’t going to make it through the whole fantasy and part of me didn’t need to. I would much rather have the real, live version of Sloane inches from me and holding my hand over this memory of her riding me.

“Again?” she had repeated.

“Again,” I replied. “I want to hear you screaming my name again... and again... and again... because I want to know that *you* know who’s making you come like that.”

“Yes... Harry,” she’d moaned.

“Good girl,” I repeated.

“Thank you, Harry... oh, fuck, thank you...”

I gasped aloud and spilled myself all down my leg and into the shower drain. I realized after I'd finished that I was not only getting off on the memory of Sloane, but the possibility that someone might walk in on me as well. That was definitely going to be something I explored at a later point in time, but right now, I needed to talk to the woman I...

To Sloane.

I got dressed as quickly as my screaming muscles would let me, then called Kimberly back to my room.

“Hey, you,” she said, popping her head in. “What do you need?”

I smiled, enjoying her demeanor. “I would like to go see my friend. Can you tell me what room she's in?”

Kimberly nodded and called to the desk to ask them.

“Room 312,” the person on the other end said.

“Room 312,” she repeated to me.

“Thank you,” I said, and Kimberly slipped away once more.

I gathered up my things and made sure my hair looked nice, then I headed down the hall to where room 312 was located.

The first thing I noticed when I approached the door was Kendal sitting very close to the exit, almost as if he was guarding it. He looked up when he saw me and immediately jumped to his feet.

“Nuh uh,” he said, putting a hand on my chest and backing me into the hall.

“Mate,” I said in surprise. “What the fuck?”

“You fucking swine,” he said to me, giving me a little push that was more painful than it should have been. “Taking advantage of my sister like that when she needed you to be the adult.”

So she had told him. So much for my plan of letting it slip a little at a time.

“Ken,” I said, my hands up by my head. “I stayed as far away from Sloane as she wanted me to. After we kissed, we just got closer. When two people get close and are in a life-or-death situation... I dunno, having sex just felt natural.”

Kendal’s face blanched and I could physically see him processing what I’d just said.

“You son of a fucking—”

I felt Ken’s fist impact on my face without ever seeing him take a swing and I heard the nurses and patients alike cry out in shock. I also felt the second hit... and the third one.

I took each of them without fighting back because at the end of the day I still wanted to be with her. The news that she’d been holding my unconscious hand while in the life flight had me ready to make things official.

It felt like time crawled, my back pressed against the nurses’ station, a few loud voices shouting commands.

Then we were being escorted out. Two male attendants with hands on us both took us to the exit and all the way outside.

“Don’t come back,” one of them said, before turning away and going back into the hospital.

I looked at Ken as they left, and he still looked mad but not rageful.

“Why are you so angry about this?” I asked in earnest.

Kendal gave me a deadpanned look. “She’s my little sister. I held her when she was a baby and when she was off to her first day of high school. The thought of you—or any other man violating her—makes me sick. And you’re supposed to be my brother. Protect the things and people I want to protect, et cetera.”

I looked down at my shoes. “I’m sorry,” I said. “Not for doing it,” I clarified, “but for making you feel like I betrayed you as a brother.”

Ken scowled and pulled out his car keys. “Guess I’m not gonna be going back in there, might as well wait in my car.”

“Ken...” I said following him. “Come on.”

“Oh, fuck off,” he said, waving me away. “If I had my way, she wouldn’t even be completing this internship. Unfortunately, it’s not my choice.”

At least there were small mercies here. Sloane and I would get a chance to spend a little time together once we were both back at the lodge.

“I’m sorry, Ken,” I called out after him. But he returned my sentiment with a middle finger that I probably deserved.

I pulled out my phone and called an Uber. If my dad was in Europe, it would be pointless to call him and Kendal had made his stance on me very clear.

I fell asleep on the car ride back to the lodge and I was embarrassed that the driver had to wake me up. I tried to comfort myself with the thought that I was likely not the first person to do it, nor would I be the last.

I took the back entrance to avoid having to talk to anyone and trudged to my suite, collapsing on my bed as fast as possible. It was odd how normal and messy everything looked. Like I’d only been in here an hour ago rather than five days and one life-changing experience ago.

I could feel the aches of my body, but none of them hurt as much as the one in my heart. I’d hurt Kendal and I was utterly ashamed of that. Sloane was probably the most wonderful, adorable, clever girl I’d ever known and it still killed me to have made Ken that angry.

I got up and headed to the bathroom to look at my face. I looked like I’d slammed my head into concrete, and the purpling around my eye was already starting to show.

I wondered if I could get away with telling people that I had sustained the injury while down in the cave, and decided that it was viable.

Then I grabbed the ice bucket from the liquor cabinet and trudged, like any guest, to the ice machine to get something to throw onto it.

By the time I got back and sat down, an idea had come to my mind as to a way that I could possibly make it up to Ken, and also show Sloane how much she meant to me. I would definitely have to ask for help with it, and I would need to contact those annoying zoning fellows. But if all went well. Sloane would be closer to her dreams than she could have imagined this internship would get her.

And I'd be the one behind it all.



## *Chapter Twenty-Four*

Sloane

**A**fter Ken got kicked out, a nurse told me Harry had gotten out of the hospital the same day with a round of IV fluids and antibiotics, plus an order of bed rest for a couple of days, but it felt pretty safe to assume Harry would ignore that last order and be back to work as soon as he could.

I, on the other hand, had to stay the night. I slept terribly, since nurses kept coming in with more pain meds. Not to mention the sling they put on my arm until the orthopedist could see me in the morning kept getting tangled around my arm, which would pull at the bandages and wake me up, gasping in pain.

It was weird, though. As I lay there in bed, listening to the beeping machines and footsteps of the staff moving through the halls, I realized that a part of me missed the cave. I missed the feeling of another body against mine in the night—of Harry's body. I missed the sound of his voice.

Maybe I didn't miss the cave. Maybe I just missed him.

And I had no idea what the hell was going to happen with us after he was so weird with me after we had sex.

Eventually, and despite the urge to stay asleep to keep experiencing dreams of Harry's hands being back on me, the morning shift nurse came in to take me to orthopedics. The surgeon there was a beautiful blonde woman who looked like she could have been a model if she hadn't decided to go into medicine. Hell, she probably still could if she ever felt so inclined.

Her sleek, golden hair made me very aware of how tangled and wild my ginger curls were. I usually loved my hair, but looking at this well-put-together woman, I began to wonder if maybe it was me that was the problem when it came to why Harry got weird. Could it be that I was a little fling because we were in danger, but I wasn't really his type out in the real world? Maybe he preferred women like this, professional and affluent, rather than a free spirit who wanted to rent out yurts to people in the desert.

Once I was wrapped up in a cast—blue, my favorite color—I was presented with discharge papers and a bunch of forms telling me how to care for my injuries, what meds they were sending me home with, and what kinds of doctors I needed to follow up with.

Great. Doctors. None of whom I was familiar with in the area.

Maybe Harry...

*No, Sloane, I said to myself. You don't even know if he's willing to have you around after all of this. Don't start expecting things from him.*

Well, if all else failed, I could always ask Finn.

Kendal took me up to our suite, which weirdly felt even less welcoming than it had before. The cold, soulless decor seemed even more superficial after being surrounded by rocks and ice for days, then being thrust into a stark, sterile hospital environment.

He helped me wrap up my arm in a plastic bag so I could get into a shower and finally wash the rocks and dirt out of my hair, not to mention off my body where I'd been naked on the floor of the cave.

I closed my eyes and pictured Harry, remembered the way his hands and mouth had felt on me, the way he...

*No, Sloane.*

I finished my shower and got out. It took me way longer than usual to get dressed, especially in my more professional clothes, since most of them had zippers I couldn't reach with my cast on, or they were too tight to go around the damn thing. In the end, I picked a stretchy knee-length dress and a chunky knit sweater that fell a few inches below the hem of the dress. Somehow, I managed to pull on a pair of sherpa-lined boots to keep my feet warm and comfy, since the idea of walking in heels after the ordeal in the cave seemed like the worst thing I could possibly imagine.

I looked at myself in the mirror for a long time before I managed to get myself out of the door. I kept picking apart the way I looked, the things that had always been there and the things that were new. The ninety-degree bend in my elbow from the cast, which made my arm look like some kind of cyborg cannon. The crazy red hair that couldn't be tamed with all the products and tools in the world. The bags under my eyes and the gaunt look to my cheekbones where I'd lost weight over the last several days.

I tugged at the dress, then gave up. I had no idea why I was so nervous just to go see Harry. I'd never been nervous with him—not once. But something had changed. We were no longer just intern and supervisor. We'd crossed a line, one we couldn't easily come back from, and I had no idea which side of that line we were on anymore.

I looked at the time. It was getting toward the end of the afternoon, and I wanted to catch Harry before he either went back to his suite for the day or left his office to go supervise some event or dinner or something. Assuming he was back in the office.

Which I had no doubt about.

I walked through the halls of the resort and felt a wave of nausea hit me. It was so different than the tunnels in the cave, but something about walking in the enclosed space put me back there mentally, and I ended up moving faster than I was probably ready for and was completely winded by the time I made it to the door to Harry's office.

I was panting and breathing heavily for a few minutes as I worked up the nerve to knock. When I finally did, I raised my hand, only for the door to swing inward and for me to see Harry standing there, looking surprised.

“Sloane?” he asked in confusion.

I lowered my hand, but I didn’t have time to give a proper response because the only thing I could see was the huge shiner he had on his eye.

“Oh, my God, what happened?” I asked, reaching quickly for his face, but then pulling back. “No, don’t tell me. Ken. Kendal happened.”

“Can you honestly blame the man?” Harry said with an attempt at a cocky smirk, but that wasn’t really his style.

“Yes, I can,” I said, putting my good hand on my hip. “I told him that there was absolutely no reason for him to be angry with you.”

Harry chuckled sadly and let me into his office, closing the door behind us. “Well,” he said, “I did sleep with his sister in a life-or-death situation—”

“But he doesn’t know that,” I interrupted. “I didn’t tell him that, Harry. Why would he know that?”

He had the decency to look embarrassed, but there was nothing to be done. We were two consenting adults, and from the looks of it, Kendal already made his feelings perfectly clear.

And had probably ruined any chance I had of exploring anything further with Harry.

“Never mind,” I said with a sigh. “Not a lot we can do about it now, I guess.”

Harry frowned, then looked down at my arm. The blue cast was poking out where it covered my hand, holding it in place. He reached out and touched it gently, then shook his head.

“I’m so sorry,” he said.

“For what?” I asked, my voice challenging.

“For putting you in danger,” he replied like it was the most obvious thing in the world.

“I really, really wish people would stop implying that I can’t take care of myself or make my own choices,” I said. “I told Kendal that you weren’t to blame because I’m the one who jumped down into that cave on my own, and I’m telling you that you didn’t make me do a single thing I didn’t want to.”

“Not one thing?” he asked, and I felt myself blush deeply.

“No,” I said, after a moment of silence. “Not one.”

We stood awkwardly for a moment, neither of us sure what to say. Harry wouldn’t meet my eyes, or at least, I didn’t see him looking at me when I looked at him. Maybe we were just missing each other.

Or maybe, just because I didn’t have any regrets, that didn’t mean Harry didn’t.

“Why don’t you come sit?” Harry said, motioning to his desk. “I know how exhausted I am, and I got to sleep in a real bed last night.”

“Thanks,” I said, following him in and sitting across from him.

“I was actually just coming up to talk to your brother. I didn’t know you were back yet. I was going to tell him to pass along that, if all of this has just been too much, that we can stop the shadowing whenever you want, and I’ll still make sure you get the credit you deserve for what you’ve been through.”

“Stop the internship?” I said in horror. “Because my brother was a dick and hit you for something I told him wasn’t your fault?”

“Perhaps it was my fault, Sloane,” he said, but I wasn’t having it.

“For the last time, and I won’t be saying this to either of you again: I do not blame you for a damn thing because I can decide for myself the things I do and who I do them with.”

Harry opened his mouth, but then closed it and fell silent. I wasn’t sure what to say next, since I’d lost my train of thought, but eventually, I cleared my throat and opened my bag, pulling out a folder.

“What’s this?” Harry asked as I handed it to him. Our fingers brushed, and he jumped like I’d electrocuted him, which made my heart sink.

“It’s from my school,” I told him. “It’s something I need you to fill out saying I completed my internship and just kind of give an overview of the kinds of things I did while I was here.” I blushed again, thinking of one specific thing I did while here, and wishing it had meant more to him than it clearly had.

“I can take care of that right now,” he said, reaching for a pen, but I put my hand on his to stop him. This time, he didn’t jump. He just stared down at where we were touching, then quickly looked away. I slowly pulled my fingers back, unsure what to make of any of this.

“No,” I said, unable to worry about my feelings for Harry outside of work right now. “It’s supposed to be done at the end of my time here. I don’t want you to feel like you owe me anything.” I took a deep breath. “This was an agreement we made, and I intend to honor my half, as long as you can still honor yours.”

He stared at me for a moment, then nodded and took the papers, putting them in his desk drawer.

“Thank you,” I said, sitting back in my chair. “Now, I suppose we should talk about work?”

“You don’t have to do that right now,” Harry said. “You can have as much time as you need to recover, and—”

“I’m recovered,” I said. It was a blatant lie, but I needed something to get my mind off the mess with Harry. I needed to do something besides sit in my room and convalesce and stare



at the ceiling. I needed to work and just be able to finish my internship and go home.

And, if the way he had acted since the cave was any indication, to never see Harry again.

## *Chapter Twenty-Five*

Harry

**W**ith the way things had regressed with Sloane, I was extremely worried about the project I was taking on to give her as a gift. Things hadn't just been awkward between us; they'd been downright miserable.

There were so many times I thought of apologizing, or even bringing up something funny from the cave. But every time I thought about it, I pictured Kendal walking away from me at the hospital, middle finger in the air, anger radiating through every inch of his body.

I found that one thing had certainly changed. Despite the fact I was sitting just as close to her, smelling her perfume, in line of sight to her heavenly body, I wasn't turned on in the least.

In fact, when I tried to get myself hard over her with a solo session at lunch, nothing happened. Like at all.

This was when I decided to call up a therapist I'd been working with on and off the last few years.

I couldn't believe how oddly relieved I felt when his face popped onto the screen. Doctor Martin was a very kind man and a stellar doctor. He had helped me through the death of my mother and helped me get through my father's disapproval of me in general.

"Hi, Harry," he said in that sweet, sing-songy voice he always used. "How are you today?"

"Well," I said back. "I think it's safe to assume it's not great because here we are."

The doc laughed and I couldn't help but smile a little.

"I see on your request form that you've been through some traumatic experiences lately, and it is inhibiting your sex life?"

"Not just my sex life," I admitted. "My social life as well."

I proceeded to give him my best recollection of everything that had happened in the cave, down to sleeping with Sloane and not skipping the part where Kendal gave me a finger.

"Whoa," he said, eyes wide with genuine shock. "That sounds really overwhelming. And how are you handling it? What are you doing to take care of yourself?"

I assumed that admitting I'd been working dawn to dusk would, in fact, not get me an A+ in therapy, so instead I said, "Not much."

Dr. Martin nodded and took a few notes. “And what’s the situation with this Sloane girl?”

What was the situation with this Sloane girl?

The doc and I hadn’t talked in a long while, so I caught him up on what had been going on. The situation with Sloane, the trauma from being trapped in the cave, and now the drama I was facing with one of my oldest and dearest friends.

“And does she feel the same way you do?”

I thought back to our conversation the day before. She had seemed genuinely concerned when she walked in and saw my face beat to all hell, and that had to mean something, right?

“Oh, my God, what happened?” she’d asked, reaching quickly for my face. “No, don’t tell me. Ken. Kendal happened.”

“Can you honestly blame the man?” I asked, feeling my heart sink as I admitted that to myself.

“Yes, I can,” she had said. “I told him that there was absolutely no reason for him to be angry with you.”

“And if that wasn’t bad enough,” I said. “She practically implied that her brother and I were infantilizing her. The idea of that is so damn awful to me, and yet, she had a point.”

“So, when she said that,” the good doctor asked. “How did it make you feel?”

“Terrible,” I said. “Like I wasn’t just an old man trying to corrupt her—which by the way, I wasn’t—but also that I was

being a chauvinist for implying that she couldn't make her own choices."

"And you apologized for the implication?" he gently prodded.

"Well..." I said. "Not exactly."

He wrote something in his notebook once more and I stewed in my stupidity. Of course, I should have apologized.

"Have you considered that perhaps this isn't about Sloane at all? I hear you talking a lot about her and her brother, but perhaps what you should be looking at is you?"

"Me? Because I'm the one who made her go down there?"

"No," he said patiently. "Because when you were down there you couldn't do the one thing you wanted, which was to rescue her. And more importantly, you couldn't rescue you. Does that sound like anything we've talked about before?"

I knew what he was referencing. I'd been so torn up when my mum died because she had been the one to act as a shield for me against my father's wrath and dismissal. An issue that went far back into my childhood.

"Yes," I replied softly. "So, you think that because I couldn't save either of us, I'm punishing... myself?"

Doctor Martin shrugged, as he usually did. "I can neither confirm nor deny what something might mean to you. Only offer suggestions about what it might be pointing to."

By the time we ended our session, I had gained clarity but not relief. Dr. Martin always said that progress doesn't always equal feeling better, but God, this time I wish it had.

I took a moment to compose myself, then got to my feet, ready to proceed with the rest of my day. I had sent Sloane to the kitchens to help with an understaffing problem, and I needed to check how that was going. In an area this remote, it tended to be hard to hire due to sheer lack of population.

As I walked through the lobby, I could feel faces on me, or rather on my hideous black eye. It was more grotesque now that it was healing, with several sickly shades of yellow popping through the purple bruise. I couldn't blame them for looking, but it still wasn't pleasant.

When I got to the kitchen, I saw several staff members working hard but absolutely no Sloane. I didn't see my manager, Finn, either. I tried not to let my animal brain go to a place of jealousy, but I was suddenly even more eager to find them.

Sure enough, I found them together, in the kitchen office, filling out paperwork and sitting extremely close.

I didn't want to startle them, so I knocked on the doorframe to get their attention.

"Hey," I said, trying to sound friendly and casual.

"Hey," Sloane replied. I noticed that Finn didn't look up and I wondered if she had told him about what had happened between us.

“Are you planning on working down here all night, or...?”

Sloane looked at Finn, who nodded. “Yeah, I think I will,” she said. “Unless you had something else you would rather me do.”

I shook my head, trying to remain looking relaxed but feeling my stomach sink through the floor. “No, no. You two enjoy yourselves.”

Sloane didn't reply, only turned back to Finn and the paperwork.

I, on the other hand, went to talk to some of the kitchen staff about their manager.

“Oh, he's wonderful,” said Gloria, a woman who had worked here fifteen years. “Such a cute face, and always so friendly.”

“You wouldn't say too friendly though, right?”

Gloria looked confused and shook her head, “Oh, certainly not. He's a really good boss to work for, always very accommodating, plus he asks about how my mother is doing.”

“I see,” I said, nodding. “Well, that's great. Keep up the good work.”

I was ashamed to admit that I was trying to catch him doing something that justified my anger, but there simply wasn't anything. I had hired him to manage that restaurant for a reason, and that reason was that he was a good human being, not to mention a skilled employee.

I turned to leave the kitchen when something in the back office caught my eye.

Finn reached out and took Sloane's hand, whispering something in her ear that she was glowing about. I felt my stomach lurch and a fire burn through me.

Sloane was mine. I had been the one to keep her safe.

*"But you were also the one who put her in danger,"* said a cruel little voice in my head. *"You put her in danger and couldn't save her. That's why your todger doesn't get hard anymore."*

I stomped away without looking back, knowing what an asshole I was being and not caring enough to stop myself. I was sure Doctor Martin would have had something to say about that, but frankly, I couldn't even think straight let alone think about acting with the intention to recover from emotional wounds.

I skipped going back to my office and went straight to my suite. At least there I could be the worst version of myself without feeling any shame.

Unfortunately for me, the fates were particularly unkind today, and I ran smack-dab into Kendal.

"Hey," I ventured, hoping this greeting wouldn't end with my other eye blackened.

"Hey," he said back, staring at my shiner. "Sorry I fucked you up like that."



“I let you,” I replied, my pride getting in the way of my sense.

“Sure, you did,” Ken said. “Where’s my sister.”

“Well, you’ll be pleased to know that some other man is groping her, not me.”

“What?!” he snapped, looking like he was seconds away from dashing to the kitchen.

“I’m joking,” I said, trying to sound convincing. “She’s working in the kitchen.”

“Oh,” he replied, his shoulders slackening. “Okay.”

I shouldn’t have bothered because I was already in a foul mood, but I tempted fate and pushed toward the reconciliation horizon.

“Any chance we’re ever gonna talk about this, Ken?”

“Fuck no,” he replied. “You’re lucky that my sister bitched me out about trying to control her life or we’d be gone already.”

I glared at him, crossing my arms. “Fine. Friendship over then, just like that?”

“Just like that,” he said, mirroring my stance and hunching his shoulders once more. “This friendship was over the second you put my sister’s life in danger, and doubly so when you fucked her.”

People were beginning to stare and I felt my anger bubbling up inside me.

“You know what, *mate*, if this is how you’re going to act about me protecting her and keeping her alive while she was in danger, I’m not sure this friendship hasn’t outlived its lifespan.”

“I couldn’t fucking agree more,” he said.

For a moment, we stood still, people all around us staring.

I became keenly aware of the fact that I was supposed to be in charge of this resort and that a blowout would reflect poorly on me and the lodge in general.

So, I took a step back and bowed my head a little. “Have a nice remainder of your stay, sir.”

Kendal didn’t reply, just turned and left.

Then I did the same.

The second I got to my room, I closed and locked the door and grabbed a pillow to punch into. This was an utter disaster and I hadn’t even done anything wrong.

I felt the urge to cry, but as Doctor Martin would say, those were the feelings of my wounded inner child. Not my real feelings at all. I certainly didn’t care that I’d lost my best college friend, nor that I would have to watch the woman I had fallen for be with some other guy.

No, I didn’t fucking care at all.

I got up from my bed and headed for the private bar in my kitchen, pulling out aged whiskey and pouring myself a tumbler full. It had been a while since I’d day drank, but this

was a total mess and I wasn't sure I or my wounded inner child would make it through unscathed.

## *Chapter Twenty-Six*

Sloane

**I** was literally dripping sweat within the first half hour of dinner service, but Finn looked cool as a cucumber.

As a soaked curl fell out from under my hair net into my face, Finn piped up with, “On your right.”

I turned my head and saw him coming through with a massive tray of what appeared to be tiny little chickens that had been roasted. He set them down in front of us and grabbed a stack of plates. He then pulled out a huge bowl of mashed potatoes and handed it to me before putting a pot of green beans in front of the girl to my left.

“Here’s the setup,” he said.

“What are those?” I asked, looking at the tiny birds.

“Cornish game hens,” he said.

“Oh,” I said slowly and drawn out. “I’ve heard of those before. Never seen one though. They’re so cute.”

“They’re going to be even cuter when they’re plated beautifully, which you are going to help with,” he said, then handed me a ladle. “I’m going to put a hen on the plate, then I’m going to pass it to you. You’ll put a single scoop of potatoes right here...” He put a chicken on a plate and pointed to a spot beside it. “Then you’ll pass it to Amalie, who will arrange the haricot verts and drizzle them and the chicken with the glaze.”

I nodded as he spoke, taking in every word. Thankfully, it seemed like I got the easy job, but when Finn started thrusting plate after plate at me, going much faster than I could, I ended up with a huge stack of dishes awaiting potatoes before Finn even noticed. Suddenly he did, and he looked up at my station, then burst into laughter.

“Well, Yankee,” he said through tears of mirth, “I think we can safely say this isn’t exactly your forte.”

“I’m scooping as fast as I can,” I said, trying not to laugh, but figuring it would be better than bursting into tears, which felt like my other option with how overwhelmed I felt. “I’m not holding up dinner, am I?”

“Not at all,” he said with a kind smile. “I’m just used to this pace, and so I’ve gotten a bit more efficient. You’re moving at a perfectly reasonable speed for a one-armed girl.”

“If you’re sure,” I said, ladling more potatoes onto a plate and passing it over to Amalie.

“I’m extremely sure, Yankee,” he said with a wink. “In fact, why don’t we both scoop potatoes until you get back on

track?”

I smiled at him. He was such a nice guy, and I remembered why I liked him in the first place. Of course. Now I kept comparing him to Harry, but I had to make myself stop doing that, because as far as I knew, and from what I could tell, there was absolutely not a damn thing that was going to happen with Harry beyond what had occurred in the cave, and I needed to get good with that fast, or I was going to end up one of those pathetic girls who couldn't stop mooning over some guy who doesn't want her.

It took us another fifteen minutes to prep all the plates, which were then put onto trays in the warmer.

“Now,” Finn said, wiping his hands on his apron. “Those are done. We can move onto the veg plates.”

“Wait,” I said, my face falling. “That wasn't the whole thing?”

Finn laughed and reached up to brush my cheek with his thumb. When he pulled it away, it was covered in a small bit of mashed potato.

“Not even close, princess,” he said. “At this dinner service, there are three options—red meat, poultry, and vegetarian. Our job is to prep all the plates in advance, so that when someone chooses their dish, we can get it out to them quickly.”

“What about special orders?” I asked.

“We highly discourage it except in the case of allergies. Of course, you sometimes get people who make up allergies just

to get us to make them something special. The number of times I've heard someone say they're allergic to steak that's been cooked too long and they need one prepared rare for them instead of medium... But that's why we do this all before dinner even starts. That way, we can focus on the few special orders that do come through during the meal, and so that we can work on the desserts."

"Makes sense," I said, wiping my sweaty forehead on the back of my sleeve.

"Shit, princess," he said with a chuckle. "You're a mess."

"You have no idea," I joked, and he laughed even harder.

"I think I do, actually," he said, and the look he leveled at me told me that, while Harry might have seen me as a one and done kind of girl, Finn was definitely interested in a second go around.

I smiled, feeling better, knowing that I wasn't just someone to be cast off by everyone who wanted me once they had me, but still feeling terrible about Harry. What did I do wrong to make him pull back so fast?

The rest of dinner went by in a bit of a blur, and by the time the last plate of dessert went out the door, I was feeling exhausted. I hadn't really given myself time to recover, and I'd just worked an entire dinner shift using a single arm, which now felt like I'd been working it at the gym the entire time.

Finn walked me out of the kitchen, once again taking my hand. It felt nice to have the warmth of his fingers around

mine, and I turned to him.

“I guess I should head up to bed,” I said. “I need to shower badly.”

“Don’t,” Finn said suddenly, squeezing my fingers and pulling me a little closer. “Come with me.”

We started to walk through the resort, and for a moment, I thought he was going to take me back to the showers where we’d had sex the night I met him for round two, but he didn’t. Instead, he led me to an employee lounge that, even from the outside, I could hear was full of people and loud music.

“Come on in,” he said, smiling at me and opening the door to let me in.

I entered the room, and saw dozens of hotel staff all still in their work clothes or with one or two pieces removed for comfort, leaving people in white T-shirts and tank tops.

“What is this?” I asked as Finn placed a hand on my back.

“Little party we’re having. Once or twice a week we do something like this to let off steam, usually after a particularly busy or stressful day, like today.”

“Oh, so you’re saying that wasn’t a normal dinner?” I asked.

“Not even close, Yankee,” he said with a laugh. “Honestly, I was impressed you held up as good as you did, considering it was the busiest and most intense dinner service we’ve had in at least a month, and you were taking it on injured and new.”



“Thanks,” I said, feeling glad that I had managed to do something impressive.

“So, what do you think?” he asked. “You want to stay and enjoy the party? Or are you feeling too tired?”

In truth, I was exhausted, but I needed something to keep myself occupied and to remind myself of what life outside of the cave and Harry Sutton felt like.

“I’m so in,” I said, grinning at him.

He walked me around the party, introducing me to people I hadn’t met yet and letting me say hi to some I had. Amalie was there with someone I learned was her boyfriend, a guy who seemed like he must have been twice my height and built like a bear, with a bushy beard and gave the warmest, tightest hug I’ve ever gotten.

As I walked around and looked at what they had going on, I couldn’t help but be impressed. They’d used a DJ booth borrowed from one of the event rooms and had set up a light show that made the room feel less like a breakroom and more like a night club. There was also someone manning a laptop that they were playing music from so that people were dancing on the edges of the room and in a large group in the center. Leftovers from the dinner service had been modified into party food that people were enjoying as they walked around, and there were no less than three huge coolers on one side of the room that held cans and bottles of alcohol and soda.

“Can I get you a beer?” Finn asked as we approached them.

“Hell, yes,” I said. I needed something to help me relax after everything I’d been through. I worried for a minute about how it would mix with my pain meds, but I just mentally committed to not taking them for the night if that meant I got to enjoy myself.

He pulled out two cans and opened them, handing one to me. I didn’t hesitate even a second before tilting my head back and chugging the whole thing.

“Easy, princess,” he said, pulling me out another one as I threw my empty can away. “Don’t want to lose you before the party really gets going.”

“I’ll be fine,” I said, reaching for my second beer, which I downed almost as fast as the first.

Before I knew it, the lights seemed a little bit brighter and more blurred, the music a little more fun, and the way Finn’s hands grabbed me as we danced were so comforting that I leaned into him, letting him move me around the party to the music. My hand—the one not in the sling—was all over him, his strong shoulders, his toned arms, his sculpted chest. I was just feeling him there, being with me, very unlike someone else I wished was there with me.

As the party began to wind down, I was on my fifth drink and feeling extremely relaxed and tipsy when Finn looked at me and said, “Can I walk you back to your room?”

Fuck yes, he could. He could do that and more.

“Okay,” I said, trying to play it cool. “That would be great.”

He took my hand and started to guide me toward the door, but when I stumbled and nearly fell, Finn stopped me.

“Come on, princess,” he said with concern in his voice. “Can’t have you falling on that arm of yours.”

“I’m fine,” I said, but even I could hear how drawn out the words were, and I knew I was a lot more drunk than I realized.

“I’m sure you are,” he said, scooping me up to carry me. “But let’s just be on the safe side.”

I leaned in to him as we went up the elevator to my floor, relishing in the feeling of having someone care enough to do this. Harry had carried me in the cave when he had to. But he wasn’t here now. Someone else was carrying me, and I had to get used to the idea.

I gave Finn my key card so he could let himself in, and I guided him to my bedroom, where he set me on the bed and closed the door behind us.

“Nice setup you have here,” Finn said as I laid back on the mattress with my good arm out to the side.

“It’s okay,” I said. “The decor is ugly as hell, though.”

Finn laughed. “You don’t mince words, do you, Yankee?” He went to my dresser, then paused. “Where would I find you some pajamas in here?”

“Top drawer, I said, rolling to my side to watch him. He dug through and pulled out some fleece pants and a long-sleeved shirt. “You sure you wouldn’t want to see me in something with a little less coverage?”

Finn grinned at me, but didn't swap out the clothes. "Let's get you in these, yeah?"

I pouted a bit, but let him take off my clothes and redress me in my pajamas. I could have lost my damn mind when he didn't even brush my tit as he pulled on my shirt. He was so frustratingly respectful, but I could see clear as day the tent he was pitching in his pants, and I remembered what it felt to have that beautiful monster inside of me.

"Come here," I said, whispering in a way I hoped was seductive but knew was probably ridiculous. "I have a secret to tell you."

He leaned down, and I turned my face to the side, trying to kiss him, but Finn dodged it, kissing me on the cheek instead.

"Not while you're this drunk," he said. "I would never forgive myself."

Damn it. Why did all the guys in my life have to be such good guys when all I wanted was one of them to just be bad?

"You sure?" I asked, sliding up toward my pillow. "It could be fun."

"It would definitely be fun," Finn said, not sitting down, as much as I wanted him to. "But that's not what this is about. With what you've been through and with how messed up you are right now, I'd be taking advantage, and I couldn't live with myself if I became that guy."

I sighed as he kissed the top of my head and left, closing my door behind him and turning out my light. I sat in the dark for

I don't even know how long, cursing myself but being thankful for Finn. I hadn't really wanted to sleep with him tonight. I just wanted to feel wanted, and the person I wanted to want me... didn't.

But then again, maybe he did. Maybe I was just reading the signals wrong.

I ended up falling asleep quickly, but not before I thought one last time about Harry, wondering what he was doing, and if he was thinking about me.

And hoping he was.

## *Chapter Twenty-Seven*

Harry

**I** was well and truly depressed now.

It had been ten days since Sloane was released from the hospital and we'd barely spoken a sentence a day to each other.

I tried reaching out to one of my mentors, James. He had recently gotten married to his nanny, someone much younger than him as well.

But when I called, him, he answered to tell me he was a new dad and as much as he would like to meet up for a drink, there simply wasn't time. He had three kids from his previous marriage as well, so I could understand why he was swamped.

Instead, I dialed my best friend, Zane. He was the only person besides me who was under forty so often we collaborated on ideas for our businesses – my resort and his stock brokerage firm. Zane was also a really good friend

outside of business talk, so when I heard his voice, I knew I'd called the right person.

"Hey," he said. "Long time no speak. How are you?"

"Miserable," I confessed. "Can we meet for a drink?"

Zane paused, "When?"

"Now if possible."

There was another pause before he said, "I'm kinda in the middle of something right now. And by in the middle, I mean I'm having—"

"Got it," I said, almost jealous that someone else was getting laid when I couldn't even touch the girl I wanted to be with.

"But what about an hour from now?" he asked. "Your place."

"Yeah," I replied, figuring I could head over to the bar early. "That sounds fine. Thanks."

"See you then."

The phone disconnected before I hung up but I didn't blame him.

I moped around in my suite for a while. There wasn't much else to do at 9 p.m. on a Tuesday, but I then decided to try and coerce my body into an erection. I hadn't tried again since that fateful day right out of the hospital.

I stripped naked, examining how thin I looked in my full-length mirror. Probably a byproduct of the stress and lack of

food while we were in the cave. Couldn't say I'd eaten much since either.

Then I lay down on my bed and used the remote to put something sexy on the telly.

It was something of oddly good film quality and camera work, and the whole screen was pinks and softness.

Sloane was soft like that.

*No*, I thought to myself. *Not Sloane. Focus on the girl on the screen.*

I watched with my hand resting on my cock as she ran her hands over her cute body and toyed with her nipples, all the while encouraging me to do the same. Her pussy was clean shaven and wet before the camera even panned in, and when it did, I felt a slight twinge of arousal.

I took my cock in my hand and began to softly pump it, needing to get hard to prove something. I wasn't sure if it was to myself, or to Sloane, or even to my therapist. But I knew that if I could get hard, I'd feel better.

Slowly I grew full mast, and I laughed out loud at my success, spending more time looking at my own length than at the girl on the screen.

I closed my eyes, leaning back and imagining the girl, lying on her stomach, me on top of her. We were in a sex club and people all around us were playing.

My cock jumped in my hand and I felt another jolt of victory spread through me.



“Yes...” said the nameless girl. “Give it to me.”

I wasn't entirely sure my cock would fit inside her, but I looked up to where a mirror was reflecting our visage and saw her voluptuous breasts, hanging over the bench I was taking her on, and plunged deep inside her.

I gave myself a squeeze, and tried not to let my mind wander to a particular redhead who I would have given *anything* to be fucking right now.

That was when I felt myself go soft, faster than I thought was possible.

I reached for the remote and turned off the TV, suddenly finding the content unbearable, and instead got dressed and headed down to the bar.

We had three bars in the resort, but my favorite was a speakeasy-themed one on the restaurant level.

Capone's usually had very few patrons after dinnertime since Sunset View was a very family-oriented type of place, and the bartender was this great Brazilian guy named Jose.

“Good evening, bossman. What can I get you?”

I slid into a barstool and looked at the selection. “Redbreast,” I requested. “Neat.”

Jose did me the honors and poured it in a fancy way that he'd clearly honed with a lot of practice. It didn't really make a difference, though, as I drank it down so fast that I was ready for another just as he grabbed a cloth to wipe down the bottle.

“Something on your mind?” he asked, eyeing my nearly empty drink.

“Someone more like.”

“Miss Sloane?” he asked.

“What... What do you mean?” I stammered. If my staff could see it then surely so could everyone else.

Thankfully, I was saved from the answer when I felt a hand clap on my shoulder and I turned to find Zane there.

“Hey,” I said, putting out my hand to shake his.

“How are you, bud?” he asked. His face was positively glowing. I supposed mine would be too if I’d just gotten done sleeping with my new fiancée.

“Exhausted,” I said truthfully. “Utterly exhausted.”

Zane ordered himself a drink and sat down, seemingly evaluating me as he did. “You look like shit, man. What’s going on?”

“There’s this girl...” I said as quietly as possible. I didn’t necessarily want to confirm my staff’s suspicions about Sloane and me. “She is... wow, she’s everything, man, and I think I fucked up my chance of ever being with her.”

“And why is that?” he asked.

“Because I slept with her,” I said sadly. “And it was phenomenal.”

Zane looked at me like I was crazy. “I fail to see how that wrecks your chances.”

“Her brother is my best friend from college and she’s here to do an internship for her bachelor’s degree.”

Zane’s mouth dropped open. “Oh, dear...”

I nodded, finishing my whiskey and indicating for another. “Yep. Did I mention it was him who gave me this?” I pointed to my black eye which, granted, looked a lot better now, but still nasty enough to catch his attention.

“You did not. Yikes.”

“Yikes, is right,” I replied. “And now, despite the fact that we’re working together daily, things are so awkward that we can hardly look at each other.”

Zane shifted uncomfortably. “This isn’t the same girl you got stuck in a cave with, is it?”

I sighed. “The very same.”

My friend looked like he wasn’t sure how to reply and I was strangely okay with that. Just having someone here who didn’t want to crucify me was nice.

We drank in silence for a minute, then Zane put down his empty tumbler and turned to me.

“If you love this girl, you cannot give up that easily.”

Love her.

Did I love Sloane?

Had we known each other long enough to be in love?

I must have been making a face or something because Zane laughed. “You haven’t even admitted it to yourself yet, have

you?”

I hadn't.

Holy shit! I did love her.

“What the fuck am I supposed to do with that, Zane?” I asked. “She doesn't even speak to me really, and as I said, her brother hates me now.”

Zane shrugged. “If that had been the case with Sara, I still wouldn't have given up. Sometimes you just meet someone who you click with right away and you know is supposed to be the one. They don't always turn out to be the one, but there is the feeling that they're supposed to. You can't let loves like that go so easily, Haz.”

His words were actually really beautiful and maybe because of the whiskey, I found myself on the edge of tears. “You're right,” I said. “But I'm gonna need to be careful with this if I don't want to make things worse with Kendal. I need time to think.”

Zane nodded and emptied his glass, clapping his hands and standing. “I think my work here is done. Now off I go, back to my fiancée's bed.”

It was nice to see him so happy. I hoped that I too had happiness like that coming toward me in the future.

I finished my drink as well and paid Jose handsomely, then trudged back to my room, changed out of my clothes, and got in bed. I needed sleep. I needed to think.

I would absolutely have to make things right with Ken because only with Ken's acceptance would I really be able to have her.

Because Zane was absolutely right.

I couldn't let her go. I wanted her far too badly to consider what life would be like if we didn't even try to make it work.

## *Chapter Twenty-Eight*

Sloane

“Can you run this schedule down to the desk workers?”

I sighed and stood from the chair. I hadn't been in it for more than a couple of minutes, but this had become the norm over the last week. Every time I'd come into Harry's office to start shadowing him, he'd come up with some kind of task for me to do that had me going pretty much anywhere in the resort that he wasn't. At first, I thought maybe he really needed my help with some stuff, since he was probably super behind after we got stuck in the cave, but when it started being gopher-type tasks after a couple of days, it became pretty obvious that he was just avoiding me.

“Yeah, of course,” I said as cheerfully as I could despite feeling more than a little let down. I'd spent a whole week hoping he would get over this, and that we could talk about what happened, or at least go back to the way we were before

the incident, but he was determined to not have anything to do with me.

Fine. It wasn't like I didn't have other options.

In fact, as I took the paper downstairs so that the front desk staff could see their schedule—something I knew they didn't actually need since it got emailed to them—I ran into Finn coming in for his shift.

“Hello, Yankee,” he said, walking over to me with an ear-to-ear smile. “You're looking particularly fit.”

“Thanks?” I said. I wasn't sure how, since I hadn't been able to exercise at all with this damn cast on.

“It means good,” Finn said, chuckling. “You look fit means you look good.”

“Oh,” I said with an uncharacteristic giggle. I had no idea where it came from or why, and I hated myself a little for sounding so fake.

“I've been meaning to ask you something, actually,” he said. “So, I'm glad to run into you.”

“Really?” I asked, falling into step beside him and ignoring my pointless task.

“Yeah,” he said, rounding a corner and turning to me, walking forward until I was backed against the wall. He put his arm against the wall over my head and looked down at me with a sly grin.

Fuck, this was familiar. Him standing over me like this, with me against a wall... I could practically feel him sliding inside of me.

“Yes, Finn?” I asked, looking up at him, fighting the urge to just reach up and kiss him.

“Will you go out with me?” he asked. “On a real date.”

“A real date?” I asked, cocking my head to the side. “You mean not some *Titanic* party scene type of deal, but a *date*?”

He laughed and shook his head.

“Yes, princess. Let me show you the winter market in town. It’s loads of fun.”

I thought about it for a minute. If it had been Harry asking me, the answer would have been an immediate and resounding *yes*. But I had to think about it for a moment with Finn. How could I go out with him when I was still hung up on Harry?

By reminding myself that I’d obviously misread some signals on a grand scale with Harry, and that he wasn’t an option. At all.

“Yes,” I said. “I’d love to.”

“Great,” he said. “I’m only working lunch today, so I can meet you back here about three?”

“Sounds good,” I said, still gazing up at him.

He started to lean down like he was going to kiss me, and I arched up to meet him, but he pulled away at the last second.



“See you then, Yankee,” he said before turning away and heading to the kitchens.

I watched him go and felt a flicker of happiness for the first time in the last week, since Harry started making it clear he was closing the door on any kind of relationship—even friendship—that we might have had. I touched my lips, remembering how it had felt when Finn kissed me before all of this happened, and wishing he’d just done it again so I could start getting over Harry.

Three o’clock rolled around, and Finn came out of the showers fully dressed in a sweater with torn jeans and a bomber jacket, looking even more like James Dean than he did the day I met him.

I’d knocked out my duties early and gone back to my room to change into something warm but stylish. I ended up in a pair of fleece-lined leggings under a corduroy mini skirt with a cropped sweater. I’d had to use the gift card Harry had given me to buy a new coat since mine had been destroyed by the cave-in, so I wasn’t in my usual boho chic outerwear, but I’d managed to find a wool coat that looked just as nice. I’d also chosen a pair of boots with a small heel on them, short enough to walk in, but tall enough to make it easier for me to reach Finn’s lips when I stood on my toes.

“You look absolutely delicious,” he said, grabbing me by the hand and having me do a little twirl for him. I nearly lost my balance since my other arm was still strapped to my chest

by the sling, but that just gave me an excuse to fall into him, laughing.

“You too,” I said, wiggling an eyebrow at him. “I can’t wait to see this market.”

“Oh, it’s a real treat,” he said, putting an arm around my shoulder and leading me out to his car, where he opened the door and took the time to strap me in since my good arm was on the wrong side for me to do it myself.

He wasn’t kidding. When we got there, it looked like Christmas had become a little town and been dropped in the center of this larger town. Even though it was January, they still had up decorations that made it feel like the holidays. All of the little stands looked like tiny red cabins with open fronts for people to sell their wares.

I stopped for far longer than I should have at a booth for various jams, where they let you sample them all—which I did. I was pleasantly surprised by a balsamic onion jelly that was incredible on the little pretzel sticks they gave you for tasting. Then there was the candy shop, which had a booth of their own, and about half of it was completely made up of different flavors of fudge.

“Oh, I love fudge...” I moaned.

“Do you now?” Finn asked. “Well, let’s get you some.”

I ended up picking out three different flavors that I’d never seen before and a small brick of peanut butter fudge—my favorite. Finn had tried to pay for them, but I told him I liked

being able to pay for myself because it made me feel like I didn't owe him anything. That way, anything that happened between us was entirely because we both wanted it to, and not because it was a returned favor.

"I never thought of it that way," Finn said. "But I think that's a wonderful way of looking at it."

"Thanks," I said with a smile as he guided me to a giant Ferris wheel in the center of the market.

"This is great," he said, getting in line. "It goes up so high that you can see all the resorts in town. They're in every direction."

"Really?" I asked. I knew there were others in the area, but I didn't realize how popular a ski destination this was.

"Yeah," he said. "Not a whole lot of industry in town besides skiing, but it works around here."

He was right, of course. Once we reached the top and came to a brief stop to give us time to look around, I could see huge hotels and mountains every way I looked, and I could even make out people gliding down some of them.

"Wow..." I whispered. "It's..."

"Beautiful," Finn said. "I know."

I nodded my agreement, but not about the scenery. My eyes were glued to the Hilton of the Hills, which from up high looked so much nicer than it did from the ground. I could even see, if I squinted really hard, the place where Harry and I had dropped into the cave, which was now covered.

I shook my head to get my head away from Harry again. I had no idea how I was going to ever be able to enjoy things with Finn if I kept comparing them, and if I couldn't stop thinking about the way things had been in the cave for me and Harry. They weren't like that out here, so it didn't matter.

Once we got off the Ferris wheel, Finn took me over to a stand where they were selling hot mulled wine. I'd never had it before, but Finn insisted it was a European staple in winter months.

"They use spices to flavor the wine, which is really sweet, and then they heat it up to help keep you warm when it drops below zero."

"Well, I'm glad they have it here, then," I said, thinking about how bitterly cold it had been and likely would be for a long time this far north.

We both bought a cup, and I fell in love at first sip. It *was* sweet, but there was so much flavor to it, and the cup warmed my hands as I held it and drank it down a little too fast. But I didn't care. It was absolutely incredible and delicious.

Finn sipped his a bit more slowly, watching me. When I realized he was, I blushed and tucked some of my hair behind my ear.

"What?" I asked, grinning sheepishly.

"You want to find somewhere more... private?" he asked, and suddenly the look in his eyes became very obvious.

“Oh,” I said in surprise. I guessed I’d been expecting this, but I hadn’t thought it would be this quick. “Um... yeah. Yeah, I do.”

Finn beamed at me and took the empty cup from my hand before downing his in one big gulp, then wrapping his fingers around mine and guiding me toward the exit.

“Where are we going?” I asked as he walked right past his car.

“My place,” he said, glancing at me. “It’s right over in this building here.” He pointed at an apartment building just on the other side of the parking lot. No wonder he didn’t need his car. He probably parked here every night.

With butterflies in my stomach, I followed him up two flights of stairs to the third floor, where he opened up the door to reveal a small but tidy and cozy studio apartment.

“It’s no executive suite,” he teased, wrapping his arms around me from behind, “but I hope it’ll do.”

I turned to face him and put my good arm around his neck to pull him down to me, finally kissing him.

“It certainly will,” I said, my lips still against his.

Finn lifted me off the floor and walked the few steps to his bed, where he deposited me. He tore off his jacket and tossed it onto the sofa he had across the room, then carefully started to pull mine free of my sling and cast. Once my coat had joined his, he pressed his lips to mine again, laying me back on the bed, careful to avoid my injury.

He felt so good, so normal. I sank into the kiss, remembering how incredible he'd been when we had sex the first time.

*Not as good as Harry was.*

I froze for just a second, but managed to cover it up and continue. I couldn't think about Harry. Not now. This wasn't about him.

*Isn't it?*

I wished my brain would shut up. Yes, I had feelings for Harry, but he didn't for me. Finn did, and he was here and he wanted me.

*How do you know he doesn't?*

Because... because he wouldn't have spent the week avoiding me if he did. He wouldn't be trying so hard to not see my face, or any part of me.

*Unless he feels guilty. After all, Kendal did hit him for putting me in danger.*

The war inside my head kept going as my hands held Finn to me tightly and his began to move up and down my body, toying with the limits of what we could do without removing any of our clothes.

“Well, darling,” Finn said suddenly, his mouth tracing the length of my neck. “What do you want to do from here?”

I froze completely. Darling. He'd said “darling.” Just like Harry had called me the whole time we were in the cave.

I couldn't do this.

Finn reacted immediately to the sudden change in me, standing up and looking at me with a frown on his face.

“What’s wrong?”

I sat up and pushed my hair back away from my face, unable to make eye contact with him.

“I... I’m sorry. I can’t do this right now.”

Finn sighed, and I glanced up to see a look of resignation on his face.

“Right now... or ever?” he asked.

I didn’t have an answer for him because someone didn’t have one for me yet.

And if I didn’t have an answer, that *was* my answer. If I wasn’t one hundred percent sure about Finn, I didn’t want to do this.

And I wasn’t.

Unable to say more, I simply said, “I’m sorry. I just... I have somewhere I have to be.”

Finn nodded, looking at the floor. “Do you need a ride?”

“No,” I said, not wanting him to feel in any way obligated to do anything for me after he gave me such a wonderful day and I rejected him at the end of it. “I’ll call a car.” I got my jacket and pulled it on, then turned and looked at Finn. “Thank you. Today was really lovely. You... I’m really sorry.”

With that, I turned and left his apartment, calling for an Uber as I bounded down the steps.

It only took ten minutes to get back to the resort, but every single second felt like an eternity. I had no idea what I was going to say, but I knew if I didn't say it, I'd spend the rest of my life wondering what might have happened if I did. I knew, as I counted the seconds, that I'd likely closed the door with Finn for good this time, and as much as it would have been nice to know he was waiting for me if things didn't work out the way I hoped they would, Finn deserved much more than being someone's second choice.

I rushed up to Harry's office, knowing how often he worked late, and I banged on the door urgently, needing to see him more than I even needed to breathe.

No answer.

I tried again, but there was still nothing. I pulled out my phone and dialed his office line, which rang out to his voicemail. I tried his cell next, but it, too, ended without an answer.

"Shit," I said, running back to the lobby.

The guy at the front desk greeted me. "Hey, Sloane. You okay?"

"Fine, Tim," I said, panting from the effort of rushing all over the damn hotel. "Have you seen Harry? It's urgent."

"Yeah, I have," he said, then turned to the huge windows that overlooked the slopes.



It was dark out, but that didn't matter because there were huge lights along the pathways so that people could see their way around. One of the pathways seemed to have become blocked with snow, which had begun to fall while I'd been at the market with Finn, and the silhouette of someone—a silhouette I recognized—was shoveling the walkway by hand.

Harry.

My heart swelled with happiness at seeing him, and with pride at knowing how much he put into this place and into the people who worked here. The fact that he would get out there himself to shovel the snow made me smile. That was the person I saw in the cave. The one who'd do anything for people he cared about.

And I just had to hope I was one of them as I burst through the doors of the hotel and out into the snow. I had to slow down on some of the spots which were slick with ice, but I made it to him within a minute.

“Harry!” I called to him as soon as I was close enough.

He looked up, and I could see concern all over his face.

“Sloane?” he asked, moving toward me. “What’s wrong?”

In the last few steps to get to him, I slipped on a patch of ice and skidded into him. He caught me, and I laughed.

“Are you okay?” he asked, clearly thinking something had happened that had made me delirious.

It had. It happened the week before, when he made me fall for him.

And now all I had to do was tell him.

“I’m fine,” I said, righting myself and putting a hand on his face. He looked surprised, but didn’t move. “I love you, Harry.”

## *Chapter Twenty-Nine*

Harry

**S**he loved me.

Sloane had said she loved me.

I was frozen stiff from shoveling the walk out here, but that had absolutely nothing to do with why I couldn't function now.

She loved me.

"I... I love you, too," I stammered, my heart feeling like it was either going to burst from stress or excitement.

Or both.

I didn't have time to react much before Sloane dove at me and knocked us both into the snow. The white fluffy, wet cold billowed up around us and sprinkled down on our faces as we lay there.

I looked up at her face and tucked my hand behind her ear, caressing her cheek where she lay on my chest. Then I pulled her down into a kiss which she returned eagerly.

“I thought you hated me,” I muttered through the mashing together of our mouths. “I thought you were hoping I’d never speak to you again.”

“That’s so stupid,” Sloane replied. “After what we went through together? No one else will ever understand what that was like. No one but me and you.”

She was right. I had a pretty good suspicion that there would be plenty more for Doctor Martin and me to talk about. Probably enough for a weekly meeting. Maybe even couples counseling.

Couples.

Sloane and I...

“I want to be with you, Sloane, but are you sure I’m not too old? Too boring?”

Sloane shook her head. “Absolutely not. You have one of the kindest hearts I’ve ever known. And I will never be able to get over how well you took care of me down there. Being in that cave was like a crash course in being a couple. We survived it, so we can probably survive anything.”

I would have married her right now if I hadn’t wanted to make things right with Kendal first, but maybe now was the time to reveal my surprise for her. It had cost a fortune to have it done over 48 hours, but she was worth it.

“Can I take you to my suite? I have something I want to show you.”

Sloane gazed into my eyes, her smile so big that I thought her lovely cheeks might split. “Only if you kiss me again first.”

I was more than happy to oblige and rolled her over so that now she was the one in the snow and I was hovering over her.

I kissed her again and again, until I was damn near certain that my penis issue had been resolved. Now there was another reason to take her to my suite.

“Come with me,” I said softly. “You’re gonna catch your death here.”

I lifted her out of the snow and helped her dust off, but I could tell she was already freezing cold.

“I didn’t keep you alive in that cave for you to freeze on my doorstep,” I said, hoisting her over my shoulder, careful that I did not hurt her healing arm.

Sloane giggled, “Lead the way,” and I took off for my suite.

When we got outside the door, I swiped the key and smiled at her. “I hope you like it because I did it for you...”

I opened the door wide to reveal the total renovation of my suite. When Sloane had been so utterly disapproving of the decor, I had made a note to have it redone. But when we survived that cave, I put all my time and resources into doing it at lightning speed.

Everywhere she looked were modern touches and cozy accents. On my sofa was a huge, chunky knit blanket, on my bed there was the same.

“You did this for me?” she asked.

I nodded and pulled her against me as she looked around, loving the feeling of her against me once more.

“Harry,” Sloane said with a giggle. “Are you hard from being happy?”

I spun her around to face me. “Maybe? Mostly I think I’m hard because of how badly I’ve wanted you for so long and now you’re actually mine.”

Sloane’s face went fiery, and she nodded. “Now I’m yours.”

I hoisted her into my arms and carried her to the bed where I threw her down and climbed on top of her. My lips went straight to hers, wanting to taste every inch of *my* Sloane.

But Sloane had plans of her own, and with strength she shouldn’t have possessed and leverage, she forced me onto my back.

“I haven’t tasted you,” she said, her hips straddling my torso. “In the cave you got to taste me but I haven’t had the chance to return the favor.”

I swallowed hard as her meaning hit me and my cock stood at attention as well. I began to fumble for my belt and zipper, but Sloane pushed my hands away, wanting to do each step herself.

God, she was sexy, and now she was mine to hold. Mine to have whenever and wherever I wanted.

Sloane grabbed my hand and led me, pants half undone, to the enormous picture window in my place. She pulled open the curtains, and despite the fact that the sun was beginning to set, anyone who walked beneath us would get an interesting show if the curtains were opened.

Sloane then got down in front of me, on her knees, back to the window and proceeded to finish baring my rock-solid cock.

“Darling,” I said, pushing her hair away from her face. “People might see.”

“Let them,” Sloane said with a low grumble that nearly drove me insane. “It’s a fantasy of mine to have someone catch me in the act.”

A fantasy of hers?

“Me too,” I stuttered.

“Then it’s settled.”

She pulled my cock forth and was on it immediately, taking as much as she could deep into her throat.

I took my hands and pulled her hair back, using my grip as a ponytail to keep her hair away from her face.

The sounds she made as she sucked on my length were almost enough to make me finish in her mouth right then, particularly since I’d had almost nothing in two weeks.

Then I saw her hand dip into her pants and she began to rub herself, moaning onto me.

With a firm yank I pulled her mouth from my cock. “If you keep that shit up, I’m not gonna last very long, I—”

Just as I was about to explain how my bits had been lazy since I’d been back, two women, probably only slightly younger than me, walked past the window from below. It looked like they were going to pass without looking up, but then at the last moment, one of them turned around and made eye contact with me.

I became keenly aware that my porn star-sized cock was hanging loosely in plain view and I wondered if for a moment, despite the next level of turn-on it was, I had made a serious mistake.

She tapped her friend on the shoulder and the friend looked as well, my length in my hand. They whispered something to each other, and before I could really panic, both gave me a thumbs up.

Unfortunately for me, this also coincided with Sloane launching her mouth back onto me in one, long pull of my cock with her lips.

Which was how I ended up coming all over her and my picture window.

The women below laughed and clapped their hands, and I held up mine in embarrassed acknowledgement. The two



continued on their way, and I wasn't sure but I could have sworn one was mimicking masturbating to the other.

Sloane looked up at me pleased as pie with herself.

“Now you're going to get it,” I said with a growl. She gave me an innocent smile and I grabbed her by the chin. “Now, you're going to get... it...”

I lifted her from her knees, my cock still bouncing freely as it went flaccid, and I took her back to the bed. I tossed her down once more and spread her thighs, pulling her pants and panties from her with just a few sharp tugs.

Then I dropped to my knees at the end of the bed and grabbed her hips, pulling her pussy right into my face.

She was already immensely wet for me and I lapped it up like it was my last meal.

Sloane let out a series of girly moans that drove me wild, and I realized how much naughtier we could be in a room that possessed an ounce of comfort—unlike the cave.

“Good girl,” I gasped, slipping a finger inside her.

I felt her tighten around me and I proceeded to rub the soft spot within her until she squirmed.

“Oh, God yes,” she whined. “Yes, please.”

I decided to test her limits and insert another finger, then keeping the tips on her G-spot, I began to thrust my knuckles against her entrance roughly. This had the effect of taking her

cute whines to all out pleased screams, and I watched as she grasped onto the sheets for dear life.

Then suddenly she was coming on my fingers, and a grin crept over my lips with accomplished pride. “Good girl. Come for me.”

I realized that I was once again hard, and since I’d gotten the long-time-coming orgasm out of the way, I would definitely be able to last longer.

I grabbed her by the hips and planted her face-down into the bed, then climbed on top of her not even holding myself up with my hands.

With my full weight upon her, I positioned myself at her entrance and began to rub the opening as well as her clit with my tip.

Sloane was whining again, a pleading, begging sound that let me know I was doing something very right.

“Now, darling,” I said with glee. “This is where the fun really begins.”

## *Chapter Thirty*

Sloane

I'd been fucked from behind before. I'd even had guys climb on top of me to do it. It never felt half as good as what was happening to me right now.

Harry's weight was perfect, pressing me into the mattress with exactly the right amount of pressure to make me feel restrained without feeling trapped. My arm was pinned beneath me, but it never was so much that it caused pain, and my face was pressed into his pillow, just loosely enough that I could turn my head from side to side to breathe, but allowing me the opportunity to scream into the fabric.

Which I did as soon as he entered me and his tip pressed immediately into the soft, sensitive place inside me he'd already been pleasuring so well.

"Fuck!" I yelled into the pillow. "God, yes!"

“Good girl,” Harry said as I clenched around him, making the pathway even tighter for him than it already was with my legs pressed together. “That’s a very... very good girl...”

I moaned, turning my head so I could see him. I couldn’t get my head all the way around, but I could see just enough to know he was loving every second of this. His face was contorted with focus, but his eyes were wild and his brow was shimmering with sweat as he plunged into me over and over.

My good hand gripped the sheets, my nails digging into them as I came once, then twice more under his expert technique. It was as good as it had been in the cave. Better, even, since I wasn’t lying on a freezing stone floor.

“You liked it, didn’t you?” he asked as he slowed his thrusts. “You liked when those girls watched you pleasuring me. You liked the way it felt to know that they saw me and knew that I was yours. That *you* were the one making me come all over the window. You loved knowing that I could see out to anyone who might have been watching, but I only wanted you. I *still* only want you.”

I whimpered a tiny, “Yes,” which caused him to make a sound halfway between a laugh and a growl as he wrapped an arm around my chest, just below my collarbone to hold me more tightly to him.

The feeling of him inside me was absolutely incredible, and I began to buck my hips up and down as he pressed inside of me over and over, deepening the contact more than I even thought was possible.

“You want more of that?” he asked. “More of me fucking you where people can see? More of having people watching us and knowing that they might want you, but they can never have you, because you’re mine?”

Mine.

The way he’d said *mine* sent a thrill through me, one so intense it sent me into another screaming orgasm beneath his touch, which began to shift and move across my body. He ran a hand along my sides, then slid them up under me to cup my breasts, using his fingers to toy with and tease my nipples. I bit down on the pillow, almost unable to bear the amount of sheer ecstasy he was giving me. He was so big, so deep, and I didn’t think I could take much more of this, because it was all just so much sensation and desire and pleasure.

“God, you feel incredible,” he breathed into my ear. “You’re so wet for me, darling. You make me want you all day, every day. Just thinking about how you tasted has been haunting me all week. I’ve needed to have you again so badly.”

“Me too,” I panted, still on the comedown from the last orgasm he gave me and feeling another building quickly within me.

His lips pressed against the soft spot behind my ear, and I shivered with delight. He opened his mouth and I felt his teeth graze the soft skin there, then bite down gently as he gave a tug on my nipples. He thrust deep into me, and I felt a wave of tiny, orgasmic pulses overtake me.

I wasn't even sure if I was screaming, crying, or begging him for more. All I knew was that I never wanted him to stop because no one—*no one*—had ever made me feel this good. It was like he was made for me and only me. Like I was always his to fuck and enjoy and toy with and make love to as much as he wanted, because this was all I'd ever need again.

“God, I've wanted this for so damn long,” Harry said, groaning in my ear. “Ever since that day you waltzed into my office looking so good and clean and yet, like you belonged in a porno.”

I sighed at his words, a lovely shivery feeling coming over me. “I wanted you, too. I knew what you were doing in your office before I came to get my phone.”

Harry stopped for a moment. “And you didn't say anything?”

I laughed, grinding against him. “What was I gonna say? Smells like you jacked off in here?”

“Yeah!” he replied.

Then he shifted the way we were positioned, pulling me up into his lap, still behind me and slowly raising and lowering my body onto his throbbing cock. I could tell he must have been getting close because we were getting further away from the lovemaking, and closer to the sheer animalism. The desire for a climax.

He had stopped talking at this point, both of us had, instead deferring to moans, whines, and grunts. The noises he

continued to make were increasingly delicious as he became feral with sexual hunger.

As he brought me down onto his cock, he began to thrust up into me. I could feel that pulse guys got when they were minutes from finishing.

“You can finish inside me,” I panted. “I’m safe.”

It was like this was the word he was waiting for because after three more thrusts, he exploded into me, groaning so loud that I was sure anyone nearby would hear. The thought alone brought me to my release as well.

We were both panting and grunting, sweat running down our faces with the sheer acrobatics of our lovemaking.

And then we collapsed on top of each other, Harry pulling me on top of his chest and placing a kiss on my sweating forehead.

“You were brilliant,” he said. “Ten out of ten.”

I smiled. “Well, anything is better than having sex in a pile of rocks.” I laughed.

“Definitively better,” he agreed.

Lying in our afterglow was so amazing and perfect that I would have been just fine staying here, lying on his chest, the rest of the day.

He smelled like sweat and a bevy of other fluids, but beneath it I could smell his cologne and the way all those mixed together was enchanting.

I opened my mouth to tell him how wonderful this was, but before I had the chance to say a thing, there was a knock on the door.

I looked at Harry and he looked at me. We giggled and pulled the covers up.

“Whoever it is will go away,” he whispered. “They always —”

“Harry, open up. It’s me.”

That was the sound of my brother’s voice. The brother who currently desired homicide against Harry.

“I wanna talk. Like men.”

Harry’s eyes grew wide and he whimpered. “Give me one second,” he shouted from under the covers. “You’ve got to hide,” he said. “The bathroom should be a safe bet.”

I nodded and crawled out, sprinting naked to the bathroom and turning off the light. I left the door open a crack to hear their conversation, and watched as Harry dressed then rushed to the door.

It was quiet for a moment, then I heard the door open and Harry said, “Hey, mate.”

There was no response on Kenny’s end, but I heard two sets of feet stomping through the hallway and into the living room.

The living room attached to the bathroom.

Why was Harry bringing him here?

“Look, man, I’m sorry for—” Harry began.



“Stop,” Ken interrupted. Let me speak here.”

There was a long pause and I could almost envision Ken breathing deeply to get his thoughts together.

“I was a total dickhead. I not only attacked you, but I undermined my sister’s ability to make her own decisions in... in partners. I want to let you know that if she wants to pursue you, I won’t get in her way.”

Well, that was exciting at least. It would be a lot easier to get him on board if he’d already given his permission.

There was shuffling noise, and I heard Harry say, “Thank you, man. I really like her.”

They clearly broke apart and Kendal said, “If you hurt her, I will kill you. Make no mistake.”

“Of course, mate,” Harry replied. “I would never.”

Kendal turned to go and I could see him pass the door. “Also, if you take my sister into any more caves, I’m pulling her out and leaving you there.”

Harry actually laughed at that. “Totally fair,” he said. “I—”

“What is this?”

Kendal’s voice was suddenly tense and Harry coughed. “No idea, mate,” he said.

“Yes, you do,” Ken said. “You know exactly what this is. You’re already fucking her again?”

Kenny sounded so mad that I actually shook with fear for Harry, and I peeked out to see what the issue was.

And there stood Ken, my T-shirt in his hand.

## *Chapter Thirty-One*

Harry

**T**his was bad. Really fucking bad.

I watched the realization cross Kendal's face as he clutched the T-shirt ever tighter. "Harry, why is my sister's shirt in your room?"

I wished I could have thought of something, anything, that would have diffused this before he exploded like a nuke.

But I couldn't.

"Sloane!" he bellowed. "Get the fuck out here. I know you're hiding."

"Can I at least take her the—" I didn't finish before Ken chucked the T-shirt at me hard enough to hurt. "Thank you."

I walked to the bathroom and poked the T-shirt through the crack Sloane had left open so that she could hear what was going on.

“I’m so sorry,” I whispered.

“It’s not your fault,” she replied. “I should have seen this coming.”

Sloane dressed and emerged, arms crossed, looking ready to pummel her brother.

I took a step back from them both and went to sit in one of the armchairs in my living room.

“How could you do this to me?” Ken asked Sloane, looking both angry and hurt at the same time.

Sloane, on the other hand, looked like she was about to either cry or scream, possibly some combination of the two.

“I didn’t do this *to you*,” she said, her voice quivering with emotion. “I did it *for* me. I... I love Harry, Ken.”

“You what?” he sputtered, laughing cruelly. “You do not. You haven’t known him long enough for that.”

“Well, I do,” she said, crossing her arms, her eyes darting to mine. She knew I felt the same, and was encouraging me to say so.

“I love her, too, Ken,” I said, standing up again and stepping closer to her, but not close enough to touch. I wasn’t trying to get another black eye today.

Kendal rounded on me, pointing at me and slowly walking in my direction. “I cannot believe you would do this. It was bad enough for you to sleep with her, but this is a betrayal I never thought I’d have to deal with.”

“Betrayal?” I said. “Ken, it’s not like I went out of my way to pursue your sister. In fact, I barely spoke to her for over a week because I thought she didn’t want anything to do with me, and because I thought if I tried to get close to her again, it would hurt you.”

“And you were right!” Kendal exploded, making Sloane jump.

“But you just came here to give me your blessing,” I said, confused as to this change of tune. He’d come in ready to accept my feelings for Sloane, but the second he found out she was here, he went right back to anger.

“Because you *knew* I didn’t approve, and you went behind my back—both of you—to continue whatever the hell this is without even trying to make things right with me first. You just fucking went for it, to hell with me and my feelings.”

“This isn’t about *your* feelings,” Sloane said. “This is about me and Harry, and you can either choose to support us or choose not to, but at the end of the day, I don’t owe you anything in terms of the relationships I choose or not.”

The hurt in Kendal’s eyes was palpable. I suppose I understood. He’d raised Sloane more than her parents had, and she was rejecting his oversight and protection, possibly for the first time. And she was doing it in a way that made it clear that she wasn’t going to be listening to him at all.

“It’s not about the relationship, Sloane,” he said, his voice no longer angry, but sad. “It’s about the trust. If you’d come to me and told me what you wanted, I’d have been unhappy, but I

would have tried to be supportive. Instead, the two of you decided to sneak around behind my back and lie. I can't trust either of you." He didn't make eye contact with me at all. He went from focusing on Sloane to staring at a spot on the wall between us. I watched his body swell as he took a deep breath in and deflate as he let it out. "I'm going home."

"What?" Sloane and I said at the same time.

"I'm going home," he repeated. "I can't stay here with two people who would lie to me rather than trust me."

"It's not about any of that, Ken," she said, pleading with him. "Harry and I love each other and decided to be together because we wanted to be. Can't you just accept that and be happy for me?"

But Ken shook his head. "I can't support this relationship when it started with deception and betrayal. Harry knew how angry I was, and he still pursued you before making things right with me."

"Ken..." I said, stepping toward him, but he put up a hand to stop me.

"Just don't," he said. He looked up at his sister. "For your sake, Chip, I really hope this makes you happy, and I really hope it was all worth it."

He turned and opened the suite door, then walked out. Sloane and I stood in silence, not looking at each other, for several minutes after he left, and then I finally turned to her.

"Sloane—"

“I need a minute,” she said, cutting me off and going to my couch, where she took a seat, then broke down crying into her hands.

I went to her side and wrapped a tentative arm around her shoulder, unsure if she wanted to be left alone, but she leaned in to me, sobbing against my chest. I let her burn herself out over the course of fifteen, then twenty minutes. Eventually, her breathing leveled out and her tears subsided, and she looked up at me.

“I don’t know what to do, Harry,” she said, her voice weary and sad. “Kendal has never been this angry with me, not even when I broke his signed baseball bat by playing with it in the backyard when I was definitely old enough to know better. He hates me now.”

“He does not,” I said, kissing the side of her head, which she pressed into my lips for deeper contact. “He’s just upset, and mostly at me. You didn’t do anything wrong here.”

“Didn’t I?” she asked with a sigh. She shook her head and looked at me. “I do love you, Harry. But I don’t know if I should stay if it means losing my relationship with my brother.”

It felt like I’d been hit in the chest by the broken baseball bat.

“I don’t want you to go,” I admitted quietly.

“I don’t want to either,” she said. “But I just don’t know if it’s the right thing to do or not.”

We sat without speaking for a few more minutes, and then I spoke up first. “Let me convince you to stay.”

“How?” Sloane asked with a sardonic laugh, her voice thick from crying.

“By showing you what you could have if you did,” I said, putting a finger beneath her chin and turning it toward me. I racked my brain for any kind of idea as far as how to do that, and my mind kept going back to one idea.

“And what exactly is that?” she asked, looking apprehensive about what I might be planning.

“It’ll be a surprise. Give me two days. In two days, I’ll be able to show you just a taste of what kinds of things I can offer you. Okay?”

She stared at me hard for a minute, clearly weighing her hurt over Ken’s reaction and her love for me, which I no longer doubted for even a second.

“Two days?” she asked.

“Two days,” I confirmed. “And on the second day, I’ll make sure you know exactly what to expect so you can be ready. But until then, just know that I’m working hard to prove to you that I can be worthy of you.”

She swallowed hard, then nodded. She tilted her head up a little more, begging me for a kiss without words. I obliged happily—well, as happily as I could, given the circumstances.

“I’m not going to pretend I understand what you’re going through or that I can fix what I’ve messed up,” I said, “but I



can tell you with certain honesty, that I will do whatever it takes to win you *and* Kendal over so that you and I can be happy. Okay?”

She looked at me sadly and put a hand to my face, then stood up.

“I need to go get ready for my day. I have an internship I have to get to,” Sloane said, standing up and moving toward my door. She looked back at me with a half-smile. “See you there, boss.”

“Ta,” I said just as glumly as Sloane seemed.

But I didn’t have time to wallow. I had a party to plan.

I had always loved a masquerade, and hadn’t been to one since I was in college with Kendal. It had been our senior year formal event, and I barely remembered any of it, except for how all of the girls there were enchanted by it, like the very act of putting on a mask somehow made an event more magical, like it turned whatever room it was in into a fairytale.

Much as I didn’t want to, I spent the day sending Sloane on meaningless tasks again. She knew what was going on, though she didn’t call me out directly. Instead, she pretended to go along with it until the end of the day, when I called her back to my office.

“Hi,” I said as she walked in.

“Hi,” she replied, and I bent down to kiss her cheek, which grew warm beneath my lips as she blushed.

“Come sit,” I said. “I think it’s about time I tell you my plan.”

“You mean the one where you sent me all over the resort setting up some kind of event?” she asked. “Is this something I should be worried about?”

“Only if you’re afraid of masks,” I replied, and she looked at me in confusion. I chuckled, then reached into my desk and pulled out one of the fliers I’d had her distribute around the resort, though all the ones I’d given her had been sealed.

“What is this?” she asked, looking at the flier for a second before her face lit up and her eyes shot back to mine. “A masquerade?”

“Tomorrow night,” I said, grinning at her. “I wanted it to be a complete surprise, but I figured I could give you the day off tomorrow to have some time to think about what you wanted to do and to get ready.”

“Harry—”

“Look. In no way does coming to the party constitute an obligation to me or to anything other than a night of fun. I just want you to show up and enjoy yourself, and if by the end, you think you know what you want to happen with us, I’ll be glad to hear it.”

She stared down at the paper for a while, much longer than I thought she would, but then looked up at me and nodded.

“Wonderful,” I said, standing up and walking over to her. I held out a hand to help her to her feet, then gave a little bow as

though we were headed to a ball and not some hotel party the following day. I kissed the back of her hand like the angel she was, like she deserved, and then led her to the door. “Get some good sleep and have a restful day, Sloane. I’ll see you at the party.”

She kissed me, long and slow, then left my office, leaving me alone with nothing more I could do tonight except throw fliers around the resort like it was a nineties romcom. But instead, I went to my desk and pulled out the little bottle of lotion.

If I was going to be spending my night alone, I was going to need a release before I could focus.

## *Chapter Thirty-Two*

Sloane

**T**urned out that if getting ready for your day with a broken arm took twice as long, getting ready for something like a party took four times as long.

Luckily for me, compared to some girls, my hair pretty much never factored much into my plans for getting ready, since it was always going to do whatever it wanted anyway. My biggest issue was trying to get into my nicest dress without any kind of help, since I couldn't exactly ask Kendal, with him ignoring my texts and attempts to talk by knocking on his door.

I picked up my phone and tried again, low level panic at not being able to reach him settling in my chest. We'd never not been close. He'd been closer to me than anyone else in the world my entire life, and knowing how angry he was at me made me want to break down and cry at any moment.

*S: Ken, please talk to me. I'm sorry for lying. I didn't think you'd understand, and I shouldn't have done it. Please forgive me.*

I watched, waiting for the little indicator that would tell me when it was delivered or seen. It had been about ten messages since he'd read one, and now, as I watched my screen, it never said delivered. It bounced back as unable to be sent.

He'd blocked me.

I sat down on my bed, feeling a numbness spreading through my body. My brother, the most important person to me in the world, had blocked my number.

I stared at my phone for several minutes, almost unsure if I even wanted to go to this damn party now. But the longer I looked at the little *Undelivered* on my screen, the more I realized that sitting here moping wasn't going to fix anything, and it certainly wasn't going to make me feel better.

I still hadn't decided what tonight would mean for me and Harry. As I managed to get the zipper up on the dress, I continued to waffle back and forth about whether this was going to be the start of a new romance or the end of one that never had the chance to properly start. For the first time since the accident, I pulled on my favorite heels and stood in the mirror to admire the look. The white and black geometric bodycon dress paired perfectly with the electric blue stilettos, and the simple jewelry I picked provided just the right amount of sparkle, especially once I pulled on my mask.

Harry had it sent up for me, and I hadn't even opened the box yet. But when I did, I gasped with delight and pulled it out.

It was black, covering from the eyes up only, tying around the back of my head with a silken string. The top of it was decorated with feathers that extended a few inches upward over my eyes, and there were glittery designs all over the front of it, drawing attention to the eye holes, where I knew my blue eyes would pop against the dark material.

I went to the mirror and put it on, then looked down at my outfit. After spending so much time picking this out, I couldn't stand it. It was all wrong for the vibe Harry had obviously imagined for the party and for my outfit, so I wrestled myself back out of the dress and pulled out one I thought would be more appropriate.

I walked into the party an hour later, the silken black dress swirling around my knees, where the hem fell. The garment was one of my favorites, a classic black dress without the "little" part. It came to a V-neck in the front, with a spaghetti strap halter top. I was glad I wasn't going to have to force my cast into a coat for this particular adventure, since it felt like it would be damn near impossible after the effort of putting on not one, but two dresses.

Twenty minutes later, I walked into the main ballroom of the resort and was met with the most incredible sight. No other party, no other formal event, not even a single wedding I'd ever been to had been so immaculately designed. The décor

was a mix of classic and art deco, which made the entire thing feel like it was crafted out of an artist's dream or plucked from some kind of fantasy story. And the people were all dressed like they were here to meet their one true love, or perhaps to reconnect with the one they already had.

I had barely made it ten feet inside when Amalie and her bear of a boyfriend saw me and called me over.

“Sloane!” Amalie cried out over the music when she saw me. She gave me a huge hug, nearly spilling her champagne on me. “Can you believe Harry threw this together in a day?”

I laughed and shook my head. “If anyone could do it...”

“No kidding,” she said. “So, are you here with Finn tonight? I saw him wandering around somewhere...”

“No,” I said quickly. “I, uh... I’m not really sure about my status to be honest.”

I still hadn’t decided what my choice was going to be, but I didn’t want to expose myself as being with Harry until I was sure that was really what I wanted.

We talked for a bit longer, with Amalie making a few comments about how she’ll miss me when my internship is over, but that I should come and work here fulltime so she didn’t have to feel like the slowest prep cook in the kitchen. Especially since everyone was always getting left in the dust by—

“Finn!” she squealed, turning around and hugging him.

“Hey, Am,” he said, smiling at her and then shaking hands with her boyfriend. His eyes then fell on me, and I could see an indecision there that I knew was down to how much he wanted there to be something here, but knowing I’d shut that door. But regardless, he stuck out a hand. “Want to dance?”

I hesitated, not wanting to give him the wrong idea, but he seemed to understand my line of thinking.

“Friends can dance, can’t they?” he asked with a warm grin, which I returned. Regardless of what I chose or what happened here tonight, it was nice to know that I made a friend.

He guided me out onto the dance floor, where a slow song was playing. He wrapped his hand around my waist and held my good hand in his at shoulder height.

He spun me around the floor for most of a song before I finally worked up the courage to say something.

“I, um...” I paused, and he looked at me with a heartbreakingly hopeful look. “I just wanted to thank you for being understanding about the other day. I know it was probably hard for me to just rush out without an explanation, but it means a lot that you’d take that in stride.”

“Well, how could I not?” he asked, raising his hand to get me to spin around in a circle, which I did a little clumsily. “Easy there, Yankee. Don’t need you to fall and break the other arm.”

“Ha ha,” I said dryly, then swallowed hard, knowing I needed to be honest and upfront. “Look... I really like you,



Finn. You're such a great guy."

He sighed and looked down. "But?"

"But..." I took a deep breath. "I'm kind of seeing someone else. I was before, too, and it seemed like things had ended, which is why I went out with you. But I realized that it didn't matter if it was over or not, because I was still in love with him, and that wouldn't be fair to you."

"And now?" he asked, already knowing the answer if the way he asked it was any indication.

"Now... things are sort of back on. Or maybe not," I said. "I'm still kind of making up my mind about things, but you're too good of a person for me to string you along while I figure things out with this other guy. And I'm not one to ask someone to wait around for me while I figure out my own shit."

Finn looked torn for a moment, then sighed.

"Well, Yankee," he said. "I can't say it was what I was hoping for, but I would never want you to feel pressured in any way. You deserve to be with someone who fulfills you and makes you happy, and if I don't check both of those boxes for you, I wish you nothing but the best."

I smiled at him and gave him a hug, which he returned. He really was a good guy, and if he was okay with staying friends, I'd do everything I could to help him find someone deserving of him.

We danced a while longer, and eventually separated as I went to go find some champagne and, if I was lucky, Harry,

since I hadn't seen him yet. I tracked down one of the tuxedo-clad servers carrying the trays of bubbly and took one. I had just put it to my lips and turned back around to the party, when, like in a fairytale or a Disney movie, the crowd parted and I saw Harry standing with a small group of people, talking and laughing. I wasn't sure how I knew it was him with the mask he wore, but there was something about him that let me know in an instant that I was looking at him.

He looked incredible in his tux and mask. His face covering was a perfect complement to mine, with black feathers and silk, though his covered half his face rather than only his eyes like the one he'd gotten for me. As I watched him interacting with a group of people I could only assume were friends of his, I marveled at the fact that he was *mine*. That I could have him—all of him—anytime I wanted to. This kind, genuine, surprising, loving, caring, strong, and supportive man, who could have probably had anyone here that he wanted, wanted me as much as I wanted him.

He looked up at that moment, noticing me and offering me a little wave from where he stood, and I could see the excitement in that one little motion. I returned the gesture and giggled to myself, but someone walked past with hair the same color as my brother's and suddenly I was reminded of the reason I had been having such a hard time deciding what to do about Harry. I knew I loved him. But I loved Kendal, too, and I had no idea if choosing Harry would mean irreparable damage to the most important relationship I had ever and would ever have in my life.

As Harry turned back to his friends with a tiny curl of his fingers to beckon me over, I tilted up my glass and finished the champagne in one long swallow. I hiccupped and burped in a way that I knew did nothing to complement the way I was dressed, but I needed the courage to face the rest of this party. I needed to be relaxed enough to make the decision I needed to. To choose between the man I loved and the brother I cared about more than anything.

And I still had no idea if those two things could be the same choice, or which of those things I was going to choose if they couldn't be.

## *Chapter Thirty-Three*

Harry

**Z**ane's fiancée was beautiful, but nowhere near as lovely as my Sloane.

The pair were glowing as they arrived, and the mirrored disco ball that hung from the ceiling in cheesy splendor made her engagement ring shine.

I beckoned them to come speak to me, keeping an eye on Sloane and Finn. I trusted her, and him really, but it still made me nervous to see them talking. What if he was trying to put in a bid for her to stay with him?

“Hey old man,” Zane said with a grin. “Great party. Very freshman homecoming.”

I rolled my eyes. “Number one, I’m six months older than you. Number two, that was kind of the point.”

“No truly,” Zane said, tightening his grip around Sarah’s waist. “I love it.”

I tilted my glass of champagne to him and took a drink. “So,” I said after swallowing. “Tell me how the whole thing went down?”

I found that couples loved to talk about their engagement story, particularly when they weren’t married yet. After that, the story about the proposal became the focus.

“It was magical,” Sarah said. “I always criticized people who got engaged at such cliché times like Valentine’s Day and New Year’s, but the timing was exactly perfect.”

Zane looked on with pride as Sarah spoke, and I could recognize the look from the way I felt about Sloane. Seeing the woman you loved in full bloom was incredible.

Speaking of Sloane, I hadn’t looked over at her and the Irish boy since Zane and Sarah walked in and when I looked back, Finn was standing alone, drinking by himself.

My eyes went to the door just in time to catch Sloane at the exit.

“Excuse me,” I said to them.

But I didn’t wait for a reply. If this was it, if Sloane had made her choice, I wanted to hear it straight from her mouth.

“Sloane,” I shouted, and she paused then turned around to face me. There was a slight sheen on her cheeks and I realized she was crying. “Darling, why are you crying?”

Sloane shook her head. “I’m just so confused. Kendal is my best friend and he won’t even talk to me. But you, you’re an

incredible man who wants to make my dreams come true and he hates you right now.”

I pulled her into a hug and kissed her on the top of the head. She felt so small and nervous in my arms, and I couldn't stand to see her like this.

“So, is this your choice?” I asked as calmly as I could. “You're gonna go home and make up with your brother? He checked out earlier, you know.”

She shook her head. “I just don't know what the right answer is.”

My heart pounded as it felt like I was watching Sloane slip away from me and I was helpless to stop her.

I reached into my pocket and retrieved the piece of paper that had been sitting there all night. The form Sloane needed to indicate she had completed her internship. Complete with my signature.

I extended it to her and she began to cry harder, taking it into her hands and reading it over.

And then I uttered the hardest words I'd ever had to say in my life. “I will still support you if you decide to go. I hope you know that.”

Sloane looked up at me, those sapphire eyes pleading with me to make the choice for her. But she knew and I knew I couldn't.

“If you're gonna leave, let me at least spend the night with you. I want to hold you while you sleep just once before you

leave.”

Sloane nodded, but said, “I still haven’t made up my mind, you know.”

I didn’t respond, only held out my arms to her, and when she put hers around my neck, I hoisted her up into a honeymoon-style carry and took her to my suite, stopping along the way to grab a bouquet of roses I’d ordered for her earlier from the front desk.

“Those are for me?” she asked, her gaze roving over the flowers.

I nodded and she clutched them to her chest like they were going to save her life.

When we reached the suite, I put her down on my bed, the place where twenty-four hours ago we’d been in paradise, and now I was preparing to walk through hell. I would never be the same if I lost her.

But I couldn’t think about that right now. Right now, I wanted to remind her how much I adored her—how much I would keep adoring her, even if she left.

“Wait here,” I said, taking the roses and heading to my bathroom and the giant freestanding bathtub that was its centerpiece.

I took half of the flowers and pulled the petals off one by one, dropping them into the tub and starting the water. It was the perfect temperature almost immediately, and I added some bath soap that turned the water a milky white.

Once the bath was prepared, I went back for Sloane, who lay back on the bed, hair spread out like a sunset in that way that always captivated me.

She sat up when I walked in, and I went to her, taking her face in both of my hands and kissing her deeply.

She returned the kisses, gently crying as she did. It was clear how emotionally torturous this was for her.

I pulled her to her feet, stroking her head.

“Arms up,” I said, wanting to take care of it all.

She did as I requested and I reached around her back to undo the zipper that kept the dress she wore closed. It got caught about halfway up, and we ended up laugh-crying as we both struggled to fix it before she just shimmed out of it, leaving her standing in a pair of lacy panties.

I took a step back to really look at her and my heart raced. She was so damn beautiful, and for the first time, I saw the scar that had been the result of her fall in the cave.

In the most self-absorbed way, I liked that no matter what she chose, she would always have a reminder of me on her. Always.

I stepped forward once more and gripped the waistband of her panties, pulling them down and kneeling as I did, allowing her to step out of them.

I looked up at her, and the sensual tension flowed between us. I was determined not to sleep with her again until her



brother and I made up, but that didn't mean I couldn't worship the goddess she was.

From where I knelt, I scooted forward and pressed my face against her lower belly, kissing it gently before looking up at her, silently asking for her permission.

Sloane nodded, toying with my hair and pressing my face slightly lower where I had wanted it.

She tasted divine as usual, and I was hard in seconds. But this wasn't about me, this was about showing the woman I loved how worthy she was.

With my fingers I pushed her beautiful, pink lips aside and plunged my tongue straight in. I felt her body react with a shiver and a slight gasp, which in turn gave me even greater pleasure in what I was going to do.

Slowly, I licked her, from her clit all the way down to the bottom of her entrance and back up again. Her fingers tightened in my hair sending a chill down my spine as I teased her.

She moaned softly, and I continued my pursuit, lingering with each stroke of my tongue, waiting for her wetness to cover it before making another pass across her gorgeous pussy.

But I wanted more, I wanted to feel her every reaction.

I grabbed her around the waist and lifted her back onto my bed, laying her down with her legs hanging off.

I grabbed a thigh with each of my hands and pulled them wide, reaching up to rub her and watch her wetness drip down

my fingers and her soft skin. I had never in my life met someone who got as wet as Sloane did, and it had a way of somehow making me feel more like a man. Like I was doing my job right.

I pressed my mouth to her once again, sucking the delicate skin, making her body shake. The room was totally silent except for both of our breathing and I had never heard anything more erotic in my entire life.

Slowly I used my fingers to rub against her wet opening, and she gasped as I slid one inside her. She felt incredible and I could have lived exactly like this until the day I died.

I stroked her from the inside while worshiping her body with my tongue on the outside, and within minutes she was shaking in an orgasm that had her eyes rolling.

When she had finished, I laid my head on her stomach, hugging her lovingly, waiting for her comedown to settle.

“You’re amazing,” she said with what sounded like a sniffle.

“I’m not,” I said, looking away. “I just really adore you.”

Sloane grabbed my hand and pressed it to her face, kissing my palm. “You are truly one of the best men I’ve ever known.”

I got to my feet and lifted her into my arms once again, kissing her on the lips this time. She moaned as she tasted herself on me, and it was all I could do not to throw her back onto the bed and say, “Fuck Kendal.”

But I was determined to do this right.

So, I carried her to the bath and put her into it, topping off the warm water with some scalding hot, to even the temperature. She looked amazed at the effort I had put into the bath and she closed her eyes happily.

“This is such a beautiful moment,” she said happily as I picked up a washcloth to clean her with, being careful to help support her casted arm.

I nodded and pulled her forward so I could start on her back, rubbing gently so as not to be too abrasive against her lovely skin. It felt so intimate to be cleaning her, and I loved the way she relaxed into my touch.

“Can I wash your hair for you?” I asked, softly.

Sloane nodded and leaned back in the tub to relax while I went to grab my shampoo and conditioner.

I washed her hair with the same loving care I would have done for my own—maybe even more so—and when we were done with the bath, I lifted her out and dried her.

The way she looked at me with adoration nearly made me cry, but I was determined not to sway her in any direction, I just wanted to enjoy our time together, however long that might end up being.

She sat on the edge of my bed, wrapped in a towel, and watched as I sorted through my things to find something she could wear to bed, and ironically, the best thing I found was a T-shirt from college. I was a lot scrawnier back then, and while it didn't fit me well, it would fit her perfectly.

I held it up for her approval and she laughed. “Sometimes I forget we went to the same school,” she said. “But it’s perfect.”

I walked over and pulled it on over her head, taking care to be mindful of her cast.

Then I got ready for bed myself and by the time I was done, Sloane was nestled happily under the covers.

I climbed in beside her and pulled her into my arms, never feeling this close to anyone in my entire life before.

“I love you, Sloane,” I whispered in her ear.

“I love you, too, Harry,” she said back.

Then she leaned up and kissed me before nestling her head on my chest, and pretty quickly falling to sleep.

I stayed up a while, wondering whether this would be the first or last time we would do this, praying it was the former.

If I lost Sloane now, I didn’t think I would stay here. I would tell my dad I was done with the hospitality business once and for all and move out of the country.

But what if she stayed?

Like an explosion of inspiration, I had an idea that might change everything. And all I had to do was wait for Sloane to be fully asleep so I could put it together.

## *Chapter Thirty-Four*

Sloane

I opened my eyes when the first rays of light washed over me, and found that I was staring into the sunrise. The bed was warm and cozy, and I didn't want to move until I saw Harry across the room watching the sunrise, too.

I climbed out of bed and walked over to him, rubbing my eyes sleepily.

"Did you even sleep?" I yawned, and he made a hand gesture to indicate that he'd slept a little.

"I was busy doing something," he said.

"Making up with Kendal?" I asked hopefully, but he shook his head in regret.

"No, but something else just as important. Come sit, I'll have breakfast delivered."

I sat down on his lap and he held me tightly, running his hands through my hair and brushing his thumb across my

cheeks. I wrapped my hands around his neck and looked at his beautiful green eyes.

“What do you want to eat, darling?” he asked softly, his fingertips gliding along my lower lip and making me shiver with delight.

“Something that I probably shouldn’t have right now,” I said, my voice teasing at something I knew he’d understand.

He smirked at me and pulled me more tightly against him, and I could see the temptation in his eyes.

“You... are being rotten,” he said softly before nibbling at my neck.

I moaned and arched into him, but a few seconds later, he let out a growl of frustration.

“Not yet,” he said, leaning his forehead against mine. “Let’s just... figure out what we need to. Then we can talk about... this.”

He was being so cryptic, but I wasn’t about to argue with him. Not when our time together was so limited. Even if I wanted to come back someday, I still had to go home. I had a degree to finish and a brother who might never speak to me again that I needed to fix things with.

“Okay,” I said, pressing my hands to the sides of his face. “Okay. What first then?”

“First...” he said, reaching for his phone. “We get some room service up here.”

He called in an order that I couldn't even believe as he was placing it. It sounded like enough food to feed a classroom of pubescent high schoolers rather than two adults with fairly average appetites. Eggs, bacon, and sausage, breakfast potatoes and biscuits, pancakes, waffles, fruit, pastries...

When the food arrived, the spread was larger than me, and I looked at Harry, giggling.

"Where exactly do you expect all of this to go?" I asked.

"Wherever you can fit it," he said, stuffing a piece of horribly undercooked bacon into his mouth and making a face like he'd never had anything as delicious in his entire life.

"I don't know whether to be disgusted or offended," I said, giving him a look of pure disenchantment.

He paused in his chewing to look at me in confusion. "Why would you be either?" he asked.

"Disgusted because that bacon was still alive," I said. "And offended because I don't think you ever looked that ecstatic when I was the thing you were tasting."

He snorted, clenching his lips shut to keep his food in his mouth, then swallowed hard to clear the food remnants. "You are really trying to undo me this morning, aren't you?"

I shrugged innocently. "If I can."

He shook his head in mock indulgence, then motioned for me to eat up as he did the same. I piled my plate with mostly baked goods and other bread products, then began to dig in

like I hadn't eaten in a week, which was odd considering when I got out of the cave, I could barely look at food for days.

We were about halfway through stuffing our faces when, suddenly, Harry stopped eating and looked at me. Then, in an overly casual voice, he said, "I don't think you should leave," as though it was the simplest solution in the world.

"Oh, okay," I said sarcastically as I swallowed a huge bite of croissant. "Sure, Harry. Why don't I just get on that? Right along with learning how to fly using my eyelashes as wings. It's not that easy, and you know it."

"Isn't it?" he asked, standing and walking across the room to his kitchen counter, where he had a stack of papers. He grabbed them and came to sit by me again, snatching up his phone along the way. He scooted in close, so that our arms were touching, then looked at me with a hopeful smile and handed me the papers.

I gave him a skeptical, suspicious glance, then looked down at the papers he'd given me.

### ***Offer of Employment***

I frowned, flipping through the pages quickly.

"Harry, what is this?" I asked, unsure what he was trying to accomplish.

"This..." he said, pointing to a line on the page, "is my attempt to convince you to stay here. With me." I read what he was gesturing to as he explained further, "I want you to come work for me. Well, with me. It might be a bit odd if you were



to work *for* me while I continued to have a relationship with you, assuming you still want that.”

“Of course, I do,” I said, giving him a look of sadness. “But you know I can’t just uproot everything to come work for you or with you or any of it. I have to finish school, and there’s Kendal to think about, too. I couldn’t stand it if he never spoke to me again. He’s more important to me than anyone else in the world, and I need to know he’s okay with us before I commit to anything.”

“Which is why...” Harry said, flipping through the pages to the last one, which was a separate document titled, *Harry’s Promise to Sloane*. “I won’t be having one more discussion about our relationship going any further until I find a way to make things right with your brother. He’s one of my oldest friends, and the fact that he means as much to you as he does makes me care about him just the same.”

I looked down at the paper, which bore a promise to make sure Kendal was okay with us being together before we moved forward from where we were again, and Harry’s signature.

“You’d really do all this for me?” I asked, feeling a little choked up.

“This and more,” he said, grabbing for his phone. He opened it up and went to his browser, where he had a tab open for my school’s website.

“What’s this?” I asked, taking the phone from him.

“Turns out,” he said with a smile, “your school has a distance learning program, which means you could finish out your degree from here. You’d have to work extra hard since it’s all online, but I know you can do it if you want to.”

I was stunned, looking between the papers and the website, then back at Harry.

“Are you sure about all of this?” I asked. “I don’t want to uproot my whole life if this is just a temporary thing, and you’ll be onto someone new in a week.”

“Sloane,” he said seriously, kneeling in front of me and looking up into my eyes. “I have never felt like this about anyone. Ever. If the words aren’t enough, I hope that the job offer will be. And if I have to spend the next five, ten, fifteen years begging your brother for forgiveness, I’ll do it. Because you, my darling, are worth it.”

I felt tears welling up in my eyes, and I had no control over them as they began to spill over. I kissed Harry, and he lifted me into his arms, carrying me back to his bed, where he laid me down and kissed me over and over. Not making love, since he’d made the promise to talk to Kendal before we went there again. Just enjoying the feeling of each other and knowing, without a doubt, that we’d both found something special.

## *Epilogue*

Harry

**M**y hands were shaking as I tied my tie, and I kept trying to talk myself out of it.

My phone buzzed and I picked it up to see Kendal had texted me: *Good Luck, 'Bro.'*

It had been six months since my promise to Sloane and those six months had been so real and growth-filled and wonderful. Sloane had moved in immediately, and as hard as we tried to keep our hands off each other while I made up with her brother, it hadn't lasted long. I supposed when your sex life was as intense as ours is, the desire will overpower anything.

She had excelled in her management role from day one with the housekeeping staff, taking care of the people I wanted to take care of, reporting to me about the goings on. I was even teaching her how to ski.

I finished my tie and checked my pocket for the small box I was taking with me on my walk. It held the engagement ring I'd bought for her a month after she moved in and had been holding onto since.

On the bright side, it gave me the time to plan a truly stellar proposal, on the not-so-bright side, it meant I had to make up with Kendal for real, as fast as I could.

It had happened, slowly, but we did make up. Which was why he was wishing me luck on my proposal.

Over the last month I'd become closer to Sloane's family than I ever was to my own, and I had asked for her parents' blessing before I'd made my plans solid. They gave it happily and I was man enough to admit I cried that day once I got home.

I checked my hair one more time and then headed for the lobby where I'd told Sloane to meet me wearing something nice for dinner. What I hadn't told her was exactly where dinner would be, and I hoped she liked it.

As soon as I saw her in the lobby, all of my anxiety disappeared and I wanted to take her in my arms and kiss her right here. But that would have made her suspicious, and I really wanted this to be a surprise.

"Hey," I said, coming up behind her.

Sloane turned around and put her arms around my neck. "God, you look nice," she said. "I love that you still get dressed up to take me to dinner."

“And I always will,” I replied, kissing her cheek. “Shall we go? I wanna show you something on the property first and then we will eat.”

She nodded. “But if it’s muddy you will have to carry me. I’m not ruining these heels.”

Seeing as it was July, it very well could have been. I should have thought about that in advance.

“Of course, I will, darling,” I said, taking her hand. “Follow me.”

She let me lead her out of the lodge and around a path that led through the back of the resort. It was beautiful back there, and it was one of the few places I’d left for just me and the staff.

We went around the ski lifts and the hot tubs, then diverged the path to go into the woods.

“Okay,” Sloane said with a questioning look. “Where in the world are we going?”

We ducked under branches, avoided trees in our path, and walked until we approached a lake. It was shimmering with summertime glow and the waterfalls that cascaded into its depths did not disappoint in their beauty.

“Okay... seriously, Harry. Where the fuck—” Sloane stopped and turned, looking around. I saw realization dawn on her face seconds before rage did. “Why the hell would you bring me here? We better not be going where I think we’re going.”

I suddenly felt unsure of my plan, but there was no going back now. Not after I sank half a million dollars into this.

I grabbed Sloane by the shoulders and turned her toward our destination. “Just trust me, will you?”

“I do believe,” she said sardonically, “that was what got me in this mess before.”

I rolled my eyes and scooped her off her feet. “Very funny, Miss Riley.”

She smiled, extremely pleased with herself as I now trekked from the lake to the cave.

When we got within a hundred feet. I pulled a blindfold out of my pocket and put it over her eyes.

“So, you really are trying to get rid of me once and for all, huh?”

“Oh, stop it,” I said, tying the knot tighter. “Just let me do this.”

She stopped fighting me, and I was able to pick her up again and carry her to the mouth of the cave. I smiled as I admired the stone staircase that had been installed, leading down to what would someday be The Cave—a gourmet restaurant for her yurt village.

But even more exciting was what I was taking her to see.

All around me were luxurious-looking decorations, themed around the gold rush. If I hadn’t known it was the same cave, I

wouldn't have believed it. This had been a place of torment for us, but now it was like walking through a dream.

Talk about turning a trauma on its head.

I approached the place where the abandoned living quarters were and put her down on her feet.

"I hope you're ready for this," I said. "Because I went to the ends of the earth to make it as perfect as I could."

With that, I removed the blindfold and Sloane gasped at what she saw.

The Gold Rush Inn. Three small housing pods where the living quarters had stood before. We used as much of the materials that were already in there as possible, wanting this place to feel authentic.

"Can I go in them?" she asked, eyes tearing up. "These would have been great while we were trapped."

"Right?" I said. "I was thinking that the whole time we were building."

Sloane turned to me. "You helped build it?"

I raised an eyebrow. "Well, yeah. How else could I be sure that they used all this original material? And..." I led her across a pod. "How else would I ensure that each little house had one of these?"

I pointed to the side of the stainless-steel fridge where a small, clear box was installed into the wall, and within it, a large red button.

“Is that...?”

“A cave in button?” I asked, finishing her thought. “Yeah.”

Sloane threw her arms around my neck in a way that made me certain that she loved it, which was all I ever wanted.

“You know what?” Sloane asked slowly. “There’s something else that happened down here that could use a redo.”

Was she saying what I thought she was saying?

“Oh yeah, what is that?”

Sloane wiggled her eyebrows. “Mmhmm...No one else is down here, right?”

I slowly shook my head.

“Good,” she said, pressing her body against mine, making absolutely certain that there was no mistaking her intention.

I put my hands on her waist and pulled her into me, feeling myself getting hard even as she tugged at my neck, bringing my face to hers so she could kiss me. She moaned against my lips, and I growled in response before lifting her up, allowing her legs to wrap around my hips as I carried her over to the bed which had been carved out of the rock from the cave itself.

I laid her on top of the mattress, which was top-of-the-line and incredibly comfortable. I only wanted her venture, her idea, to have the very best of everything it possibly could to help her be successful.



Her legs bent and raised up along my sides, inviting me to lie between them as I crashed my lips down on hers again. My hands went to the hem of her blouse and tugged, pulling it up and over her head, leaving her in her vintage jeans and a lacy bra, which she promptly reached behind herself to remove, allowing her perfect tits to spill out over her chest. I bent my head to each of them in turn, sucking gently and biting until she whimpered, demanding more.

Which I was happy to oblige.

I put my hands to my belt, which I removed and tossed to the side. I wasn't going to be needing that for several more minutes, at least.

Once my pants were no longer strapped to me, Sloane reached between us and undid the button and zipper, the last constraints that held back my now-throbbing mass. She reached inside and began to stroke me to life, as if I wasn't already at full attention.

"God, darling," I groaned, beginning to thrust into her hand, even through my boxer briefs. Her hands slid across the fabric like she was touching some kind of priceless relic, and I made a mental note to make the next party I threw for her to be art-related so that I could see if she interacted with actual masterpieces the way she interacted with my cock.

Sloane wasted almost no time, however, in pulling it free so she could wrap her hands around it, gasping at the size of it. I hope she never stopped doing that, because there was something euphoric and erotic about a woman, especially a

woman you loved, touching you and acting like your body—even just part of it—was a masterpiece in its own right.

“God, I love when you do this,” I told her, running my hand over her hair and kissing her deeply before returning my hands to her chest, squeezing and kneading her breasts and tugging at her nipples. She let out a series of moans and whimpers that nearly drove me mad with need for her.

“You deserve it,” she said into my ear, giving a particularly satisfying tremble as my hands traversed her sensitive skin once more.

“What else do I deserve?” I asked curiously.

“I don’t know,” she said in a voice that would have been bored if it hadn’t been so breathless. “But I bet you could find it if you looked really hard.”

I chuckled under my breath and ground into her grip, which tightened around me in a way that had me barely speaking above a whisper.

“I’m really hard, all right,” I said jokingly before sliding my hand from her tits down to the hem of her jeans. “May I?”

“If you don’t,” she said very seriously, “we’re going to have a fight about it.”

“As you wish,” I said, undoing the button with one single motion and pulling the zipper with a second. Once they were free, I reached between her legs, down the front of her jeans as she’d done to me, though in my case, I wasn’t gripping a shaft.

I was stroking and teasing her little love bud, her clit, and within seconds, I had her panting with desire.

“Fuck, darling,” I said as her movements and noises brought me closer and closer to the edge before I forced myself back down again, not wanting to end the moment so quickly. “You touch me like no one else ever has.”

“Or ever will do again,” she said slyly, giving a tight squeeze to my member.

“Or ever will do again,” I repeated as she continued to stroke me.

I pulled her hands off me after a few more moments of enjoying her hands, then stood up to remove my pants, which flew across the room to meet my belt. I knelt down between Sloane’s legs to start tugging at her pants, dragging them down her legs until they were completely free of her body. Then I sat for a moment, admiring the panties she’d put on, one of my favorite pairs, which I found highly amusing since she had no idea any of this was going to happen when we left our suite this morning.

Once we were both laid bare, I positioned myself between her legs, but didn’t insert myself just yet. I simply lay there, kissing her and touching her body, the body I *would* do anything to keep, and the body I was so grateful to have that I *planned* to do anything to keep.

Finally, Sloane couldn’t take the wait anymore and she arched her back, thrusting her hips up at me.

“Harry, please...” she said in a low whine.

“Patience, darling,” I said, but I didn’t make her wait more than a few seconds before I guided myself to her entrance and slid inside, drawing a gasp from her that could have sent me into a frenzy if I wasn’t so intent on making sure this moment was perfect and romantic.

“God, I love the way you feel,” I said to her as I began to move in and out of her.

Her hands went to my sides and she threw her head back, moaning as she did. “You too...” she said quietly, and then I felt her offer me the first wave of her climaxes, tiny little pulses that squeezed my length and gave me just a bit more friction against her, which caused me to bring us both even closer to our finishes.

I made love to her for a solid half hour, going slow and taking my time to enjoy her body and allowing her time to enjoy mine. Our mutual desire kept us entranced in a state of pure bliss, until finally, I couldn’t hold out any longer.

“Sloane...” I groaned. “I... I’m gonna...”

“Me too,” she said, and I breathed a sigh of relief. I’d been hoping we’d manage to come together, and I felt myself go over the edge, bringing her with me in a swirl of joy and ecstasy.

My heart was pounding as we finished, and I had never been more ready than now to have this beautiful, glorious creature as my wife.

I got to my feet and crossed the room to where she'd thrown my trousers and dug the small box from my pocket. I decided to pull on my pants while I was there. It would be a bit odd for my proposal to come with a side of balls.

As soon as my button was done, I spun on my toes and dropped to one knee before her.

"I've been waiting to do this since the first day we were trapped down here," I said, and I could hear my voice shaking. "And it would mean the world to me if you, my cave buddy, would instead become my life buddy by taking me as your husband."

Sloane's jaw dropped open and she started to cry. "Yes," she said, whimpering. "Yes."

I pulled out the ring and put it on her finger, eliciting a gasp from her.

"Harry," she said, still crying. "It's beautiful."

"There's one more surprise," I said, walking to the wall where the light switches were. "I think we can both agree that our time down here would have been much more livable, with a little..."

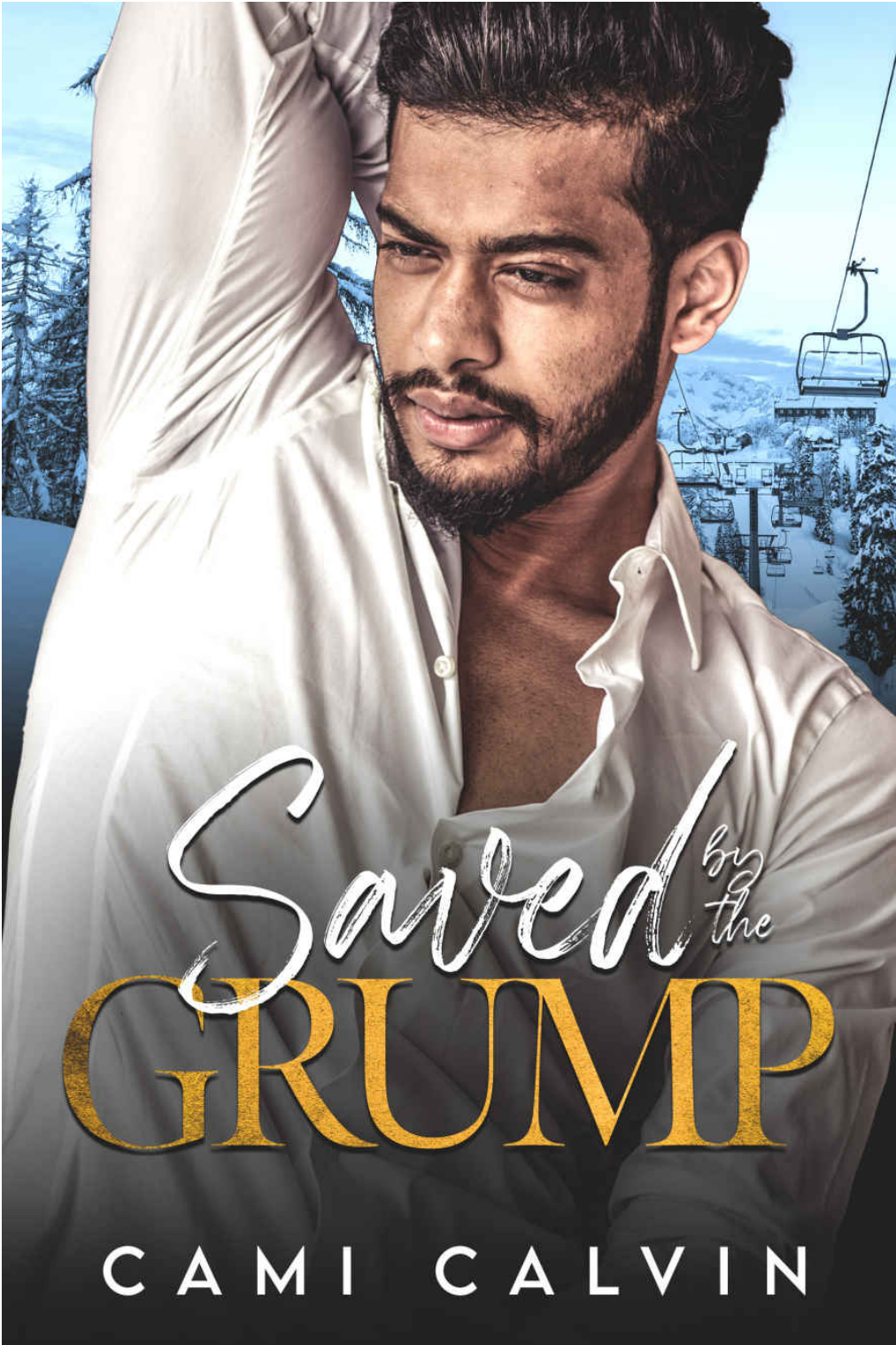
I flipped the switch and it triggered a skylight to open. I'd had them cut all the way up so whoever stayed in here could see the sky.

"You're incredible," Sloane breathed.

"You make me want to be," I replied. "I love you," I said with all my heart, pulling her against me.

“I love you, too.”

**THE END**



*Saved* by the  
**GRUMP**

CAMI CALVIN

## Chapter One

### Zane

The knocking on the door startled my already shattered nerves. My daughter, Kenlee, would not stop crying, and I didn't know what to do. How could a six-month-old possibly cry this much? What was I doing wrong? No matter what I tried, nothing seemed to work. Sleep had become a distant memory and I was just about to open my sixth, or was it my seventh, energy drink of the day when the knock came.

*Great, I am officially so tired, I no longer know how many Monsters I've had to drink. I thought to myself as I got up to answer the door. That can't be good for me.*

The knocking continued so I yelled out, "Hold on! I'll be there in a second." Unable to put Kenlee down, I carefully opened the door to be greeted by a smiling and sympathetic Sloane. Sloane Sutton, my best friend Harry's new wife, a woman with a heart of gold and patience for days.

"Hi, Sloane. What can I do for you?" I asked.



Sloane smiled sweetly before saying, “I think the question is what can I do for you, Zane?”

“Nothing I can think of, but thanks. I’m good. I’ve got this under control,” I replied, trying to sound more confident than I was.

Kenlee and I had been staying at Henry’s ski lodge since Sarah, my wife, and Kenlee’s mother died tragically in a car accident five months ago. After Sarah’s passing, the house we shared, which was once filled with such joy and laughter, sat empty and cold. I couldn’t bear the thought of going back there so I jumped at the chance to stay with Harry when he graciously offered my daughter and me temporary lodging. Being a successful stock trader, I could technically work from anywhere. That is if I could concentrate amid the baby crying. Luckily, I had a dedicated staff who kept my business running. Harry, being the good guy that he was, didn’t put an end date on the offer to stay here. He knew I needed space to grieve, heal, and try my best to shift over into the role of being a single parent.

Obviously, I was failing miserably with the last one.

Sloane stepped inside, glanced at the empty pizza boxes and piles of Monster cans, then looked at me with a worried expression. I knew I must’ve looked like a total mess, with dark circles under my eyes and unwashed hair. Sloane could probably guess that I hadn’t showered or had a decent meal in days, and she’d be right. She set her bag down and took the baby from me. Sloan grabbed the bottle of formula that I had

warming on the counter and began to feed Kenlee while she gently rocked her. Within minutes, Kenlee stopped crying, finished her bottle, and was sleeping peacefully.

“How did you do that?” I asked, raking my hands through my hair. “I have tried so many times to get her to eat and all I manage to do is make her scream more. What’s your secret?”

In many ways, Sloane reminded me of an old-school hippie trapped in the body of a twenty-something-year-old. A total bohemian at heart with an athletic side. Sloane carefully placed Kenlee on her shoulder to burp her before saying, “There's no secret Zane. You are a ball of nerves and she can sense it. She can feel the calm energy I am projecting, allowing her to relax enough to eat and finally sleep.”

“I don’t know how to thank you. I didn’t think I’d ever get her down. You are a lifesaver, once again. You and Harry have done so much for us these last five months. We would be lost without you.” I was speaking earnestly, mostly because I meant every word I’d said, but also because the sleep deprivation was making me more emotional than usual.

Sloane’s eyes were full of love and concern. She smiled and said, “Zane, that is what friends are for. I know that if God forbid, something happened to either Harry or myself, you would do the same.”

“Of course, I would, but I pray I never have to,” I said, kissing her cheek.

“Listen, I hate asking this, but while you’re here, would you mind watching her while I take a quick shower? I am starting

to think that maybe she was screaming because I smell like I've been living in a zoo." I laughed, trying my best to make light of the situation.

Sloane laughed too and shooed me away. "Of course. Don't be silly. You know I love this little angel. Now, go bathe. I'm as bohemian as the next hippie chick, but I draw the line at B.O. and you are dangerously close to that line my friend," she said pretending to hold her nose. I started to walk away but she said my name softly under her breath. I turned back with a raised brow, and she shook her head. "Nothing, never mind."

I felt like she wanted to ask me something, but I decided it could wait until after my shower. Right then, a shower sounded better than winning the lottery. I might not have been able to sleep, but I at least could get myself cleaned up. "I won't be long," I told her. Then smiling, I added, "Thanks, Sloane, I really appreciate this."

"Yeah, yeah, yeah, now go. Kenz and I will be right here when you get back," she said before starting to sing a gentle song to the beautiful infant in her arms. My perfect little daughter, who did not deserve any of this. "Take your time and relax. No offense, but you look and smell like hell."

"Ouch! I'd be offended if it wasn't true," I said over my shoulder as I went into the bathroom. I shut the door behind me and sighed with relief. This was the first alone time I'd had in a while, and even though I loved my daughter more than anything in the world, it felt good to have a moment or two of quiet to myself.

I got into the shower and stood under the steaming hot water, letting it penetrate my aching muscles. At this point, I couldn't remember the last decent shower I'd had. Had it been one day, two, or three? The fact that I couldn't recall told me it had been way too long. Exhaustion had taken over and set up residency as the dictator of my life. Being a single parent is not for the faint of heart. But it wasn't like I planned to raise Kenlee alone. She had barely been a month old when Sarah was killed. I still had nightmares about it. Well, I did when I actually slept, but I couldn't remember the last time I did that either.

"I still can't believe she's gone," I said out loud to no one.

After stepping out of the shower, I dried off, wiped the mirror, and stared at my reflection. "Who are you?" I asked the ghost looking back at me. My face was pale and tired looking and the muscles I once had from working out and skiing were beginning to soften. They were still there, but I realized if I didn't change my diet of energy drinks and pizza, they would soon dissolve into fat.

"Damn dude," I said to myself, "Are you 34 or 64?"

Even though I was technically a father, I didn't love that I was adopting a 'dad bod'. This was ridiculous. Just because I was tired and grieving, that didn't mean I had to completely let myself go.

"If you won't do it for your sake," I said to the man in the mirror whom I hardly recognized. "Then do it for Kenlee." She deserved to have a happy, healthy parent in her life. The

happy part was going to take some time and wasn't fully within my control, but at least I could take steps toward being healthier.

The pep talk seemed to revive me, even if it was only temporary. I put on some clothes and headed back to Sloane and Kenlee.

When I came into the living room, Sloane was changing the baby's diaper. "Thanks, but you don't have to do that. I can change her," I said, feeling guilty. I looked at my baby, who was really quite a sight to see when she wasn't screaming in my ear. My heart was overflowing with love for the smiling little infant.

"It's no problem at all. In fact, it's kind of why I came down here in the first place," Sloane said, laying Kenlee down in her bassinet.

Raising a confused eyebrow, I asked, "Really? You came down here to change my baby's diaper? Why?"

"I worded that wrong," Sloane said, laughing. "Actually, the whole point of my visit was to make you an offer."

"What kind of offer?"

"Harry and I were talking and we thought it might be a good idea if you let us keep Kenlee for the night so you can get some sleep. In fact, we are willing to take her one night a week to help you out, that is, if you will let us. We know you are doing your best and we just want to help," she said softly.

I would be lying if I said I didn't want to take her up on her offer. But I couldn't do it. Ever since Sarah died, I have been too scared to let Kenlee out of my sight. In my heart, I knew she would be fine with Harry and Sloane, but I couldn't get my mind to agree. "I really appreciate the offer Sloane, and maybe someday I'll take you up on it, but right now, I'm just not ready. I wish I was, but I'm not."

Before I could go into more explanation, Sloane put her hand on mine and interrupted me. "Zane, it's ok. We understand. Harry and I love you both and we just want to be here for you. Just remember that we are here for anything you need, so please don't hesitate to ask."

I wanted to lighten the mood and hold back the tears that were threatening to flood, so I half-jokingly said, "Well, I wouldn't mind a daily shower. Think you could fit that in your schedule?"

I expected her to laugh me off, but I should have known better. That wasn't who Sloane Sutton was. "Of course, consider it done," she said smiling. Sloane put an extra bottle of formula in the fridge for later, gathered the rest of her things, and turned back to me before leaving. She looked lovingly at Kenlee and me and said, "Don't try to be a hero, Zane. Let us help you however we can. You know they say it takes a village? Don't be too proud to let Harry and I be part of your village, okay?"

I once again fought back tears and kissed Sloane on the cheek.

“Sloane, you and Harry *are* my village. We’d be lost without you guys,” I told her.

Sloane smiled softly and headed back to her suite. I closed the door and sighed, and before I knew it, the tears I had worked so hard to hold back were spilling down my face. I slumped to the floor and cried until I couldn’t cry anymore.

“Damn it, Sarah! Why did you have to leave?” I said through my sobs. “ I don’t know how to do this without you, and I don’t want to. We were supposed to do this together!”

I cried into the silence for nearly half an hour, then finally managed to pull myself together and go check on my daughter. She was sleeping like an angel, and I figured she must be pretty exhausted too. My stomach growled, and I realized I needed to eat something. Something *real*. I went into the kitchen in search of a meal with some nutritional value, and through some divine miracle, the carton of eggs in my fridge had not expired. Nor had the bread in my pantry molded. I placed two slices in the toaster and scrambled what was left of the eggs. It wasn’t a gourmet dinner by any means, but it was the best I could do. It was also a welcomed change of pace from all the pepperoni and sausage.

After I was clean, fed, and all cried out, I sat down and turned on the television. There wasn’t much on that interested me, but the background noise was a nice distraction. I was finally settled on watching a baseball game when my phone started ringing. I thought about letting it go to voicemail, but I knew once I saw it was my old friend Chase who was calling,

I knew that would be pointless. He would just keep calling until I picked up, and the noise would have woken my sleeping baby, which was the last thing I wanted. I answered the phone as cheerfully as I could; trying to disguise the fact that I'd been crying for the last hour.

“Hey, Man, what’s up?” I said, bringing the phone up to my ear.

“Not much, Dude,” Chase said, and I can tell right away that he'd been drinking. “I was calling to see if you felt like getting wasted and watching the soccer game tonight. It’s gonna be awesome!”

If I was being honest, there was nothing that sounded better than getting drunk and forgetting about everything for a few hours. I knew I would regret it in the morning, but the idea of escaping my life, even for just one night, was very appealing. I thought about calling Sloane and taking her up on her offer to keep Kenlee for the night, but then immediately pushed that idea aside. What kind of father would that make me? I couldn't ask my friends, who were already doing so much to help me out, to take my six-month-old daughter for the night so that I could get drunk and watch a soccer game. I wasn't twenty-one anymore, and I had real responsibilities. Not to mention, the anxiety I would feel from leaving her would be too overwhelming.

“Thanks, Chase, but I can't. It sounds like a blast, but I just got Kenlee to sleep, well, Sloane did. Either way, I'm just not



comfortable leaving her yet. I appreciate the offer, Man. Maybe next time.”

“It’s okay, Dude, I get it. You know how to find me if you change your mind,” he said, yelling over the sounds of a crowded bar.

“I’ll keep that in mind. Have a good time and be safe,” I said and then hung up the phone. It was getting late, so I decided to call it a night and try to get even just a few minutes of shut-eye if I was lucky. Before heading to bed, I walked over to the crib and bent down to kiss my sleeping siren. She made a little cooing noise in her sleep, and I smiled down at her, knowing right then that I’d made the right choice.

Staying in with her was better than any drunken night out.

## *Chapter Two*

### **Katya**

“**L**uca, hold still, please. Mommy needs to brush your hair for school,” I said, trying to get my four-year-old ready for the day. I needed to hurry things along since my shift started soon and I hadn’t even brushed my own hair yet. He fidgeted in my arms, nearly knocking over his glass of orange juice that had been sitting precariously on the edge of the nightstand table. I pushed the cup farther away from him and said a silent prayer that he wouldn’t get anything on my work uniform like he had the day before. Trying to scrape grape jelly out of my white shirt was why I had been late to work yesterday, and I really didn’t want to have to make that excuse to my boss two days in a row.

“Okay, Mommy. I’ll be good,” Luca said with that smile of his that never failed to melt my heart. That little boy was my world, and I didn’t know what I did to deserve him, but I was eternally grateful.

“Thank you, sweetie,” I kissed his head. After I finally managed to get us both dressed and looking presentable, I went to the kitchen to eat breakfast. Only instead of finding my breakfast waiting for me, I found Aleks, my boyfriend, sitting at the table eating it like I had made it for him. I pushed aside my anger and made Luca a bowl of cereal. I could handle working without eating, but I’d be damned if I sent my baby to school hungry.

“Luca, sit down and eat your Cheerios. You don’t want to be hungry at school, do you?” I said sweetly.

I poured myself another cup of coffee and turned to talk to Aleks, but he was already herding Luca toward the door.

“What are you doing? He hasn’t had time to eat his breakfast.”

“So what? He’ll be fine. I have places to be. If you want me to give the kid a ride, it’s now or never,” he said, sounding irritated with me already.

I hurriedly grabbed an extra banana and stuffed it in Luca’s backpack to eat on the way there. I knew I shouldn’t be surprised by Aleks’s behavior, not after we had been together for this long, but sometimes his selfishness and abrupt behavior still shocked me. I had been raised to treat people with respect and to be kind and open-hearted unless someone gave me a reason not to be. Aleks, on the other hand, immediately treated people with disdain and hostility, and it always made me feel like I had to work to earn his respect.

Sometimes, I believed that I deserved better than Aleks, but maybe this was all someone like me deserved. I had run away from my family when they didn't approve of my pregnancy and was trying to build a new life in the United States. Aleks had found me when I was literally on the streets. I had him to thank for a roof over my head, but that was all.

Sighing, I put on my old and worn coat, threw my purse over my shoulder, locked the door, and headed to the bus stop to begin my day.

The bus ride to the ski lodge was calm as usual. I said hello to some familiar faces then sat in silence until my stop. As I walked into the lodge, I reached into the pocket of my coat to retrieve my name badge, but it wasn't there. I checked again and discovered a hole in the pocket.

"Well, that's just great," I said under my breath. Then I started to laugh because this is so typical. Of course, I would have a hole in my jacket pocket. That was exactly the sort of bad thing that happened to people with my luck.

I went to my manager's office first because I wasn't supposed to work without my badge. I knocked, and Harry called from inside, "Come in!"

I pushed open the heavy wooden door and stepped in. I didn't see Harry right away because he was hidden behind a mountain of paperwork taking up his desk. He stood up and smiled at me over the top of the pile. "Oh hello, Katya, what brings you into my office this fine morning?"

“Good morning, Harry,” I said. “I came because I need a new nametag. I thought my badge was in my pocket, but apparently, there was a hole in my pocket and it fell out...I was wondering if it would be possible for me to get a new one?” I winced a little as I said this last part, not sure if I was going to get in trouble for losing my first badge, or if it would cost me anything to get a replacement.

Harry laughed, and I prepared for the worst. He was laughing *at me*. I just knew it. He probably thought I was a fool for losing my nametag, and after showing up the day before with my dumb excuse about a stain on my uniform, he was probably totally sick of me and my lateness. But then he smiled warmly and pulled a label maker out of his bottom desk drawer.

“That’s no problem at all,” he said, getting started on my new tag. “Why don’t you have a seat while we wait for this to print and dry?”

I walked tentatively into the room, and Harry moved some of the paperwork aside so that we could actually see each other as we sat down.

“So, how is Luca doing?” he asked. “I haven’t seen him in a while. You need to bring him around more.”

“Luca is good. Thank you for asking, Mr. Sutton.”

“Now Katya, we’ve been over this,” he said. “Mr. Sutton is my father. Please, call me Harry.”

Looking down to hide my embarrassment, I quickly said, “I’m sorry, Harry. I forgot.”

“No worries.” He chuckled. “So, aside from Luca, how is everything else? Are you still dating Aleks?”

“Yes,” I said, sighing unintentionally.

Harry raised an eyebrow and looked at me worriedly but then seemingly decided to let it go. “Well, since you’re here, I have a favor I’d like to ask you,” he said.

“Of course, Harry,” I said, a little confused. “What can I help you with?”

“I was wondering if you could change your cleaning schedule around a little bit. I know you’re supposed to do floors 2 and 3 today, but I have a friend staying on the fourth floor and I think he could really use some help getting his room in order.”

I nodded. “Sure,” I said. “You’re the boss. I’ll take whatever route you want me to.”

He smiled. “I appreciate that. But I also have to warn you, before you say yes right away, his room is pretty messy. My wife was there yesterday to help him with his 6-month-old daughter, and she said it was... well, to be frank, she used the word pigsty.”

“I get it,” I said. I remembered what it was like to be a new parent, and how easy it was to let things like personal hygiene and household duties fall by the wayside. “And it’s nothing I can’t handle.”

“Thanks, Katya. It means a lot... Also, I know this might be a little strange, but while you’re there, do you think you could try to give my friend some advice? He’s a single dad and he’s been running on fumes lately. I’m worried about him. I normally wouldn’t ask you to do something like this, but I figured since you know what it’s like to be a young, single parent, you might be able to help him out.”

I wasn’t exactly thrilled by the idea of talking to a stranger about my struggles as a single parent, but then again, it would’ve been nice to have someone to give me advice when I had a six-month-old back home and was only getting a couple of hours of sleep a night. I smiled politely at Harry and said, “Sure. I’ll try to talk to him if he’s there.”

“Thank you,” he said. “And because I know the room will be a wreck, you can look forward to a bonus on your next paycheck. Seriously, this means so much to me, and I know it’ll make a world of difference for my friend.”

“It’s no problem at all. I am happy to help. It was not that long ago when I was a first-time single mom. I was scared to death.” My mind started to wander back to that time, and I heard myself saying something without even really thinking about it. “There were so many nights I cried right along with Luca because I was so frustrated.” The words fell out of my mouth before I could think better about saying something so personal to my boss, and I felt my face redden. I always talked too much when I was nervous, and now I was going to get myself in even more trouble at work.

“Sorry,” I said. “I got a little lost in my own world there for a second. Yes, of course, I will check on your friend and clean his room. Is there anything, in particular, you would like me to do?”

Laughing, he said, “Just see if you can give him some tips for getting the baby to stop crying. I know he’s doing his best, but he’s lost. He needs all the help he can get. Sloane and I help as much as we can but we don’t have kids, so half the time, we’re just guessing. I am hoping that talking with someone who has been through it will help him see there’s light at the end of the tunnel.”

I nodded, and then since my new tag was done drying, I stood up and thanked him once again for being so understanding. “And thanks for my new badge too.”

“It’s really not a problem,” he said with a grin. “Have a nice day, Katya.”

I began my morning rounds and wondered more about who this single dad is that Harry asked me to check on. I had met a lot of single moms over the years but very few dads.



## *Chapter Three*

### **Zane**

**A**fter another sleepless night, I dozed off while feeding Kenlee. It wasn't on purpose but who knows how long I would've stayed asleep if someone hadn't started knocking on my door. I opened my eyes to see sunlight streaming in through the window, and Kenlee was asleep in my arms. The knocking continued, so I sighed and tried to get up as quickly as possible. It was just after 1:00 pm, so it wasn't like it was early in the morning, but I hadn't been expecting anyone, so my brow furrowed as I made my way to the door and peered through the peephole. But before I could see anything, the person knocked again. It wasn't a loud knock, but it was enough to wake Kenlee, who started crying right away.

“No, no, no,” I said, both to myself and to whatever jackass was on the other side of the door. “She was sleeping so soundly!”

I furiously opened the door, ready to go off on whoever was responsible for my crying child. They might not have deserved

it, but they were damn sure going to get a scolding regardless. I was too exhausted to play nice. My eyes met the curious gaze of a young maid with blond hair, and I twisted my mouth into an angry scowl. I pointed to the 'Do Not Disturb' sign hanging from my door handle, and said, "Can't you read?"

Nervously, the woman took a step back and started wringing her hands. "I'm sorry, sir," she said. "I saw you had the 'Do Not Disturb' sign on your door, but your friend Harry sent me to clean your room."

"Harry sent you to specifically clean *my* room? Why?"

"Uh, well... he... um... he mentioned that your room might be in need of some tidying up because you have a young child at home and he was worried that you were maybe feeling overwhelmed. But—"

"Oh I get it," I said, narrowing my eyes and going to shut the door in her face. "He sent you to check up on me, is that it? Sloane told him what a wreck I was yesterday when she came around, and now he wants to make sure that everything is fine. Well, you can go back and report to him that I've got it all under control. I can take care of myself, and my daughter, on my own, thanks."

"I understand, sir," she said. "It's just that I know how difficult it is to take care of a small baby by yourself, much less keep anything clean. So, if you're sure you don't need someone to come help you tidy up, then I'll go... but the offer still stands if you change your mind." She then smiled at me once more and started down the hallway. I started to walk back

into my room and then remembered I was actually out of clean towels and needed the sheets changed, so I poked my head out of the door once more and called after her.

“Oh, uh...” I cleared my throat, feeling a bit of my pride being wounded in real time as I had to ask this woman to come back. “Actually...”

She looked over her shoulder with a smile. “Yes, Sir, what can I do for you?”

“If...if you wanted to come in and clean the room,” I said knowing there were frat houses in better condition than the pigsty I was living in. “I guess I could use some fresh linens... and the tub could use a good scrubbing. I haven’t been able to stay on top of cleaning with the baby and all, so if you *really* wanted to help, then there are some things you could assist me with.”

The woman nodded politely and came back to the door. She entered the room, and I read her name tag as she walked past me.

*Katya. That’s a pretty name.*

She set her cleaning supplies down and surveyed the room. “It isn’t that bad Mr. – I’m sorry, I’m afraid I didn’t get your last name.”

I laughed, knowing it is just like Harry to send her down here without giving her all the information. “That’s okay. My name is Grey, Zane Grey.”

“Thank you, Mr. Grey. I have seen much worse than this. Don’t worry, I will have the room looking brand new with minimal disruptions to you and the baby,” she said assuredly.

Not liking the sound of Mr. Grey coming from this young woman’s lips, I quickly corrected her. “Please, call me Zane.”

She looked nervous like she had said the wrong thing so she quickly started apologizing. “I am so sorry, Zane. I meant no disrespect.”

“You are fine, please relax. You didn’t know, but I appreciate your manners.”

“Right,” she said, nodding, “Well, my name is Katya.”

“I know,” I said. “I saw your name tag. It’s nice to meet you, Katya.” At this point, Kenlee had finally started to quiet down, so I went about strapping her into the baby stroller. “I think I’m going to take her out for a walk if you’re good to start cleaning while I’m gone?”

“Of course,” she said, but then quickly added, “But please, don’t feel like you need to leave on my account. I will be really quiet and won’t disturb you or the baby, I swear.”

“I’m not doing it for you,” I assured her. “I could really use the fresh air. Kenlee and I have hardly left the room in the last few days, and this is the perfect excuse for us to get outside and actually join the real world for a while.”

“Well, I am glad I can be of service,” she said, smiling as I grabbed my keys and a hat for Kenlee.

“Okay, then I will leave you to it,” I said, walking out the door.

The walk around the town and ski village was invigorating. I didn't realize how much I was taking the fresh mountain air for granted. Breathing in the cool crisp breeze and hearing the sounds of children playing in the nearby parks warmed my heart. It was too bad I couldn't seem to truly enjoy the happiness that surrounded me. I couldn't shake the anger that came with knowing that Sarah and I should've been one of the happy families enjoying this sunny afternoon with our baby. It wasn't fair and I wasn't sure I would ever understand why this happened. I didn't deserve it. Sarah didn't deserve it, and Kenlee definitely didn't deserve it, but wondering why wasn't getting me anywhere so I decided to head back to the room. It was getting close to Kenlee's afternoon nap time, and I could use a couple of hours of rest myself.

As I entered the room, I almost thought I walked into the wrong one. It looked—well it looked amazing. Katya had outdone herself. There was not an inch that had not been cleaned, dusted, and vacuumed, and I was eternally grateful. She even did the laundry.

“Wow,” I said, walking around and taking it all in. “This is unbelievable.” She came out of the sparkly clean bathroom with a rag over her shoulder and smiled at me. I smiled back and opened my mouth to say thank you for all her hard work when I saw it.

Sarah's shirt. Her favorite shirt.

The one she wore at least once a week. It was a running joke between us that she loved that shirt more than she loved me. Of all the items in the room, she had to wash Sarah's shirt. The one I haven't been able to bring myself to wash for the last five months because it still smelled like her. It was vague at this point but I could still detect, or maybe I just imagined I could, the subtle hints of her floral perfume. That was until now. Anger began to boil over and I exploded on Katya. Instead of thanking her for all her work, I annihilated her for what she had done.

"How dare you do my laundry without asking! You had no right! Do you know what you have done?" I grabbed the shirt off the neatly stacked pile of shirts and waved it around in the air. "It was all I had left of her and you've ruined it!" I screamed while holding back my tears. "Are you stupid or just completely oblivious? I can't believe you did this! Get out of my sight! I can't stand to look at you!"

Visibly confused, Katya began crying and then stammering, "I'm sorry Mr. Grey. I mean Zane. I didn't know. You never said not to do the laundry. I was just trying to help," she continued to cry as she quickly gathered her things and hurried to the door. "I didn't mean to upset you, I'm sorry." Her accent became a lot thicker the more she stumbled through her emotional apology, to the point where I was pretty sure she started speaking a completely different language on her way out the door.

Once she was gone, I seethed for a while, but soon I began to calm down and collect myself. I realized what a colossal

fool, no dumbass, I'd been. I was still furious, but I was no longer sure if I was mad at her or myself. It suddenly occurred to me that she didn't know what she'd done. How was she supposed to know it was my dead wife's t-shirt and that it was off-limits? She couldn't and she honestly thought she was helping me by doing the laundry.

This was all my fault. I hadn't put the shirt in a safe place where it wouldn't be included with a normal load. I also knew Harry well enough to know he hadn't told her the details of how I became a single father. Harry respected my privacy too much to have done that.

The incident had been unintentional but what could I do about it now? I yelled at her, made her cry, and sent her running out of here faster than a downhill skier at the Olympics. Man, I was a complete asshole. I would make it up to her if I could, but as angry as I was and after the horrible things I said, I was afraid I may have caused irreversible damage. And the fact still remained that the last meager memory I had of Sarah's scent was gone. For some reason, I didn't think Katya would tell Harry about what happened, but my guilt got the best of me, so I picked up the phone and dialed his number.

"Hey Man, what's up," Harry asked cheerfully. "Did Katya make it by your room yet? I hope you didn't mind. I just thought you could use the help. I'm sorry if I overstepped."

"Yes, she came by already," I told him. "In fact, that's what I'm calling you about."

“Uh oh, I don’t like the sound of that. Look I am sorry if you weren’t ready but I was just trying to help you out. Katya is usually one of my best employees and she’s a single mom so she gets it. But I can tell by the tone of your voice that this isn’t a good call. What happened?” he asked.

“No, sending her was fine, Harry. I appreciate it. I even got out of the room for a few hours and took Kenlee on a walk,” I explained.

“Well, that sounds positive, so what happened to make you sound like she stole The Hope Diamond?” he wanted to know.

Letting out a deep breath, I dove right into the story. “So, I had an old shirt of Sarah’s; actually it was her favorite shirt. I haven’t been able to bring myself to wash it because it still smelled like her, at least it did for a while. Anyway, my dumbass didn’t have it put up somewhere safe and well...”

“Let me guess. Katya washed it and you blew up at her?” he said matter-of-factly.

“Yeah, unfortunately. Look, Harry, I don’t know her very well obviously, and I doubt she will say anything to you, so please don’t mention it. But I need to make this up to her. I was really ugly and out of line. If I was her, I would never want to see me again.” I shook my head, mentally reliving the moment I screamed and sent her packing. “Even though she won’t know it’s from me. Is there a way you can add something extra to her paycheck? It will at least make me feel a little better and ease my guilty conscience.”



“Sure. I can do that. Just let me know how much. I already told her I’d pay her extra for cleaning up your tornado of a room, so I’ll just add this on as well and say it was all a token for her hard work. I think she’ll buy that story, plus I know she can really use the money,” Harry told me.

“Thanks, Man. I would apologize to her if I could, but I seriously doubt she’d want to hear it. I wouldn’t. I know you’re busy but if you can, could you try and check on her? I don’t know where she went, but she was understandably a crying mess. I just want to make sure she is okay. I was such a jerk.”

“No need to say more,” Harry said as only a friend can. “We all handle stress differently. Send me the amount you want me to give her as a “bonus” and I will take care of it. In the meantime, I will go check the employee break room and see if she’s in there. I won’t say a word or let on that I know what happened, I promise,” he assured me.

“Thanks, H. I am really sorry about all of this. I don’t know what came over me. I went into a blind rage thinking that my last tie to Sarah was gone. I know that sounds ridiculous considering Kenlee is her spitting image, but that’s what happened. I would take it back if I could, but I can’t.”

“I get it, but Zane, can you do me one favor?” Harry asked, laughing a little under his breath. “Sure. You name it.”

“Can you try not to send my maids running down the hall in tears in the future? It’s kind of bad for business.”

Leave it to Harry to make me feel better. I smirked. “You got it. Now, go check on Katya for me. I want to at least know she’s okay.”

“I’m on my way,” he said as we hung up the phone.

I sat down next to Kenlee’s bassinet and once again wondered how my life ended up like this.

## *Chapter Four*

### **Katya**

**C**rying, I sat in the breakroom trying to figure out what just happened. I obviously crossed some line by doing Zane's laundry, but for the life of me, I couldn't figure out what that line was. I thought he'd be happy to come home to clean clothes and linens. I knew when Luca was a baby, I would have loved to have someone do the mounds of never-ending laundry that seemed to go along with having an infant. Whatever I did must have really been bad because no one had spoken to me like that in years. Maybe ever. His words were so ugly and hurtful, for a moment I felt like I was back in Russia. Not wanting to relive that period in my life, I tried to focus on getting myself together. I couldn't do my afternoon and evening rounds with a tear-streaked face, but I couldn't get the tears to stop. It was as if Zane opened my floodgates and now, they wouldn't shut off. I was still crying when Harry, of all people, walked in.

With a concerned look, he pulled up a chair to sit next to me. Fighting the urge to run out of the room, I managed to say, “Hello, Harry.”

He looked at me sympathetically and asked, “Katya, what’s wrong? Did something happen?”

Not wanting to tell him his friend is the rudest, most unhinged man I’d ever met, I tried to diffuse his concern by saying, “Oh, I am fine, Harry. I just got emotional after seeing Mr. Grey’s baby. It reminded me of Luca and how fast he is growing up. It seems like yesterday he was that small.”

It wasn’t the truth and I hated lying to my boss, but he seemed to buy it, so it would have to do. I didn’t want him to know what a jerk his friend was.

“Oh, that’s understandable,” Harry said, nodding his head. “I don’t have kids of my own yet, but I hope to one day, and I am sure time will fly by much too quickly when I do.”

I smiled through what was left of my tears, looked at him, and said, “Yes, it will. So cherish every second of every day. Even the bad ones because they all add up to the beautiful painting that is parenthood.”

“Wow,” Harry said, dumbfounded. “That was beautiful. I never thought of it that way.”

I shrugged and went back to looking at my hands. “I have my moments of introspection.”

He smirked. “I’ll say. Now, are you going to be okay? Would you like me to get someone to cover the rest of your

shift?”

I shook my head. “No, that won’t be necessary. I just needed a moment to gather myself. Please, do not worry about me. I will be okay.” I smiled to show him I was on the mend then pulled out my compact and began to touch up my face. Luckily, I did not wear mascara today, so I didn’t have streaks running down my face. That would have been even more humiliating.

“Okay.” He eyed me suspiciously. “If you say so then I have to trust you. You are part of the family here at the lodge, so just know, you can always come to me if you have anything you need to talk about.”

“Thank you, Harry. I appreciate that very much.”

“No problem. You know where to find me if you need me.” He was looking at me like I was a long-lost puppy, and I wanted to make sure he had nothing to worry about so I got up and said I was going to get back to work.

Zane Grey might have ruined most of my afternoon break, but I would be damned if I’d let him ruin the rest of my day.

###

The rest of my shift went by without incident and I finally headed home a little before 8 pm. When I walked through the door, Luca was playing silently in the living room while Aleks was passed out on the couch, again.

*Hmph, some babysitter he is!*

Alek's drinking was becoming a problem and I didn't know what to do. I was stuck. More than anything, I wanted to pack up my stuff, grab Luca, and leave. But, where would I go? This was Alek's home and although I did okay at the lodge, I didn't have enough money to move out. Especially since Aleks takes everything I have left after making sure Luca is taken care of each month.

Luca was curled up on the floor half-asleep but wasn't quite there yet. I walked over to my angel and scooped him into my arms to carry him to bed.

I laid him down and pulled the covers up over his shoulders. I bent over to kiss his head and said, "Good night, my love. May you have the sweetest dreams."

I then tiptoed out of his room and sighed as I carried my wary body to the bathroom and turned the water on in the shower as hot as I could stand it. It had been one hell of a day and my muscles were begging for a warm massage. I stood under the stream and couldn't stop my thoughts from traveling back to Russia. I thought of my family and wondered whether or not I should contact them. It was an appealing idea, but I knew I couldn't risk it. If I wanted to hang onto my son, I would have to just keep my head down and stay with Aleks, even if he was a controlling, alcoholic piece of shit.

My family wouldn't be able to help me, even if I asked them to. They might have welcomed me and Luca with open arms at first, but that would only be short-lived. Eventually,

they would return to their domineering and militant ways, and likely try to take my son away from me. I knew they would.

I pushed all remaining thoughts of going back home out of my head and turned off the water, and hoped that Aleks would still be passed out when I went back to the living room.

No such luck.

As I was drying off in the bathroom, he came through the door and smiled at me. I knew that smile. It was charming, and part of what drew me to him in the first place. It was a smile that could only mean one thing.

“I see you are up from your nap,” I said.

Walking toward me like I was dinner for a starving man, he slowly said, “Yes, I am and now I am ready for you.”

Despite Alek’s many faults, I had always found him attractive. He was a terrible partner in almost every way, but the one place he actually managed to make me feel good was the bedroom.

Dropping my towel, I seductively whispered, “What exactly are you ready for?”

Groaning at the sight of my wet, naked body, he pulled me to him and massaged my breasts. “I am ready to have your lips wrapped around my hard, throbbing cock while I lick and suck on your pretty little clitoris,” he moaned into my ear.

Deciding I wanted to take charge, however, I pushed him into the bedroom and onto the edge of the bed. Wasting no time, I dropped to my knees. Aleks laid back in anticipation as

I began to take him into my mouth. “You want this baby?” I asked. Moaning, he nodded and grabbed my hair. I had to admit, I loved it when he did this. It drove me wild.

His warm, musky scent overtook me as I licked the precum beads off the tip of his cock. Alek’s groans grew louder as I took him fully into my mouth. I wrapped one hand around his shaft as I began sucking. I may not have control over much in my life, but this, this I could control, and I loved it.

Alek’s breathing became more rapid and my pussy was throbbing with need. Suddenly, he pulled me up and positioned me on top of him.

*Whoever came up with 69 as a sex position is a genius.*

Aleks began to slowly lick and suck on my dripping wet folds, teasing me by avoiding my throbbing clit. I began to suck harder and faster and as I did he screamed, “Fuck, Katya. That feels fucking amazing baby! Don’t stop!”

Energized by the power I had over him at the moment, I continued sucking his cock like a woman determined to finally find out how many licks it takes to get to the center of a tootsie roll pop. The feeling was intoxicating. Aleks was sucking on my clit and sliding his finger inside me at the same time. OH MY GOD! “Aleks, yes! Yes, oh God, yes!” I screamed breathlessly as I dug my hands into his thighs.

“That’s it, Baby, Come for me. I want you to drip all over my face,” he said while continuing to bring me closer to ecstasy. My body began to tingle as the orgasm threatened to explode so I continued sucking his cock. I felt his body tense



as he got ready to climax and when he did, I swallowed every drop while savoring the bliss of my own mind-blowing orgasm.

Aleks may have a multitude of faults, but when it came to sex, especially oral sex, the man was a god. I lay in silence for a moment, enjoying the post-orgasm high before getting up.

I went to the bathroom, cleaned myself off, and finished my after-shower activities that were derailed by Alek's appearance. I brushed my hair and teeth and put on deodorant and then slipped into my favorite t-shirt. I knew I should go find something to eat for dinner but to be honest, all I wanted to do was crawl into bed and hopefully cuddle with Aleks. After the day I had, I wanted nothing more than to fall asleep with his arms wrapped around me. But I knew that would not happen. I turned the bathroom light off and headed back to Aleks only to find him already snoring.

*So much for comfort tonight.*

Oh well, I was only fooling myself to think tonight would be any different.

I checked on Luca who was sleeping peacefully. Leaning down, I kissed his forehead, tucked his stuffed dinosaur under his arm, and headed to the kitchen to make a bowl of cereal. I wasn't really hungry, which was surprising since I skipped lunch and dinner that day, after the incident with Zane. Still, I didn't want to go to bed on an empty stomach, so I ate my Frosted Flakes and sat alone in the dark. I hoped that

tomorrow would be better. I recalled a line from some famous American movie I'd seen a while back.

“After all,” I said softly to myself. “Tomorrow is another day.”

Then I got up to rinse my bowl out and headed to bed. Under the covers, I stared at the ceiling for a while, before eventually drifting off to sleep.

## *Chapter Five*

### **Zane**

**A**fter feeding and bathing Kenlee, I finally sat down to eat something. My nerves had been shot all day so I was not really hungry, but I knew I had to eat to keep my strength up. The last thing I needed, or Kenlee needed, was me getting sick from not taking care of myself. Last night's dinner of eggs made me miss my healthy eating habits.

So, considering I had time to kill when I was awake last night, I scheduled an online grocery delivery. I was so out of the loop; I had no idea that there are so many premade healthy options available. Sarah always took care of the grocery shopping so I never gave it much thought. I ordered enough to get through the week as well as necessities for Kenlee. It might sound simple to some people but knowing I can have her diapers, wipes, and formula delivered to me put my mind at ease.

The oven signaled that my salmon almandine was ready so I prepared myself to finally eat a decent meal for the first time

in months. It was delicious. Ok, well, maybe not delicious, but it was better than anything I have had in a while. I ate every bite. There was not a piece of fish, green bean, or baguette left when I was through. I found it funny how the meal instantly affected my mood. I didn't feel as grumpy or tired as I normally did. It made me realize that nutrition is important. I went to the medicine cabinet and found my multivitamins. If I was starting a healthier path, that might as well include my supplements. I made a list of all the others I needed to purchase but this was a good start.

*Baby steps, right?*

Swallowing the pill, I almost choked when the phone started ringing. I checked the ID and saw that it was Chase. I wasn't really in the mood to talk but decided he might be a good sounding board. I was still wound up about what happened earlier today with Katya, not to mention the devastation over Sarah's shirt smelling like Spring Meadow Tide. I've never been good at hiding my feelings, so when I answered the call, Chase seemed to know something was up right away.

"Hello," I said.

"Hey man... Who pissed in your Cheerios? What's up?"

"Huh?"

"I just mean, you sound bummed out. What's going on?"

"I screwed up today," I told him. "Like big time and I don't know how to make it right. But the thing is, I'm also still upset about what made me screw up in the first place."

“Okay, why don’t you start from the beginning and tell me what happened? You know I want to help, but that explanation was a little vague,” he told me. “Whatever it was, we can work through what you need to do about fixing it.”

“Thanks, man,” I said, taking a deep breath and letting it out slowly. “Basically, I just took all my anger out on an innocent and unexpected victim. You know, like real supervillain shit.”

I could hear Chase smirk through the phone. “Yeah? Tell me what happened.”

“It all started when this maid who works at the lodge asked if she could help out,” I explained. “Harry sent her to check on me, and at first I sent her away, but then realized how messy my place was and said she could clean it if she wanted.”

“That sounds like Harry, but I’m failing to see where this is a bad thing. I’d like to have a maid sent to my house and I don’t even have a baby to take care of.”

“It wasn’t a bad thing. In fact, she did a great job cleaning everything and even did all the laundry while I took Kenlee out for some fresh air. The only problem was, when I got back, to the room, I saw that she had washed one of Sarah’s shirts.”

“Uh, oh.”

“Yeah...And it wasn’t just that I was mad because she touched one of Sarah’s favorite clothing items...The real problem is that she washed the only thing I had left that still smelled like her.” I pushed back the anger that was once again threatening to boil over. “I feel like I have lost the last

remaining thing I had of Sarah. And of course, I completely blew up at the maid and said some really nasty things. Like, really nasty. I've already called Harry and told him to add a 'bonus' on to her pay, but even I know that in no way makes up for my behavior." I did feel a little lighter getting all that off my chest.

Chase paused a moment before responding. "Damn Man," he said after a few seconds. "That is messed up, and it totally sucks that Sarah's shirt no longer smells like her, but have you considered that you might not have exploded like Mount Vesuvius if you weren't so tense? I can't even begin to imagine what you have been through the last six months, but I do know staying cooped up in your room hasn't done you any good. You need to get out and have a little fun. It would be good for you to get out and be around people."

"I don't know, Chase. It's not like I can just leave Kenlee."

"Yeah, Zane, you can. That's what babysitters are for. Call Sloane and see if she can watch her for a few hours while you come and have some drinks. You need to let off some steam and I need to see my friend. What do you say?"

I wrestled with the idea for a moment and decided he was right. I couldn't sit in this house for another night.

"Okay, I'm in. Let me call Sloane, take a shower, and I will meet you in an hour."

Excited, Chase whooped into the phone. "Woo Hoo! All right, I can't wait! I'll meet you at McCalister's Pub at 8:00." We hung up and I nervously dialed Sloane's number.

She answered after the second ring. “Hey, Zane, what’s up? Is everything ok? Harry told me what happened today. I’m really sorry about Sarah’s shirt.”

“Thanks, Sloane. Yeah, it was devastating and it is kind of what I am calling about. Chase thinks I need to get out of this room and let off some steam and I hate it when he’s right, but I think he might be about this,” I said. “So, I was wondering...”

Sloane cut me off mid-sentence. “You were wondering if my offer to watch Kenlee is still good. Duh! Of course, it is! I am thrilled you want to get out, and I love Kenlee so, yes, I will watch her for you.”

“Amazing. Thank you. Do you want me to bring her to you or would you be more comfortable watching her here? I want to make it as easy as possible for you.”

“Bring her over here,” she said. “That way you don’t have to worry about waking her up if you get home late. She can crash at our place, so you can relax and get some sleep when you get home. I will bring her back around 10 am tomorrow so you can sleep in. How does that sound?”

I was still nervous at the thought of leaving Kenlee, but I knew I had to rip the band-aid off some time. “Ok. Thank you again. I’m jumping in the shower and then I will get her bag ready.”

“Sure. Take your time,” she responded. “Your angel will be in good hands. Harry and I will take good care of her, but I can’t promise Harry won’t spoil her rotten.”

“I wouldn’t have it any other way,” I said, laughing.

We hung up and I took a quick shower. Back in the day, I met Chase for drinks all the time, but nowadays getting me out of the house was such a feat. I felt like Neal Armstrong when he first landed on the moon.

“One small step for man, one giant leap for mankind,” I said to myself as I slapped some aftershave on my face and ran my fingers through my hair. I chuckled, and this good feeling lasted all of about five minutes before the guilt started to crawl back in. It felt really strange, leaving Kenlee for the entire night, and when I went to pick her up and pack her bag, I worried I wouldn’t be able to let go of her. Then I remembered I was doing this, at least in part *for Kenlee*. I didn’t want her to have a dad with anger issues, or who was so stressed out, he was like a volcano always on the verge of exploding. That wasn’t good for either of us.

I dropped Kenlee off with Sloan and Harry and made my way to McCalister’s Pub. Luckily, it was within walking distance of the lodge so there was no need for a cab. I heard the music from down the street and felt myself getting excited for a guy’s night out. It had been way too long. When Sarah was alive, Chase and I made it a point to get together once a month, but that changed after the accident. Everything changed after the accident.

Chase waved to me from the bar as I made my way to him. The bar was far from crowded but then again it was early. By 10 pm, it would be standing room only. “Hey, man, good to



see you,” I gave Chase a big handshake which turned into a hug. And now that I had him standing in front of me, I realized just how much I had missed him.

Returning the hug, he asked me what I wanted to drink. “So, what’s your poison of the evening?”

“Whiskey, neat.”

Chase gave my order to Jake, the bartender, and said, “His tab is on me tonight so do not let him try and pay no matter how hard he tries.”

He turned back to me with a pointed look, and I held up my hands in surrender. “Okay, man I get it. Trust me, I am not going to argue with you about paying for my drinks. In fact, any time you want to pay for my drinks is fine by me.”

Jake set our drinks in front of us and the first taste of the aged Scotch whiskey had a smooth burn as it went down. “Damn that tastes good,” I said, turning back to Chase. “Thanks for convincing me to come out. I didn’t realize how much I needed it until I got here.”

“Dude,” Chase said wincing, “You’re yelling.”

“I am?” I laughed. “Oh, Man, I’m sorry. I’ve gotten so used to whispering around the house so I don’t wake Kenlee, I guess I forgot what it was like to talk at a normal volume.”

“You’re good,” he said, clapping me on the back. “Just forget about all that stuff for a while. Tonight is about you.”

Chase and I had two more drinks before deciding to play pool. I definitely felt relaxed and maybe even a little buzzed.

Chase laughed when I accidentally stumbled over my words.

“Damn, Zane, what happened to you? You could always drink the rest of us under the table and now you’re slurring after three drinks,” he said, racking balls for the game.

Not caring that I was slurring, I told him very confidently, “Life. Life is what happened. You can’t exactly take care of a baby when you’re drunk or hungover. I have to be on the ball at all times so the hardest thing I touch these days is Monster Absolute Zero.”

“But not tonight. Tonight, I am going to drink until I am shit-faced and deal with the consequences tomorrow.” I laughed and patted him on the back.

“Awesome! That’s what I like to hear,” he said. Yelling across the bar to Jake, he told him, “Hey, Jake. A round of shots over here and make them strong!”

I took my first pool shot and sank it into the corner pocket. When I came up, Chase nudged me. “Hey, that cute redhead has been eying you since you got here. You should go talk to her,” he said encouragingly.

Even though I’d been drinking, the thought of flirting with another woman still felt like cheating. “I don’t know, it still feels wrong,” I told him.

“Come on, Zane, it isn’t like you have to marry her. Just have a conversation and see where it goes. Don’t take this the wrong way, but Sarah wouldn’t expect you to be alone for the rest of your life,” he said as nicely as he could.

“I know that. I’m just not sure. Let’s play another game while I think about it, okay,” I pleaded.

“Sure. Take your time,” he said, racking the balls for the next game.

After two shots of Fireball and another whiskey neat, I found myself not only talking to the redhead but in the bathroom making out with her like I was back in high school. How no one walked in on us is beyond me, but I had a feeling Chase took care of that. He was always a good wingman. I focused my attention back on the sexy vixen in front of me. She tasted like lemon and sugar from the lemon drop martinis she had been drinking all night. It had been so long since I’d touched or kissed a woman and I enjoyed it probably more than I should’ve. That was, I was enjoying myself until she suggested we get out of there and finish this back at her place. It was no longer just a make-out session in a bar but an invitation for sex. Sarah’s face immediately appeared in my mind and I was overcome with guilt.

*How could I betray her like this? What was I thinking?*

I pushed the girl away, trying to be respectful.

“No, I can’t. Look, you’re great but I just can’t. Please don’t ask me to explain,” I said, making my way to the door. I found Chase, thanked him for the drinks, and told him I needed to leave.

“Are you okay? What happened? I thought you two were hitting it off,” he stated curiously.

“I’m fine and we were. I just need to go. It’s just too much and I need some air,” I said as I grabbed my jacket and headed to the exit.

“Yeah, Man. Okay. Text me when you get home, okay,” he said.

“Sure thing. Thanks again and I’m sorry for bailing,” I told him.

“It’s ok, Zane. I’m just glad you came at all,” he said reassuringly.

I stumbled a few times on my way home thinking over the events of the night.

*How could I make out with a stranger five months after Sarah’s death?*

I shuddered at the thought of how much of a scum bag I would be if I had actually gone home with her. I tried to put it out of my mind but couldn’t. I felt like the biggest piece of shit on earth. I unlocked my door, threw the keys on the table, kicked off my shoes, and fell onto the couch where I spent the rest of the night crying before finally passing out.

## *Chapter Six*

### **Katya**

I woke with the realization that today would be no different from all the others except I hopefully wouldn't get yelled at by a guest today. I better not, at least. I didn't think my nerves could take it. Yawning and stretching my arms above my head, I sat up, slipped on my house shoes and robe, and headed to the kitchen to start breakfast. Aleks could've helped me make breakfast, just like he could've helped me do a lot of things, considering he didn't have a 'job' so to speak, but I had long since given up on the hope of that ever happening. That morning, however, I had a plan to keep him from eating my food when I wasn't in the room. I would stash my plate in the oven so that he wouldn't see it, and so it would stay warm while I went about my morning tasks.

Sure, it was a little childish, but I was doing what I had to because I couldn't go through another work day with an empty stomach.

Once the sausage biscuits were ready, I went to the bathroom to get ready for work. My eyes were bloodshot from crying yesterday afternoon and visible circles had formed underneath. Today definitely called for concealer. After I was dressed, I ate my breakfast and made sure Luca's lunch was in his backpack and that he finished all his food. Then I kissed him goodbye, nodded to Aleks, and headed off to work.

Perhaps I should've been friendlier to Aleks after last night, but I was just not feeling it. Yes, I was physically attracted to him, but the emotional connection had dissipated a long time ago if there ever was an emotional connection to begin with. I decided I didn't want to think about that right now. Something else was weighing on my mind—Christmas time at the lodge.

Today, the lodge staff, maids included, were having an ugly Christmas sweater day. Well, everyone except me. I didn't own a Christmas sweater of any sort, pretty or ugly, and I definitely didn't have the money to buy one, so I wore the only thing I could, my uniform. A part of me wished I could've participated in the festivities, but then again, I was sort of glad to have an excuse to just keep my head down and get my work done like it was the same as any other old day.

The problem was, I both loved and hated Christmas. I loved the true meaning and of course, I loved seeing all the decorations and lights, but I hated the fact that I never had any extra money to buy Luca presents. In fact, he was not even aware that children received presents at Christmas. At least, he hadn't known up to this point. He was bound to find out sooner rather than later, however, now that he was four years

old and going to school. It was only a matter of time before his classmates would start talking about presents and Santa and I wasn't sure how I was going to handle it.

How could I explain to an innocent child, who had never done anything wrong, that Santa doesn't visit him or bring him presents? He was too young to understand that food, clothes, shelter, and electricity take precedence, but he was old enough to think it was his fault he didn't receive gifts when his friends did. To say it broke my heart was an understatement. Broke was too nice and clean of a word. A better description would be to say it shattered it into a cloud of fine dust that permeated my entire being.

As I walked to the bus stop, I prepared myself for the onslaught of questions I was sure to receive about my lack of participation in today's celebration. I didn't want my coworkers to think I was rude or disrespectful, but I also didn't want them to know the real reason I was not participating. They wouldn't understand that even a five-dollar sweater from Goodwill was a luxury in my world. How could they? All the other maids and hotel staff made roughly the same hourly rate as me, but they didn't have someone like Aleks back home, draining their bank accounts every single month. Just thinking about him, and his philandering ways, put me in a bad mood, so I had to make a conscious effort to cheer myself up as I got off the bus and headed to work.

*I'm not going to be the only person not wearing an ugly sweater, I thought to myself. Surely someone else will have decided to opt out... right?*

Wrong.

When I walked into the employee lounge, I noticed that I was the only one not wearing a sweater. I stood out like Rudolph and his shiny red nose. The humiliation was overwhelming but there was nothing I could do about it.

I wished I could go back to sleep and wake up a month from now when Christmas was over. It was hard enough to fit in in a foreign country and not being able to participate in the customs and traditions made it worse.

“Okay, head up high Katya. You can do this,” I muttered to myself.

My co-worker, Sherry, saw me and came right over. She was wearing a hideous red and green sweater with rhinestones and fake fur that outlined a Christmas elf. It was made even worse by the fact that the elf’s eyes lit up. It was seriously creepy.

“Good morning, Kat,” she said, her words spilling over each other as they often did. “Where is your ugly Christmas sweater? Did you forget? I am sure Harry would let you run home and get it if that’s the case.” Sherry always talked like an auctioneer and today was no different. Maybe that’s why she cleaned so fast, perhaps she was just a generally speedy person.

“No, that won’t be necessary, Sherry. I – I don’t celebrate Christmas, that’s why I’m not wearing one,” I blurted out as I stuffed my coat and purse into my employee locker. I hadn’t



planned on responding that way, but I didn't know what else to say and it wasn't a complete lie.

I didn't celebrate Christmas, and it wasn't anyone's business to know why I didn't. I avoided making eye contact with Sherry after saying this, and thankfully she seemed to get the message and stopped asking me questions about the sweater and the holiday. I felt terribly left out, like a kid on the playground who wasn't invited to play with the others, but I held my emoticons back and just focused on putting my things into my locker. Sherry sounded like she was about to say something else, but then apparently thought better of it, and just told me to have a good day and left me alone.

Once she was gone, I sat down on a nearby bench and tried to gather my thoughts. Nobody else said anything about my lack of a sweater, but I still felt like they were all staring at me. They probably weren't but that was the thing about insecurities, they often didn't make a whole lot of sense and were rarely rooted in reality.

Since it was still early, most guests were not awake or did not want their rooms cleaned yet, so once I was feeling better, I started my shift in the lobby. Staying busy was good. Busy was what I needed. It kept me from thinking about how sad I was about everything. Harry already walked in on me crying yesterday, and I wasn't going to let that happen again. I was stronger than that. I had to be.

I was, after all, the girl who left Russia alone as a pregnant teenager. I was the woman who started a new life for herself in

a country where she didn't know a single person. That life might not have turned out exactly how I wanted it to, but I was still on the right path, and I would get where I needed to be eventually. I knew I would.

This little internal monologue made me feel better, and I got to work with a little more pep in my step than I'd had before. I started vacuuming and looked up just in time to see Zane Grey, the single dad who apparently hated me, waltzing into the room. He looked like he'd had a rough night. His skin was pale and teetering on green and he was wearing sunglasses at 9:00 in the morning. That could only mean one thing. Hangover.

*Good, it serves him right to feel lousy.*

But my petty thoughts were quickly replaced with sympathy. I knew how bad hangovers could be and taking care of a baby in that condition was damn near impossible. I was close enough to hear him ask Dan, the front desk clerk, for some aspirin.

Oh yeah, he definitely had a hangover. I realized I had a choice at that moment. I could either enjoy watching him suffer, or I could be the bigger person and offer to help. He may have hurt me yesterday, but I didn't know his story just like my coworkers didn't know mine.

I felt like I was in one of those cartoons where the angel was on one shoulder and the devil was on the other. Luckily for him, the angel won out.

I walked to the desk and tapped him on the shoulder.

His look was confusing, and I could not tell if he was embarrassed to see me, surprised, or about to vomit.

“Excuse me, Mr. Grey,” I said softly.

“Oh, hello. Yes, Katya? How can I help you?” he said, his face turning a little red.

Trying to be helpful and direct, I told him, “I don’t mean to butt into your business, but I heard you ask Dan for some aspirin. No offense, but that’s not going to be strong enough to kick the kind of hangover it looks like you’re dealing with.”

“You don’t think?” He raised his eyebrows. “Then what do you suggest?”

“Hair of the dog, or however you say it in America. What you need are carbohydrates and a shot of vodka. That will have you good as new in no time,” I said with expert confidence.

“Is that right?” he said. He looked desperate to be rid of last night’s painful reminder and he turned to Dan. “Do you by any chance have any vodka I could have?”

Always the professional, Dan explained he could have some sent to his room. It wasn’t something the lodge normally did, but he knew that Zane was Harry’s best friend so he made an exception.

Looking at Dan, Zane said, “Thank you. I owe you one.” He then turned to be me and rubbed the back of his neck. “Thank you for the suggestion, Katya.”

“You’re welcome,” I said.

“Katya will bring up that vodka shortly,” said Dan, and I turned to frown at him.

“I will?”

He nodded. “Yes, you will. Since it was your idea, and since I’m swamped with emails and phone calls I have to return.”

“Fine,” I said, shrugging. I then looked back at Zane and smirked. “I guess I’ll be seeing you shortly.”

He nodded, thanked me again, put his sunglasses back on to cover his bloodshot eyes, and headed back to his room.

I couldn’t help but wonder what Zane Grey’s story was, but since I didn’t want people in my business, I decided it was best not to ask.

## Chapter Seven

### Zane

**O**n the way back to my room, I stopped by Sloane and Harry's to pick up Kenlee. My head felt like a freight train ran over it and then came back to make sure the job was done.

*What the hell was I thinking last night?*

A hangover and taking care of a baby did not go well together, but that didn't matter. I was a parent now, and I had a responsibility, plus, I was anxious to see my baby girl. I'd never spent the night away from her, not since Sarah died. I shook the thought of my late wife away and knocked on the door. Sloane opened it and looked me over.

"Have a good time last night?" she asked, looking like she was trying not to laugh.

"Good morning to you too, Sloane. Do I look that bad?" I asked as I walked into their spacious suite.

“Let’s just say you might want to reschedule your GQ cover shoot for another day.”

“Ha ha, very funny Sloane. Has anyone ever told you, you should be a comedian?” I said looking around for Kenlee. I scratched my head and made a face. “Umm, I did leave my baby here last night, did I not?”

She smirked. “Did you? I don’t remember taking care of a baby, but I’ll ask Harry.”

I mustered up a return smile, but then it quickly fell from my face as I dropped the bit. My head was really starting to throb, and I didn’t have enough energy to keep joking around. “But seriously, she’s here, right?”

“Yes, of course, she’s here. She’s in the other room taking her morning nap. She should be up in just a few minutes. Can I get you a cup of coffee?” she asked, obviously concerned with my current state.

“Coffee sounds great. Thanks, Sloane. I hope Kenlee wasn’t too much trouble.”

She touched my shoulder and said, “She was no trouble at all. In fact, she was a perfect angel. We loved having her.”

I sighed with relief. “That’s good to hear. She cries so much at night I was worried you wouldn’t get any sleep.”

Sloane scrunched her brows in contemplation before saying, “Zane, if you don’t mind me asking, would you like me to keep her for a while longer? No offense, but you look like shit. Maybe you should go to the room and take a nap.”

“No, I’m ok.” I lied. “I look worse than I feel, I promise.”

I could tell from the look on her face that she didn’t believe me but she went along with it nonetheless.

“Okay, if you say so. But I am only a phone call away if you change your mind,” she said. She handed me a cup of coffee, then went around the suite gathering all of Kenlee’s things. I drank most of the coffee in a single sip, and waited impatiently for the caffeine to start doing its thing.

Half an hour later, I was finally back in my room. I put Kenz in her baby bouncer, and she started giggling right away. I knew she wouldn’t be falling asleep any time soon, but hopefully, the bouncing would keep her occupied for a while, and I could get some rest. I brought her into the living room with me and sat back on the couch with a cold compress over my head. I wondered whether or not Katya would actually bring the vodka up to my room. I was still so confused about where I stood with her. She had been so kind to me that morning in the lobby, even though I didn’t deserve it.

What was she playing at?

But there was no point in worrying about that now, so I pushed thoughts of Katya out of my mind and tried to relax. I closed my eyes and was lulled into serenity by the sound of my baby laughing, but my tranquility was soon interrupted by the sound of my phone ringing.

I groaned and opened one eye to see Chase’s name appear on my screen. I answered, begrudgingly, and said in a quiet, hangover friendly voice, “This better be important, man.”

Chase laughed, and I honestly thought about hanging up on him. “Hey there, Cinderella, you left the ball so early last night. I thought I’d see how you’re doing but the sound of your voice tells me the prince did not show up with your glass slipper.”

“Go to hell, Chase,” I said. My tone was soft, so he knew I was kidding, but I also didn’t laugh along with him because I wanted him to know that I truly wasn’t in the mood for his antics. “What did you really call for?”

With a little more restraint, he told me he really did want to check on me. “I didn’t call earlier because I hoped you were sleeping, but I forgot you’d have to pick up Kenlee.”

I was running out of energy and knew Kenlee was going to need me alert soon so I politely said, “It’s okay. I’m fine. Thanks for last night but I think I am going to go lie down.”

Still chuckling, he took one last jab. “Okay, Granny. Take care of that hangover and let me know when you are old enough to play with the big boys again.”

He hung up before I could actually say goodbye so I just sat in misery listening to the innocent sounds of my giggling baby, wishing she would fall asleep, but seeing as she’d just woken up from a nap over at Sloane and Harry’s, I knew that was just a pipe dream.

Someone knocked softly on the door shortly after I hung up with Chase, and I pushed myself up to my feet with an audible sigh. It was likely Katya with the vodka. More alcohol may not be the smartest decision, but I was willing to try anything.



I answered the door, and there she was, smiling and holding a bottle of clear liquor and a bag of potato chips.

Lifting them up she said, “Carbs and vodka. Best hangover remedy in the world. If this doesn’t cure you, nothing will.”

I moved to allow her entrance. I was still not sure how to apologize for yesterday, so for the moment, I avoided it.

Kenlee started fussing but when I went to get her, Katya stopped me. “Please, let me help. You go eat and drink. I will take care of the baby.”

I did not want to argue with my Russian savior so I agreed. I watched in amazement as Katya gently picked her up and Kenlee almost immediately stopped fussing.

*How the hell did she do that?*

In less than ten minutes, Kenlee was asleep in Katya’s arms. It was unbelievable to watch, and I tried my hardest not to be jealous over the fact that this random stranger was better at soothing my child than I was.

Katya set Kenlee in her crib at the far end of the room and turned to leave.

“Wait,” I said, and she stopped on her way toward the door. “You have to tell me how you did that.”

She frowned. “How I did what?”

“Get her to sleep so easily. It takes me forever and it is like wrestling a shark. The more I try to calm her, the angrier she gets.”

Blushing, she shrugged like it was no big deal, “I have a four-year-old son. I was clueless when he was born but learned along the way.”

“I see,” I said. “Well, I’d like to say that gives me hope, but I don’t know. I feel really out of my depth sometimes. I honestly don’t know if I’m cut out for this.”

“If you ever need any help,” she said. “Or if you need someone to watch her for you... I’m around. I mean, I don’t have a lot of free time on my hands, but I’d be happy to help you out whenever I’ve got a minute.”

“I couldn’t ask you to do that...” I then raised a brow. “At least, not without paying you.”

She laughed. “I’m not looking for a second job.”

“Oh, no, I know! But... Well... What if we had some sort of arrangement? When Kenlee is crying and I haven’t been able to get her to sleep in days, would it be okay if I called you and asked for help? You’d be like—like a consultant.”

“A consultant?”

“Yeah!” I smiled. “You know how legal experts will oftentimes serve as a ‘legal consultant’ and doctors will serve as ‘medical consultants’? You would be like my parenting consultant. And I would pay you for your time.”

She cocked her head to the side, seemingly thinking this over. I knew it was a wild idea, but that’s just how desperate I was.

“Yeah, okay,” she said eventually. “I could do that. After all, I wish I had someone to help me with Luca when he was born. But, uh, we’ll have to hash out the details later because I have to finish my shift. I’ll come by this afternoon if that is okay?”

“Yes, by all means. I did not mean to keep you from your job. This afternoon is perfect,” I told her. “I will see you then.”

She reminded me to take another shot of vodka if needed and try to get some sleep. “You always want to try and sleep when the baby sleeps,” she added on her way out the door. Her first piece of advice, and it was a winner. *Sleep when the baby sleeps.*

It was so simple I felt like a moron for not thinking of it but then again, Kenlee slept so sporadically that I hadn’t been functioning on all cylinders. I decided against another shot but since Kenlee was sound asleep, I followed Katya’s advice and took a nap. I definitely needed one after last night.

Unbelievably, I slept better than I had in months. It was a welcome surprise and it was just what I needed. Hopefully, Katya would be able to help me have more days like this.

For the first time in months, I was hopeful.

## *Chapter Eight*

### **Katya**

**S**eeing how desperate Zane was made my decision easy. He looked like one of the abandoned puppy dogs in the SPCA commercials. Knowing I probably had that look about me when my son was a baby, I felt the urge to help the guy out. The extra money, of course, also sweetened the deal.

I was hoping I could keep Aleks from discovering I had this new source of income, however, that way I could buy Luca something for Christmas. The thought of seeing his eyes light up when he unwrapped a new toy warmed my heart and brought happiness to an otherwise depressing day. He was a good boy and deserved it.

Since I would be visiting Zane after my shift, I needed to make arrangements for Luca, so I texted my friend Addie to see if she could pick him up from school and watch him for a few hours. Over the years, Addie has been my guardian angel sent from Heaven. She was always willing to watch Luca, and in many ways has been like a mother to me. She was only

forty, but you'd never know it. She didn't look a day over thirty and acted even younger. I was pretty sure that was why she and Luca got along so well—she was young at heart.

I went to the employee lounge to get my phone and rest for a minute. In typical mom fashion, Addie answered almost immediately.

“Hey, Sweetie. How are you? Is everything okay?”

“Yes, everything is fine.”

“Why are you calling during the workday,” she interrupted. “Is Luca hurt? Do I need to go to his school and get him?”

Trying to contain my laughter, I put her mind at ease. “No Addie, Luca isn't hurt. Everything is fine. I was just calling because I've been asked to work late and wanted to ask if you would be able to pick him up from school today. I know it is last minute, so I understand if it is too much of an inconvenience.”

“Hush now,” she said. “You and that little boy are never an inconvenience. You know I am happy to pick him up. I wish you would let me do it every day so he didn't have to spend time with that loser boyfriend of yours, but I will take what I can get.”

Addie had never hidden her feelings about Aleks so I wasn't offended. Besides, I knew he was a loser but I was stuck. I'd rather put up with a loser boyfriend than be out on the streets. Luca did not deserve to be homeless.

Even though I was fairly certain Addie would agree to help today, I was still relieved when she said yes. “Thank you so much. I appreciate it and I know Luca will be excited. He loves going to Aunt Addie’s house. I think he likes you more than me.”

“It’s just because I let him have as many chocolate chip cookies as he wants. Oh, and I feed him pizza. Pizza is the way to all kid’s hearts,” she said matter-of-factly.

“Addie, please don’t go out of your way to do anything extra. He will be fine with whatever you were planning on having for dinner anyway.”

“Nonsense. Let me spoil him, I enjoy it and besides, it gives me an excuse to blow my diet and eat food that actually tastes like something.”

We shared a laugh, but then I saw what time it was and I knew I had to get back to work. “Thanks again. I don’t know what we would do without you. I’ll be there to pick him up as soon as I can.”

In my mind, I could see her waving her hand at me as she said, “No rush. Take your time. We will be here whenever you’re off work.”

I finished my afternoon rounds rather quickly and found myself with twenty minutes to kill before heading to Zane’s so I decided to sit in the lounge and decompress. It had ended up being a good day but I would be lying if I said I wasn’t tired. I sat on the couch and closed my eyes when I heard people come in. They were talking about the employee Christmas

dinner party. I had not planned on attending but since I was already working late, I figured I might as well. Maybe it would show my coworkers I was not a complete Scrooge.

I brushed my hair and teeth with the little toiletry bag I kept in my locker at work, then headed off to Zane's.

Once I got to Zane's suite, I knocked on the door and he opened the door looking more rested and a lot less hungover than this morning. He caught me by surprise looking so chipper and it almost took my breath away how handsome he was – tall, with broad shoulders, in really good shape with beautiful brown eyes, although sad eyes. I wondered again what his story was. *How did this good-looking single dad end up here with such a young baby?*

Zane invited me in and offered me a seat in the living room where he and Kenlee were hanging out. "I'm glad to see you again Katya. I am anxious to learn some new parenting skills from you. Lord knows I need them."

"Don't be so rough on yourself, Zane. Your best will be good enough for her. I learned that the hard way. Kids are resilient and they feel your love."

Maybe I was imagining it, but Zane seemed to be studying me carefully with a glint in his eye. *Could this previously rude guy actually be a sweet girl dad?*

We chatted a little and agreed on a time to meet tomorrow after my shift was over for "parenting consultation" as he called it. I had a sneaking suspicion that this was going to be interesting.

Zane opened the door for me and said, “See you tomorrow, Katya.” He was actually sounding like he was looking forward to it.

After leaving Zane’s, I headed to the Christmas dinner. I made sure to stay at Zane’s until it started as I did not want to be early. My confidence from earlier was fading and I was starting to second-guess my decision. Pushing those thoughts aside, I forced myself to walk into the banquet hall that had been reserved for the staff dinner. I was still embarrassed that I was the only one not wearing an ugly Christmas sweater but there was nothing to be done about that now.

Mingling was never my strong suit so I was standing in the corner when I saw Harry walk in. I didn’t know why I was surprised to see him since he was the owner, but for some reason, I just assumed he didn’t attend these types of functions. Actually, what surprised me was who was with him. It was Zane. He saw me from across the room and waved.

My cheeks immediately turned pink from embarrassment.

*What if someone noticed him wave to me? What would they think?*

That might seem stupid but I knew how people were. If they saw a good-looking guest smiling and waving at a member of the maid staff, they would automatically think there was something going on. Then again, it wasn’t like I was just going to ignore him. That would get people talking even more. I smiled and returned the wave before turning away. After that, some of my coworkers approached me, and I was forced to



mingle and make small talk for a while. The fake smiling and making up stories to tell when people asked me if I had plans for the holidays was starting to wear on me, so I was on my way out the door when Harry went to the front of the room and tapped on his wine glass.

“Excuse me, everyone,” he said, clearing his throat. “If I can have your attention real quick, I wanted to take this time to hand out everyone’s holiday bonuses, and to let you all know that I hope you have a wonderful holiday season and new year.” He beamed and then picked up a red Santa bag sitting by his feet and started handing out little red envelopes to all the employees. Our Christmas bonuses were usually in the range of \$200 to \$500, depending on whether or not an employee was full-time or part-time, and how much overtime they’d worked that year. I wasn’t expecting any more than last year, and since Aleks would be ready to take the bonus check out of my hands the second I walked through the door with it anyway, it was hard to be excited at all.

I honestly thought about leaving and just picking up my check from Harry the following morning, but he made a B-line right towards me and handed me my envelope with a knowing smile on his face. “This is for all your hard work,” he said with a nod. “And for helping my friend out when he needed it.”

I frowned, then tentatively opened the envelope and pulled my bonus check out.

It was for \$5,000. I was at a total loss for words, and when I looked up, ready to tell Harry that he made a mistake, that

he'd written an extra zero, I realized he had already walked away and was giving everyone else their checks. I managed to catch his eye as he crossed the room, however, and he winked at me.

*So he did mean to give me this much.*

I stuffed the check back into the envelope and put it in my pocket, then I walked out of the room as a confusing cocktail of emotions crashed over me.

Zane hasn't known me long but he must have noticed something off in my demeanor because he followed me and found me hiding in the ice machine room. It wasn't the savviest hiding place but I had to get out of that room as quickly as I could before the walls closed in.

"Hey, are you okay?" he said, kneeling down beside me. I was sitting down on the floor with my back pressed against the wall. "I saw you run out of the room, and I thought I would come to make sure you were okay."

I sighed and pushed my shoulders back. "It's nothing."

"It's clearly something," he said, laughing. "But hey, if you don't want to talk to me about it, I understand. We hardly know each other."

"It's not even that," I said. "I'm just not sure how to put it into words. You're going to think I'm insane."

"Try me."

"Harry gave me a much bigger bonus this year than he usually does, and it's just—it's really throwing me for a loop,

that's all."

Zane looked at me with obvious confusion. "So, let me see if I understand this, you're upset because Harry gave you more money than usual? Maybe it's because I'm still sleep-deprived, but I'm failing to make the connection here. Isn't having more money usually seen as a good thing?"

"Yeah," I said. "And if I actually got to keep this money, it would be a good thing. It would be a *great* thing. But it's going to be gone the second my boyfriend finds out about it. We should use the money to give my son a good Christmas, but Aleks doesn't care about that kind of stuff."

"But... Can't you just, not give him the check?"

"He's going to ask for it," I explained. "Because he knows I get Christmas bonuses every year, and even though he's generally a very disorganized man, if there's one thing he keeps track of, it's the amount of money I'm bringing into the house. Besides, he's in charge of all the household finances, and he checks our bank account religiously. There's no way for me to deposit a check like this without him finding out about it and immediately spending it." I choked back tears and then looked at Zane and laughed sarcastically because I knew if I couldn't find the humor in all of this, I would start crying.

"I'm sorry," I said, shaking my head. "This is way too much to dump on you all at once. I was just feeling overwhelmed and needed to get it off my chest."

Zane was quiet for a moment, clearly processing what I had told him. That or he was trying to figure out how to get out of

here as quickly as possible. I couldn't blame him.

When he finally spoke, it was clear he had thought about what I said.

"I'm very sorry to hear that and I don't want to overstep by asking this so please tell me to mind my own business if you want, but would you like me to help you set up your own bank account? You could deposit the money into it and he would never know it exists."

"You would help me do that? Why?"

He shrugged. "You agreed to help me when I needed it, even though you didn't know me, and that was after I'd already screamed at you for something that wasn't your fault at all." We shared a laugh, and I was starting to feel better just being in the presence of this oddly charismatic man. "Besides, you work hard, and you deserve to have some money of your own stashed away... Just in case you ever need it. Or use it to give your son the greatest Christmas in the world. Do whatever the hell you want with it—it's yours."

"Is it something that's going to take a long time?" I asked. The banking systems in America had always confused me, and until Zane had said as much, I honestly didn't even know it was possible for me to open up my own bank account without Aleks knowing.

"We can do it tonight," he said. "If you want."

I took a moment to think it over, then nodded. "Yeah, okay. Let's do it."

“Great. We can use my computer.”

He extended his hand to help me up and we headed off to hide my bonus from Aleks. Maybe it was wrong, but in reality, it felt like I was doing the right thing for a change. It was like Zane said, it was *my* money.

## Chapter Nine

### Zane

Seeing Katya upset when she should have been happy bothered me more than I expected it to. I didn't know this Aleks character, but he sounded like a real piece of work. On the way back to my room, I put on my best poker face so Katya wouldn't see how upset I was. I got the feeling she needed someone to be strong for her for a change.

*How could a grown-ass man take every cent she made and leave her with nothing?* I couldn't wrap my head around it. Katya should be doing cartwheels over an extra 5k, not hiding in the ice room crying. The protective side of me would love to teach this Aleks guy a lesson about how we treat women in America, but I'm smart enough to know it wouldn't help. In fact, it would probably make her situation worse.

I put those thoughts aside and focused on the task at hand, protecting her money. In the short time I have known her, I could tell how good of a person she was. Most women, or people in general for that matter, would never have spoken to

me again after the way I treated her the first day I met her. But not Katya. She put her feelings aside to help me out. Both with my hangover and with Kenlee. I didn't know how she ended up with such a controlling asshole, but I was going to do whatever I could to help her. It was my turn to do the right thing.

Sloan was in my room watching Kenlee while I went to dinner with Harry. She looked at me strangely and quickly left. Always cool, she didn't ask us any questions though.

I went straight to my computer when we got to the room. It only took a few minutes to set up the account and Katya was amazed.

"I don't know how to thank you for doing this," she said as I handed her the slip of paper with all her bank information written down on it. "It is so nice to know I have a safety net that Aleks can't touch. If only I could put part of my paycheck in without him knowing."

"It was no problem, Katya. I'm glad to help. You work hard and you deserve that money. So does your son. Now, if you will excuse me for one second, I am just going to go peek my head in and check on Kenlee. I am not used to her sleeping so soundly."

Before I could fully stand up, she stopped me. "Please, let me check on her. It is the least I can do."

I sat back down at my desk and stared at my computer. I was glad I helped her set up the account, but I felt like there was more I could do. Since I couldn't beat the crap out of the

controlling asshole boyfriend without causing her more problems, I decided I could help out with her account. I matched the 5k bonus money with an additional \$5,000 of my own. Once it was complete, I leaned back in my chair with a small sense of relief. 10k may not be much in the big scheme of things, but it was enough for her and Luca to live off of for a while whenever she hopefully decided to leave that loser. I knew it wasn't my business, but now that she'd told me about this horrible relationship she was trapped in, I couldn't help but want to know more about her story.

After twenty minutes, Katya returned looking more relaxed than I'd ever seen her. It was like a weight had been lifted off her shoulders and I guessed in a way, one had.

Not wanting to scare her by jumping straight into a game of Twenty Questions, I started off by asking, "Is Kenlee okay? You were gone for a while."

Smiling, Katya went to sit down on my sofa. "Oh yes, she's fine. She'd just woken up and needed her diaper changed, so I took care of it and put her back to bed. She's sleeping like an angel now."

Relieved and grateful for Katya's unending kindness, all I could say was, "Thank you. It probably would've taken me an hour to get her back down. We're both indebted to you."

She waved off my gratitude and said it was no big deal. Katya was so polite and respectful that she asked if it was okay if she stayed for a little while to gather her thoughts before heading home. This was perfect since I had questions I



wanted to ask her, so I quickly responded with, “Of course. Take all the time you need. I’m going to pour myself a glass of wine. Would you care for one?”

I could tell she was thinking it over but finally declared, “Yes. You know what? A glass of wine sounds lovely. I could use one after today.”

“Good. I will be right back,” I told her as I left to retrieve the wine.

“Red or white?” I yelled from the kitchen.

“Red please,” she yelled back.

When I returned, we sat in silence for a moment before I got the courage to start asking questions. This young woman intrigued me and I wanted to know more. She was beautiful and kind. *How did she get trapped in a bad relationship with a jerk*, I wondered.

“So, Katya, where are you from? I have a pretty good idea from your accent, but I don’t want to be presumptuous.”

Setting down her wine she looked into my eyes and very quietly said, “Russia.”

She had a look in her eye that told me her memories of home were probably a mixture of good and bad. Trying to lighten her mood, I laughed and said, “Yes, I was right. I’m not as stupid as I thought.” This made her laugh, and I was grateful. I somehow doubted she had a lot of laughter in her life, but then again, neither did I.

“That’s cool. I have always wanted to visit Russia, but tell me, how in the world did you end up in Montana? You’re so young. Is the rest of your family here as well?” I asked.

Katya’s face sank, and she looked away.

“Oh, I’m sorry if I asked too much,” I quickly added. “I didn’t want to offend you. I was just curious, that’s all. Please forgive me. I didn't mean to pry.”

Softening, she looked up and said, “No, it is okay. It’s not a secret. I just haven’t had many people to tell. My story is quite simple really. As I am sure you have already figured out, I got pregnant as a teenager. Luca’s father, my ex-boyfriend, disappeared and I didn’t know what to do. My parents were very strict and I was a frightened kid, so I ran away from home.”

Once again impressed by her bravery I couldn’t help but gush over this fact. “All the way to Montana? That’s a long journey. Most grown adults would be too scared to move to a new country all alone, but you – you did it when you were still a child yourself. You should be proud of yourself, Katya.”

*Not only was she beautiful, but she was also strong and brave.* I found myself thinking.

“Thank you,” she said, her cheeks growing flushed. “But I just did what I had to do for my baby. That’s all.”

I didn’t want to prolong her embarrassment so I altered my questioning.

“So, how did you end up with Aleks?”

“I met Aleks a year or so after I arrived. At first, he seemed like the answer to my prayers. He was loving and attentive and promised to take care of Luca and me, but that quickly changed. By the time I realized he wasn’t the man I thought he was, it was too late. I had already moved in with him. So now I’m stuck. I’m trapped, living with an alcoholic loser who loves nothing more than to tell me how worthless I am,” she confessed.

I barely knew this girl, but hearing about her situation made my blood boil. *How could anyone treat this beautiful soul that way?* Another thought popped into my head. *If Katya were mine, I would treat her like a queen.* Where in the hell did that come from? From the wine? I pushed that thought away and refocused on her.

Not knowing what to say, I told her the only thing that came to mind. “I am sorry, Katya. You do not deserve that. No woman does.”

I could tell she wanted to take the focus off of her and since I had been asking questions about her life, it only made sense for her to start asking about mine. The rational side of me knew this, but the hurt and guarded part didn’t agree.

“My turn,” she said, taking another sip of wine. “Why are you and Kenlee living here in the ski lodge? Don’t get me wrong, it’s nice and cozy, but...” She trailed off, probably for fear of offending me by telling me what she really thought of my living situation.

I wanted to answer her. I wanted to tell her some of my story, but I couldn't. The words wouldn't come out. I knew it sounded stupid but saying it out loud made it real. I knew Sarah was never coming back but somehow not talking about it helped me get through the day. I realized I was a "Dr. Phil" episode waiting to happen, but that didn't help me answer her question. So instead, I did what I was best at, and I shut down. I stood up and quickly brushed her off by saying, "You know what, it is getting late, and I really need to go to bed. Sleep when the baby sleeps, right?"

Frowning up at me, Katya put her wine glass aside and got up as well. "Okay," she said, going to grab her coat and purse. Before leaving she turned to me with a look of gratitude. "Thank you again for helping me tonight. I hope you have a peaceful rest of your evening."

"You too." I shut the door behind her and once again collapsed on the couch. Running my hands through my hair, I realized that I had screwed up.

Again.

## *Chapter Ten*

### **Katya**

I was more confused than ever when I left Zane's. Either something really big happened in his life, or he didn't trust me enough to tell me. I could be angry about it since he had no problem asking me personal questions but I decided it wasn't worth it. I needed to relieve Addie and pick up Luca and besides, he did help me set up the online account. Knowing that Aleks will not know about and cannot touch the 5k bonus gave me a sense of peace that I have not had in years. That alone is enough. For that, I was eternally grateful to Zane Grey.

I arrived at Addie's and found Luca sleeping peacefully on her couch. I bent down and kissed him and then stood back up to talk to Addie. "Thank you, Addie. Was he any trouble?" I asked.

"Please, he's always perfect and you know it," she told me. She then motioned with her head towards the kitchen and asked if I'd like a cup of coffee. I could tell she was stalling,

and as much as I wanted to take her up on her offer, I had to get Luca home to his own bed.

“Thanks, but no thanks,” I said. “It’s late.”

She clicked her tongue. “Are you sure?”

I gave her a look, and she sighed. “Alright, fine, you caught me,” she said. “I’m trying to get you to stay over so that the two of you don’t have to go home to that cold apartment.”

“No,” I said. “You’re trying to get us to stay over so that we don’t have to go home to Aleks.”

“Well, can you blame me?”

“Addie, we have already been through this and I am too tired to have the same conversation again. You know I can’t leave him so can we please just drop it?” I pleaded hoping she would take pity on me.

“Fine, but you know you can do better,” she said in defeat before heading to the kitchen. She came back out with enough Tupperware containers of food to feed a small army.

“Addie, what in the world is all of this? You shouldn’t have,” I scolded her.

“You stop all of that. I did it because I wanted to and so did Luca. Turns out he is quite the helper in the kitchen. There should be about a week’s worth of dinner there, but you can always freeze what you don’t want to eat yet,” she said with love I haven’t felt in a long time.

I wiped away a stray tear that had started to fall and kissed her on the cheek. “Thank you, Addie, for everything. And I don’t want to talk about it, but you are right. One day maybe there will be a way out, but right now this is my life and I have to make the best of it.”

“I know, Sweetheart, I know, but it breaks my heart. You and Luca can always stay here with me as long as you need to. Just promise me you’ll think about it.” she said, hugging me.

I woke Luca, loaded my arms with the mounds of food, and headed to my apartment praying that Aleks would be passed out when I got there. But no such luck. The day had ended up going too well for it to end on a decent note. Aleks was furious. Before I could even set my stuff down, he was in my face screaming and yelling at me for being so late.

“Where the hell have you been Katya? I have been waiting for you for hours. Where is my dinner? How dare you not be here when I expect you?” he screamed as he threw the leftover pizza across the room, scaring Luca who ran to hide in the bathroom.

Terrified, I didn’t know what to do. Immediately I started trying to soften things by apologizing. “I’m, I’m sorry Aleks, I had to work late,” I tried to tell him but he didn’t care, plus, he couldn’t hear me over his yelling. He was blinded by rage and began to move closer. Even though it had been a few months since he’d actually laid a hand on me, I could tell from the look in his eye that he wasn’t going to hold back.

I closed my eyes and braced myself for what was coming next.



## *Chapter Eleven*

### **Zane**

**O**n some level, I understood that what I was doing was insane.

I mean, really, what the hell was I thinking going down to Harry's office and taking the employee directory out of his desk drawer? The only logical explanation was that I had stopped thinking all together. I was clearly delusional, or maybe that one glass of wine had just hit me harder than I thought it would. Either way, it wasn't until after I dropped Kenlee off with Sloane and was on my way across town to Katya's apartment building, that I realized just how weird this was.

Why was I so worried about her?

I didn't have an answer to that question. In fact, all I had was this sick feeling in my stomach. I felt like she was in trouble, and that she needed someone to protect her.

Why did I have to be that someone?

Perhaps because Katya didn't seem to have anyone else in her life. Or perhaps that was just what I told myself so that I didn't feel like such a creep as I pulled up to her building and put my car in park. I checked the note I made on my phone, and then headed up to the door with a placard that said "Unit 1F."

This was her unit.

I raised my hand to knock, then took a moment to collect my thoughts, and let my fist drop.

*I shouldn't be here. This isn't—*

But then I heard shouting, and the sound of glass shattering. I pressed my ear to the door, but couldn't make out any of the words being said. All I knew was that someone was screaming and that Katya might be in trouble. I didn't hesitate this time, nor did I knock. Instead, I tried the handle, and thankfully, it was unlocked. I busted through the door and saw a man with his fist raised high in the air above Katya, who was cowering, trapped in the corner of the room. I launched toward the man and tackled him to the ground.

The guy was bigger than me, but he also hadn't seen me coming, and I used the element of surprise to my advantage. I pinned him to the ground and then landed three hard hits in a row to either side of his face. He passed out after the third hit, but I raised my hand once more and probably would've delivered another blow if Katya's voice hadn't cut through the sound of my blood pounding in my own ears.

"Zane, stop! You're going to kill him!"

I sat back and drew in a deep breath, then turned to look at her, and slowly the rest of the room came into focus. I felt a dull ache pulsating through my right hand, and when I looked back down at the broken, bloody face of Katya's boyfriend, I realized now would probably be a good time to explain myself.

"I—I'm sorry," I said, getting off Aleks unconscious body and shaking off the rest of my anger by shaking off my bleeding hand. "I just—I heard him yelling and..." I trailed off. There was no good explanation for why I was even there in the first place, and the last thing I wanted to do was make Katya feel even more scared.

"But... How did you know where I live? Why did you come over in the first place?"

These were both very valid questions and ones I wished I had good answers for. Instead of saying anything right away, I ran my hand along the back of my neck and looked around the room for Katya's son. "Is your boy okay? He didn't lay a hand on him, did he?" Some of the anger I was feeling before started to bubble up inside me once again, but I managed to push it down when Katya shook her head and then hurried to get me a glass of water.

When she handed it to me, I took a sip, then walked over to the sink and used the rest of the glass's contents to rinse out the cuts on my fist. Sighing once more, I looked back at her and said, "I'm sorry for just barging in like this... I came to apologize. I felt bad for sending you away like I did earlier,

and I wanted to make sure we were good. I also had this feeling..." Then I laughed at my own ridiculousness and shook my head. "Never mind."

"No, what? Tell me."

I shrugged. "I just got this feeling that you were in trouble. I don't know. It's weird. And maybe I'm just trying to make up a better reason for why I looked your address up in the employee directory and came to your house without an invitation..."

"But you were right..." She looked down at where Aleks was still lying unconscious but breathing. "I was in trouble."

"You shouldn't stay here with him," I said. I knew I was crossing a line by telling this woman how to live her life, but I wasn't about to walk out of there and pretend like everything was fine either. What good would that do her? "You deserve better than him."

"Yeah, well," she said, and then she muttered something else under her breath but I didn't quite catch it. Before I could ask her to repeat herself, however, she talked over me. "Listen, I appreciate you coming over here to apologize and for... everything else, but you have to leave before he wakes up. It'll just be easier that way."

"I can't just leave you here with him."

"Zane," she said, her eyes filling up with tears. "Please. We don't have another choice, and he could wake up at any second."

“You do have another choice,” I told her. “You can stay at the lodge. I’ll pay for the room. Go get your son, pack up your things, and we can leave right now.”

Katya rocked her weight back and forth on both feet, seemingly thinking over the offer I’d just presented her with. After a few minutes, we heard the sound of creaking floorboards from down the hall, and her boy poked his head around the corner and gasped. “Mama,” he said, looking at Aleks, and all the blood.

“Shh, shh, it’s okay,” Katya said. She ran to him, wrapped him up in a hug so that he couldn’t see anything but her, and then carried him down the hallway. “Don’t worry about it, honey. We’re going to stay somewhere else tonight, okay? Won’t that be fun? It’ll be like a sleepover.”

Despite everything that had just happened, I smiled when I heard her say this, and slid my hands into my pockets. I really wanted to help this woman, and it seemed like she was actually going to let me.

## Chapter Twelve

### Katya

**A**s I gathered a few items of clothing and helped my son pull his coat over his pajamas, I thought about what might've happened if Zane hadn't shown up the moment that he did. I'd seen Aleks mad before, but I'm not sure I'd ever seen him as furious as he was when I first walked through the door. He could've—

I couldn't think about that, I couldn't imagine the outcome for me or for Luca.

What had I been thinking, staying here this long with a rotten son of a bitch like Aleks. *What if he had hurt my son? What if he had hurt me and Luca was left with him?*

And my knight in shining armor, for the night at least, who could have ever guessed it would be Zane Grey?

But then again, it wasn't worth dwelling on. It was over now, and Luca and I were on our way to a safe place. I had my own personal bank account, with money in it, and a warm,

secure room to use for the night. I would worry about the rest later.

On my way out the door, Zane took our bags and went ahead with Luca. I stepped over Aleks' unconscious body and stared down at his face one last time before leaving. I silently hoped that this would be the last time we ever saw each other, but deep down, I knew it wouldn't be. Still, I felt like this was a goodbye of sorts because I knew that after tonight, things were never going to be like they were.

Things had changed—but for better or for worse, I couldn't yet say for sure.

## *Chapter Thirteen*

### **Zane**

**D**riving back to the lodge was surreal. I came over expecting to tell Katya I was sorry for how things went down earlier when we were talking in my suite, and then leave. Never in my wildest dreams did I think I'd be leaving her apartment twenty minutes later with her and her son in the car with me. It felt like I was in a movie or something, like if I had told someone else this story, they would say I was making it up.

As I drove, however, I realized that I would need to make arrangements for Katya and Luca at the lodge, so I pulled my phone out of my pocket and called Harry. He picked up after three or four rings.

“Hey, Zane. What’s up? Is everything ok?” he asked. “Are you on your way to get Kenlee?”

“Yeah, everything is fine. I’ll be there to grab Kenlee soon. Thanks again for watching her so last minute.”



“You know it’s never a problem. Sloane was actually just —”

“Listen, Harry, I hate to be rude but I’m sort of in a hurry here. I was wondering if there are any available rooms at the lodge. I have a friend who needs a place to stay for a while. I’ll pay for it.”

“No need. Any friend of yours is welcome at my lodge. If you are asking, I know there’s a good reason. I will call the front desk and have the room prepared. When will they be arriving?”

Feeling relieved, I told him, “Soon. They are with me now as we had to leave rather abruptly. They can hang out in my room while the room is prepared so no need to rush. And Harry, I really appreciate this.”

“No problem at all,” he said, and because I knew Harry so well, I knew he meant it. “I am happy to help. Let me know when you arrive and I will let you know when the room is ready.”

“Great, thanks. And uh, Harry, if you wouldn’t mind keeping this on the down low.” I looked over at Katya, who was wringing her hands in the front seat. “My friend doesn’t want a lot of people knowing where she’s staying.”

“Of course,” Harry said. “But I have to ask... is everything okay? For real?”

“Yeah, everything’s fine. She just needs a place to crash for a bit, a place where no one can find her.”

“Understood. See you when you get here.” He hung up.

Katya had been extremely quiet and I wondered if she was processing what happened or was having second thoughts. I truly hoped she saw that leaving that abusive pile of shit was the best decision she could make. If I let myself think about what could've happened if I had not shown up, I would feel the rage begin to build again. It also made me wonder how many times it had happened before. I wanted to know, but then again, I didn't. Maybe the saying was true, *ignorance really is bliss*. I knew it was easier than thinking she had been hurt before. It killed me to think that Katya felt like her only option was to stay with a man like that. I vowed that one way or another I would prevent him from ever hurting her again.

When we arrived at the lodge, we headed to the front desk. Luckily, Harry had put her a few rooms down from me so that would make it easier to keep an eye on things. I hoped it would make her feel better as well.

“They're still getting your room ready,” I told her as we stood in the empty lodge. “Why don't you go back to my room and get settled? I'm going to swing by Harry's place to pick up Kenlee.” I handed her the key to my room, and she nodded, then took her boy's hand and walked away. Once I had Kenlee and was on my way back to my place, Harry texted to let me know Katya's room was ready. I walked into my place and saw her sitting on the floor with Luca, playing with one of the toys he'd brought over.

I smiled, then cleared my throat, sorry to interrupt this sweet family moment. “Your—uh—your room is ready.”

“You hear that, Luca? You ready to go?”

The boy smiled, though he still appeared apprehensive. I couldn’t blame him after the night he’d had. We gathered their things and made our way down the hall to their room. I opened the door for them and let them go in before me.

“I hope this place will work,” I said sheepishly.

“Are you kidding?” she asked, laughing. “It is bigger than my entire apartment. I don’t know how to thank you for this, but I promise I will find a way to make it up to you.” There were tears in her eyes.

“There’s nothing to thank me for,” I told her. “It has been a long day. Why don’t you unpack and take a shower, and I will watch the kids.”

She looked like she wanted to argue but didn’t have the energy, so she nodded her head and disappeared around the corner into the bedroom. I almost asked her if she knew where it was but then I remembered that she worked here so of course, she did.

I called the front desk and asked them to send up some basic groceries and bill them to me. I saw Luca sitting quietly on the floor so I walked over to play with him. It was obvious he was a good kid, but no child should have to witness what he saw tonight. I couldn’t allow myself to wonder how many times he had seen it before. It was too heartbreaking. He was quiet and

shy at first but warmed up fairly quickly. I was sure he was leery of men after Aleks, so I made sure to speak in a soft voice and not make any sudden movements while I was around him. Kenlee was happily playing in her carrier and Luca and I were playing *Angry Birds* on my phone when Katya came out shortly thereafter.

Drying her platinum blonde hair with a towel, she looked around and saw the groceries that had been delivered, and looked at me with gratitude.

“Thank you for having this brought up. How much do I owe you?” she asked.

I stood to gather Kenlee and told her, “Not a cent. My payment is knowing you and Luca are safe. That is all that matters. Now that you are settled, I’ll head back to my room. Here is my number and I am right down the hall if you need me.” Before I left, I walked over to Luca and gave him a fist bump. “See you later, buddy.”

She nodded and saw me to the door before thanking me again and telling me goodnight. When I returned to my room, I put Kenlee to bed and retrieved my cell phone. I had one more call to make. Thirty minutes later I had successfully called the police, explained the situation, and filed a domestic violence report on Aleks Petrachova. Katya never told me his last name, but it is amazing what a four-year-old will tell you when you are nice to them.

Tonight, I slept better knowing that I had done the right thing.

I just hoped Katya thought so as well tomorrow in the light of the day when reality struck home.

## *Chapter Fourteen*

### **Katya**

**A**fter Zane left, Luca and I crawled into bed and snuggled. I knew there was a separate bedroom for him, but tonight we needed each other. He had seen too much in his short life, and it hurt my heart just thinking about it. I made a silent vow that he would never witness that again. Holding my precious little boy, I fell into the deepest sleep I have had in years, but it was short-lived.

In the morning, I woke up in a panic. I was suddenly overwhelmed with fear that Aleks was waiting outside to drag me back home. Expecting to see a barrage of angry messages, I grabbed my phone. I was shocked when there weren't any. "That's strange," I said out loud to no one.

"What's strange, Mommy?" Luca asked. Kissing his head and pulling him close, I sighed and said, "Nothing, Sweet Pea."

I realized it was Saturday which meant that Luca did not have school, and it was also my day off. The last two days had been a whirlwind and I could use the downtime. I kissed Luca once more before cheerfully saying, “Why don’t we go eat breakfast and then make some cookies for Mr. Zane? Does that sound like fun?”

Squealing with excitement, he started jumping up and down.

“Yay cookies! Can we make him chocolate chip cookies? I’ll bet those are his favorite,” he said smiling.

Tousling his hair, I said, “Of course, we can.”

I didn’t let on that I knew his ulterior motive. Chocolate chip was his favorite, and he knew I would never make chocolate chip cookies without saving a plate full just for him. We headed to the kitchen where I made him scrambled eggs and bacon for breakfast. It felt nice not to worry about someone else eating his food and to be able to feed him something healthier than cereal. He smiled at me with his bright blue eyes and my heart melted.

After breakfast, I looked through the cupboards for the ingredients to make cookies, but the groceries Zane had sent up were lacking in the baking department. I placed a call down to the lobby and asked if I could place another order. I rattled off a list of all the things we need for cookies, as well as ingredients I needed to make some of Luca’s other favorites, and they said they would send them up. It wasn’t until after I

hung up the phone that I realized they must've automatically charged them to Zane's account.

*Oh shoot, I thought. I have to be more careful about that next time.*

I did thankfully remember to have them leave the food outside of the door, and I didn't give them my name, just my room number. The fewer people who knew I was staying here, the better.

*Am I being paranoid?*

Maybe, but I didn't have time to worry about that this morning. I had managed, through the help of my kind new friend, to find a safe place for Luca and I to stay. I needed to focus on making sure he was okay, and if that meant being a little overly cautious, then so be it. I spent the rest of the morning pushing away intrusive thoughts about Aleks, fears over him showing up at the room and pounding on the door. Thankfully, making cookies with my little boy was a pretty good way to distract myself, seeing as he was always spilling something or mixing the wrong two ingredients, so I had to watch him like a hawk. Still, when we got to the end stage of the process, I let him take over. He was pretty cute with his furrowed brows deep in the concentration of correct chip placement.

Once the cookies were ready, I let him try one fresh out of the oven, and he announced that they were the world's "chocolatiest chocolate chip cookies". We wrapped up a plate and headed down to Zane's room. Luca was skipping which



was a refreshing site. I knocked on the door and waited for Zane to answer, but instead, he yelled, “Come in.”

I opened the door nervously and saw Zane standing at the ironing board attempting to iron a shirt.

“Did we come at a bad time?” I asked.

“Not at all,” he said. Looking at the shirt, he shrugged and said, “Eh, good enough.”

“Going somewhere special?” I asked, wanting to make small talk.

“I have a work gala to attend tonight with stuffy financial people if you want to know the truth of it,” he said with a slight smirk. I was curious what that meant since he had told me when he was setting up my bank account that he owned a stock brokerage firm. *Is he a stuffy finance person too?* I wondered. But that didn’t matter at all after everything he had done for Luca and me last night.

“Actually, since you are here, I have a favor to ask.”

Looking at him curiously, I said, “Zane, you literally saved my son and me last night. I doubt there is anything you could ask that I would say no to.”

He smiled. “In that case, would you mind babysitting Kenlee? It should only be a couple of hours, and I left her with Sloan last night so I hate to ask her again.”

“Of course, I will. Luca and I would love to,” I told him as Luca started pulling on my sleeve. I could tell he was bursting with excitement.

Laughing at how 24 hours has made such a difference in my son's personality, I asked him, "Luca, would you like to give Mr. Zane his present?"

"Yes!" he squealed, grabbing the plate from me.

Bouncing up and down as he handed it to Zane, he could barely contain his excitement.

"Mommy and me made you some super-duper chocolatey chip cookies! Here, try one," he said, holding the plate up for Zane to take.

Zane laughed. "Wow! For me? You shouldn't have. How did you know that chocolate chip is my favorite?"

"See Mommy, I told you he liked chocolate chip!" he screamed with four-year-old excitement.

"Yes, my angel, you did." He ran back to my side and I bent down to kiss him on the cheek. "You are just so smart."

Zane smiled at us mischievously. "The only problem is... I can't possibly eat all these cookies by myself. Oh hey, I know a solution. Luca, do you want one? You would really be helping me out if you ate one."

Looking at me with pleading and hopeful eyes that I could never say no to, Luca begged, "Please, Mommy. Can I have one? Pleeeeeeassee?"

I laughed and said, "Yes, you can have one. But that's the last cookie until after dinner, okay? I don't need you bouncing off the walls all day from all that sugar."

“Yes!” he yelled, grabbing a cookie from Zane.

When Luca sat down to eat his cookie, Zane poured him a glass of milk and walked back to the ironing board motioning for me to follow.

“So, about the morning sugar rush, sorry, not sorry,” he said, trying not to laugh.

I wasn’t mad. Luca deserved some happiness and to feel like a normal kid. “It’s okay. It’s nice to see him happy for once. I still don’t know how to thank you for last night.” I looked away from him, feeling guilty because I never seemed to have the right words to express myself when I was around Zane.

He reached out and gently touched my arm, and waited to respond until I was looking back at him.

“There is nothing to thank me for, Katya. I did what any decent man would do, and I would do it again. So, I don’t want you dwelling on it. Okay?” he said softly.

“Okay,” I said, fighting back the tears that were threatening to fall.

Luca finished his cookie and milk and wiped his tiny face with his sleeve, then looked over at Zane and me and said, “That was good! What are we going to do now?”

Embarrassed that he assumed Zane wanted to spend the day with us, I tried to quickly redirect him. “Now Luca, Mr. Zane is a busy man. We have taken enough of his time this morning.

We should go. You and I will find something fun to do. Okay?"

"Okay..." But as he said this, he looked over at me with the saddest puppy dog eyes I'd ever seen.

"Actually," Zane piped up, "I was going to see if the two of you would like to get bundled up and go play in the snow with Kenlee and me. It would be a lot more fun if you two went."

Luca's eyes widened and he began bouncing again as he waited in anticipation of my answer. I didn't leave him waiting long because he looked like he would explode if I did.

"Yes. We would love to. Thanks for inviting us," I responded.

Luca leaped out of his seat. "Let's go, let's go!" He took off towards the door.

Zane and I laughed, but his excitement was contagious and we found ourselves caught up in it.

Zane squatted down so he was at eye level with Luca and told him, "Okay Buddy, why don't you and your mom head back to your room and get ready while I get Kenlee into her coat? We can meet back here in thirty minutes. Does that sound good?"

"Sure!" he squealed.

"Alrighty," Zane said and gave Luca a high five.

Today was shaping up to be a good day.

## *Chapter Fifteen*

### **Zane**

I originally suggested the snow day for Kenlee and Luca, but once I was out there, I had to admit I was having fun. Being outside in the snow was exactly what I needed. I think it was good for Katya too because she finally looked relaxed. I knew she was still worried about Aleks, but her features were less tense and anxious once we got outside and stood around watching our children play.

Luca and I took on the task of building a snowman and then I suggested a snowball fight. His eyes lit up like only a little boy's can at the thought of pegging someone with snow but soon showed frustration when he realized he didn't know how to make a fort for protection. Katya meanwhile stood far away from the line of fire with Kenlee in her arms, the two of them watching us and laughing.

"Alright, Luca," I said, rolling up a large ball of snow. "We're going to build your fort first. What do you want to call it?"

“The Super Mega Snowball Fort.”

I laughed. “Well of course that’s what you want to name it. That’s the best name for a snow fort I’ve ever heard. Now, watch what I’m doing.”

Luca was eager to learn which made it easy and before long we had his fort ready to go.

Katya was playing with Kenlee who giggled every time she put her tiny hand in the snow, but after a while, I could tell that everyone was getting too cold, especially the kids. I picked up Kenz, twirled her around, and then suggested we head back inside for a while. Luca’s lower lip jutted out in a pout, but it quickly turned into a smile when I reminded him we can have hot chocolate. Once inside, I asked Katya and Luca to come back to my suite and hang out. They accepted and we headed up.

I ordered room service for lunch and Katya graciously fed and changed Kenlee while we waited for it to arrive.

I was grateful for the extra help. It might not seem like much to others but to an overwhelmed, grieving, clueless, single father, small things like feeding and changing were worth more than gold.

It gave me an idea. Scratching my head, I looked at her and said her name. “Umm, hey Katya?”

“Yes,” she said, looking up from the baby’s changing table.

“Well, I know I already asked you to babysit tonight and that is more than enough so if it is too much trouble, by all

means, please say no, but would you possibly mind watching her while I get dressed for the gala also? I will pay you extra for it.”

She smiled. “Yes, of course. And I won’t hear anything about you paying me extra. After what you have done for me and more importantly, for my son, this is the absolute least I can do.”

She turned her smile down towards the baby as she gently put Kenlee back in her playpen so she was occupied while we ate.

Surprised by her unassuming humility, all I could say was, “Thank you.”

The food finally arrived and we all devoured it like it was the last meal we would ever have. I swear Luca had a full cheeseburger a second ago and now it was gone. Laughing, I messed with his hair and said, “Playing in the snow really works up an appetite, huh?”

He nodded with a mouth full of hamburger and French fries before chugging his apple juice.

The afternoon went by peacefully as the kids played and we relaxed in their presence, but before I knew it, it was time to get ready.

As I was finishing, someone knocked on the door. *Shit!* I thought. I had totally forgotten about my “date” for the evening. I used the word “date” loosely as she really wasn’t a date, not in the typical sense of the word.

When the gala invitation came out for an important work event, I was not even going to go at first until Sloane and Chase talked me into it. I know they were trying to get me out of my room, out of my shell, and back to living again. I didn't know anyone to ask, and I didn't want to go alone as I was sure to get pity looks from all my business acquaintances who knew I had lost Sarah, so I took drastic, albeit stupid, measures. I hired an escort. Not my classiest moment and it is definitely not something I would normally do, but I was desperate.

Desperate times called for desperate measures, right? She was also a safe decision. Since she was only a paid escort and not a real date, there was no chance of romantic feelings being an issue. She was gorgeous, that much I learned from her online profile, but she wasn't exactly my type, and both of us knew this was nothing more than a business transaction.

The only problem was I hadn't planned on Katya and her son being at my place when the escort arrived. It wasn't like I cared whether or not Katya saw me with another woman, but what if she could somehow tell that my 'date' was someone I'd *paid* to spend the night with?

That would be humiliating, to say the least.

I was in the bedroom still getting ready when the person on the other side of the door knocked again, and I realized I was trapped. There was no getting out of this. I had to go let this woman in—and risk whatever judgmental looks or snide comments Katya decided to throw at me.



I felt like such a dick.

## *Chapter Sixteen*

### **Katya**

I was on the floor playing with Luca and Kenlee when someone started knocking on the door. I thought nothing of it since Zane already told me he ordered a special dessert for Luca, so I got up and yelled down the hall, “I’ll get it.”

“No wait!” Zane called out, but I was already on my way over. I opened the door and was surprised to see a raven-haired beauty with a supermodel body standing on the other side. Her satin, emerald green dress was stunning and her hair and makeup were flawless.

Suddenly, I was very aware of my own appearance. I doubted this woman would ever be caught with a “messy bun”, no makeup, and sensible shoes. Not even in her own home. Nope, definitely not. She looked me over, sized me up, determined I was not a threat, and asked where Zane was.

“Oh, uh, Zane?” I said as if I didn’t know who she was talking about. It wasn’t my finest moment, but I was at a loss

for words.”

“Yes,” she said. “I’m looking for Zane Grey. I’m supposed to meet him here. This is the correct room, isn’t it?” She smiled, but there was an icy quality to her expression.

I was not about to let this woman know she bothered me, so I held my head up high and told her, “Yes, this is the correct room. Zane is in his room getting ready and should be out shortly. Please, come in and have a seat.” I then walked over to Kenlee, picked her up, and began feeding her.

A look of relief came over the beautiful bitch’s face when she looked at me and said, “Oh, you’re the babysitter. I see.”

She appeared visibly relieved when she realized that I was just there to watch the baby while Zane went to the gala, and it took everything in my power not to roll my eyes at her obvious slight. Thankfully, a second later, Zane came out and she and I were no longer alone.

“Oh good,” he said, smiling awkwardly at the woman. “You’re here.”

I glanced his way and was immediately taken aback. I knew he was good looking but seeing him in a tuxedo made me see him in a whole new light. Even his date looked shocked.

Embarrassed and ashamed of my thoughts and of my reaction to his date, I picked up the baby and told Zane I was going to take her to her room. He had a strange look on his face that I couldn’t quite decipher, but it didn’t matter. He said okay, kissed Kenlee goodbye, and left for the evening.

*Is she his girlfriend?* I couldn't help but wonder. Then I shook the thought from my mind and tried to distract myself.

I turned on the television for background noise while I started making dinner. Luca asked for his favorite, spaghetti, so I put the water on to boil. Just as it began to steam and bubble, I saw the breaking news story. I momentarily forgot what I was doing, and the boiling water splashed across my hand.

*Damn, that hurt!* The pain was not enough to keep me from wanting to find out more, so I turned the volume up and ran cold water over my hand. The cause of my distraction and subsequent injury was an image of Aleks scrolling across the screen.

I turned the water off and moved to the couch to find out why my boyfriend, ex-boyfriend, or whatever he is, was a headliner on the evening news. At this point, I shouldn't be surprised, but it turned out that Aleks was a bigger piece of trash than I could have imagined. Now, it was clear why he hadn't been blowing up my phone trying to contact me and drag me home. He was in jail!

The bigger surprise was that I wasn't shocked. The news anchor explained that he had been arrested for domestic abuse charges last night and this gave the police a chance to question him on something they had been watching him for before last night. Breaking and entering was bad enough but where he was breaking into was even worse. The morally vacant loser I lived with was breaking into his grandmother's house of all

places. The same grandmother who had been “Missing” since 2010.

I never knew the full story about his grandmother that I hadn't met, and I never asked too many questions because I guess deep down, I didn't really want to know. Not because I'm heartless, but because I was fearful of the truth. Part of me always wondered about his grandmother's house that he stayed at sometimes. I was just thankful for a break from him when he stayed there.

But breaking into her house is low even for Aleks. Especially when he had an apartment that we shared. And did the police suspect Aleks had anything to do with his grandmother's disappearance? I shuttered at the thought of that.

I had absolutely no idea why and only God knew the reason, but I had to admit, I could breathe easier knowing Aleks was behind bars, at least for a little while.

Unfortunately, my relief was short-lived. Like always, panic and anxiety took up residence in my brain. To be honest, I was tired of them living there rent-free but no matter how hard I tried, I couldn't seem to evict them.

Aleks being in jail solved one problem, but I began to worry about how long I could stay here at the lodge. I couldn't allow Zane or Harry to permanently foot the bill and there was no way I could pay for it.

After my breathing was under control, I spoke out loud and told myself, “It's okay. You're okay. We don't have to leave

tonight, and worrying about it won't change anything, so make the best of this situation.”

I went back to the kitchen and finished making dinner. I had lost my appetite but enjoyed seeing Luca so excited. I noticed he had more pasta sauce on his face than on his plate, but in a small way, it made me feel better. Grabbing a napkin to wipe his face, I took a step back. Looking at my innocent child, my heartbeat, and my reason for living reminded me of what is important. Nothing else mattered but Luca.

Somehow, we would be okay. We would get through this together. We always had.

## *Chapter Seventeen*

### **Zane**

**T**he gala was going well, better than expected, and my date was perfect. Well, she was perfect for what I needed. She was gorgeous, polite, and could hold her own in this crowd. That was all I could ask of her, but even still, I found myself not caring one way or another when other men at the party started making eyes at the woman on my arm. For some reason, I couldn't seem to get Katya out of my mind and that confused me. I told myself it was just because we spent the day together, that was all.

Yet, thoughts of her lingered as the night dragged on.

I spotted Chase not long after arriving at the party. He was standing near the bar and I nodded when he looked my way. Luckily, Melanie, my "date" was stopped soon after we came in by some women who wanted to ask about her dress so she was occupied for the time being. When I booked her services, I was only thinking about myself and not wanting to deal with the sympathetic looks I would receive for not having a date.

Most of the guests knew about Sarah, and I didn't want to deal with the barrage of questions and looks.

I'd rather have them gossip about who my date was than give me sad, pitiful looks and whisper about how sorry they felt for me. Unfortunately, it hadn't crossed my mind when I decided to bring a stranger with me that night, that I would need to entertain her since she wouldn't know anyone else in attendance. I was only thinking of myself. I also hadn't thought about how I'd answer if people started asking questions. It wasn't like we prepared a backstory on the way over. It didn't seem to matter though, because she was proving she was a professional and used to handling these types of situations. It was definitely not her first rodeo.

Since she was taken care of, I left her to the mercy of the gushing women and told her I would be at the bar.

"If you will excuse me, I am going to say hello to a friend at the bar. Is there anything I can get you?" I asked.

She smiled demurely and replied, "I would love a glass of white wine if it isn't too much trouble."

"No trouble at all," I told her and made my way to Chase.

Chase was grinning like a Cheshire cat when I walked up. Smirking, he said, "Wow Zane, your date is smoking hot. Where did you meet her?"

I wasn't in the mood to play along so in the nicest way possible I said, "Shut up Chase. You know damn well where I met her and I'd appreciate it if you'd keep it between us."



He put his hands up in surrender. “Whoa. Sorry. I didn’t mean to hit a nerve. I was just trying to make a joke. She really is pretty damn hot though.”

I looked back at Melanie and then at Chase. “Thanks. Yeah, she is, but she is just a companion for the evening so I didn’t have to show up alone. If you remember correctly, I didn’t want to come at all, but when I decided to, I knew I wasn’t up for the circle of sharks that would surround me if I arrived alone, so I hired her. You know how these women love to gossip and I didn’t want to be the new item on the menu. In hindsight, I realize it was a stupid decision but what’s done is done,” I shrugged and leaned against the bar trying to get the bartender’s attention. I needed a drink. A strong one.

I should have known Chase wouldn’t be able to let it go and I saw the wheels spinning in his head. The twinkle in his eyes gave it away. Chase was a good friend, but even I had to admit he was something of a womanizer, so I was not surprised when he suggested I think about paying her for “extra services” not stated in the contract.

“I get that you just brought her to make the night more bearable, but since you have already hired her and technically, she is an escort, why don’t you take full advantage of what she has to offer?” he said, elbowing me in the side.

I rolled my eyes. “Chase, don’t even start.”

Smirking again he said, “Aw, c’mon, Zane. She’s an escort. We both know that’s a classy term for high-class hooker. All I am saying is if I were you, I would get my money’s worth.”

Melanie was gorgeous, there was no denying that, but I have never been into casual sex and I've never paid for it. Even when I was younger, I preferred to be in a relationship or at least know the woman before sleeping with her. I met Melanie less than an hour ago.

Shaking my head, I told him, "No, I don't think so. Not really my style if you know what I mean."

"Yeah, Man, I know. I'm just saying think about it. I know it has only been six months, but I also know you aren't ready to date. Sleeping with her would take care of your "needs" so to speak without any emotional tangles to contend with," Chase said.

It made sense when I looked at it from that angle, but I still didn't think I could do it. I also didn't want to. And there was no way I was going to tell Chase about the petite platinum-blond woman who seemed to be occupying my thoughts. He'd have a field day with that. Thinking of Katya made me want the evening to end so I could get back to the lodge. I didn't know why. It wasn't like she was waiting for me, but I was overwhelmed with the desire to see her.

Wanting to end the conversation, I looked at him and appeased him by saying, "Maybe you're right. I don't know, but I will think about it, okay?" I slammed my whiskey and motioned for another.

The bartender refilled my glass and I grabbed it and then remembered to order my date her glass of wine. With both drinks in hand, I told Chase I would be back. I needed to take

Melanie her drink. I might not want to spend time with her, but I did not want to be rude. Maybe Chase was right. Maybe I should consider exploring all of her “services.” It has been a while. If I drank more, maybe I would get the courage to change my mind.

The rest of the night went by flawlessly and no one but Chase had a clue who Melanie really was. But I did, and I couldn't get past it. I wasn't judging her. Hell, I was the one who hired her. Throughout the night she had alluded to being open to providing “more” should I be interested, but I wasn't. I wanted to be and I tried, but even the liquor didn't help change my mind. I was sure that despite her profession she was a lovely person, but I just couldn't bring myself to pay for sex. When we returned to the lodge, I ordered her an Uber and thanked her for a nice evening before giving her a generous tip and telling her goodnight.

###

It was after midnight when I got home so I walked quietly into the suite, expecting to find Katya asleep. I'd told her she could take the kids to her suite if she wanted, but she insisted on staying here. She explained that it was important to keep Kenlee on a consistent routine, especially now that she was starting to sleep better. She also pointed out that it would be World War III trying to get Luca away from the new toys that I had bought him. To my surprise, she was still awake when I came in. Looking around, I realized that she had cleaned and straightened while I was gone.

Quietly I put my keys on the table and said, “Hey, I didn’t expect you to be up so late. You could have gone to sleep, you know. You didn’t need to wait for me.”

“I know, but I wasn’t tired. Well, I was, and then I got a weird burst of energy. When that happens, I clean,” she told me nonchalantly.

She was adorable when she blushed. The thought floated through my mind before I could do anything about it, but then I realized I’d been staring at her saying nothing for a few seconds, so I shook off the thought and looked away.

“Thank you for cleaning, but you really didn’t have to do that,” I told her. “Taking care of Kenlee was more than enough.”

“I didn’t mind. It gave me something to do, and I actually enjoyed it,” she said, laughing a little.

I didn’t want her to leave yet, so I rubbed the back of my neck and said, “I know it’s late, but I could really use a nightcap. Would you care to join me?”

“Yes, that would be nice,” she replied.

I poured us both a glass of wine before we sat down on the sofa to make small talk. When her leg brushed against mine, it felt like a fourth of July fireworks explosion. My cock noticed it too, I could tell by the slight stiffening in my pants. Whoa, what was that?

*This is insane. Damn Chase for putting sex thoughts in my head.*

I asked where Luca was and she explained she put him to bed in the spare bedroom.

“I hope that’s ok. He was just so tired after playing in the snow all day, and I thought it would be easier to just let him fall asleep here.”

“Of course, it is. I want you both to be comfortable here,” I said. Then our eyes met, and she didn’t immediately look away. At that point, I’d had quite a bit to drink that night, which is probably the only reason I had the confidence to reach out and brush a piece of hair out of Katya’s face.

The electricity that radiated when I touched her sent chills down my spine again. *What is going on? What is it about this woman that I suddenly want more of?*

“We do,” she said, not breaking our charged little staring contest. “I, at least, feel very comfortable.”

I don’t know what came over me, but I suddenly couldn’t help myself and I leaned over and kissed her. It was a risky move and I wasn’t sure how she would respond, but to my pleasure, she eagerly returned the kiss. Our make-out session stayed PG-13 for a while. I ran my fingers through her hair while tenderly tasting the hints of the vintage red on her lips. My tongue explored her mouth softly at first, but as our need for each other grew, I began to kiss her more passionately.

I pulled back and looked at the gorgeous woman in front of me. I’d be lying if I said I didn’t want this. I had just spent the evening with a sexy and willing woman, but all I could think about was coming home to this. I had no idea it would actually

happen or if she felt the same. I'd hoped but didn't expect it. I'd already convinced myself that the spark was something in my imagination or at least something only I felt. But her kiss told a different story. Her kiss said that she had been thinking of me too. I pulled her into my lap. She was so small I felt like I could break her, but I knew that was impossible. She was too strong for that.

*Damn, she feels good,* I thought as I began to slide my hands across her body. I slid my hands under her sweater and massaged her small but alert breasts. She wasn't wearing a bra which only intensified my hunger. I lifted her sweater over her head and momentarily broke free from her lips. I could tell she missed the contact, but I soon began to kiss her neck, as my hands made their way down to her perfectly shaped backside. Her ass was soft and tight and my hands slid under it to position her closer. When she began to moan and move her hips, I felt my pants growing tighter. I flipped her over to readjust myself and get a better look at her. She was gorgeous. She didn't need an elaborate dress or makeup. She was stunning the way she was.

"Katya, you are so beautiful," I told her as I began kissing her neck again and moving my way down. When I took a nipple into my mouth, she gasped and wrapped her legs around me. Her reactions spurred me on, so I continued licking and sucking her breasts until she was writhing underneath me.

Suddenly she pushed me away, sat up, and panted as she said, "I need to feel you," as she started unbuttoning my shirt.

Her small fingers were taking too long, so I ripped the rest of the shirt open and tossed it aside. She grabbed my neck and pulled me back to her, but I resisted. I wanted to taste every inch of this incredible creature laid out before me. I slowly started trailing kisses across her breasts and down her stomach, stopping at her belly button.

“These pants have got to go,” I told her as I slid them off her gorgeous body.

“Okay, but only if yours come off too,” she said with the most seductive smile I’d ever seen.

*Damn, this woman is going to be the death of me,* I decided.

“I couldn’t agree more,” I said, never taking my eyes off her.

I quickly got rid of the barriers in our way and got back to what I was doing. Katya’s fingers ran through my hair as I kissed down her stomach and her breathing became rapid when I got close to her sensitive folds. Her scent was intoxicating and I took a moment to savor it.

“Damn Katya, you smell incredible. I can tell how wet you are already for me,” I said before flicking my tongue across her swollen bud. The action caused her body to shudder and we both needed more. I slowly started to lick and suck on the most sensitive part of her body. She tasted even better than she smelled and her smell almost did me in. She stifled a scream and grabbed hold of my hair.

“Ummm, I could get used to tasting this,” I groaned as she continued writhing underneath me. I continued to flick my tongue against her sweet pussy and gently slid two fingers inside her. *Damn! She is so tight and wet.* I continued my ministrations as her small hand reached down and took hold of my throbbing cock. This made me start licking and sucking harder and faster and I could feel her muscles begin to tense as her climax built so I continued to lick and suck until she exploded in my mouth. I lapped up her juices as she came down from her orgasm when she started to pull me toward her.

Pleading, she begged, “Please Zane, I need you. I need to taste you.”

Not wanting to disappoint her, I happily obliged. I picked her up and carried her to my bedroom, kissing her on the way. I knew she could taste herself on me and that turned me on even more. I laid her on the bed in amazement that this was happening. I didn’t plan it, but I was so grateful for unexpected surprises. Katya seemed to want to take the reins from here, and I had no problem letting her. She sat up, pulled me to the bed, and shimmied between my legs. Running her fingers up and down my length, she looked at me with a smirk and then took me into her mouth.

*Oh, My God,* she felt amazing. My breath hitched at the sensation of her warm, moist mouth on my cock. It was unbelievable. She moved up and down, licking and sucking like I was the last popsicle on a hot summer’s day. I didn’t want it to end, but I knew that if I didn’t stop her, it would be



over before it started. And I needed to be inside her. I needed to feel every inch of this amazing creature.

“Damn, that is incredible, but if you don’t stop now, I won’t last, and I need to be inside you,” I told her breathlessly.

Out of breath, she looked at me with a hunger I have never seen. Her look let me know she wanted and needed it too, so I quickly flipped her onto her back.

“I want to see your gorgeous face while I make love to you,” I told her.

Nodding, she pushed herself onto her elbows as I inched toward her. When I reached her, she grabbed my neck and I kissed her again. As I thrust into her, I was overwhelmed with emotions. I knew she would feel incredible, but this was so much more than that. Our bodies moved as if they were made for each other. It felt right. This is where I was supposed to be. I wanted to savor this moment but she felt so damn good I was not sure how long I could last. I slid in and out and began to quicken my pace as her orgasm built around me which only intensified my pleasure. She grabbed onto my shoulders and let out a silent yell as we tipped over the edge together, but it wasn’t enough. I wanted more. I needed more.

I made love to her over and over again until early morning when we both fell asleep.

I finally felt like I was home.

## Chapter Eighteen

### Katya

I opened my eyes and saw the sun starting to peek through the blinds. It was still early and for a moment, I wasn't sure where I was. I realized that someone was next to me but it wasn't Luca. This was an adult, a very large, muscular adult. When I realized it was Zane, last night's events flooded back to me. I should have been thrilled, but instead, an anxiety attack threatened to take over. My brain was screaming.

*Oh, My God! What have I done? I just slept with my boss!*

Technically, Zane wasn't my *boss*, but he was still someone who agreed to pay me for a job, and now, I might've just ruined everything by letting my desire get the best of me. I had to get out of there. I prayed Luca was still asleep so I could get dressed before he found me in Zane's bedroom.

I slid out of the bed as quietly as I could and tiptoed to find my clothes in the den. I didn't regret last night, in fact, it was the most incredible night of my life with such a sensitive

partner who cared about making me feel good, but I had no way of knowing how Zane would feel when he woke up, and I needed to get to work. After I got dressed, I heard Kenlee waking up in her crib. She was cooing and hiccupping, and I knew it was only a matter of seconds before she started screaming in the way only a sleepy baby could. She would wake Zane, and I wasn't ready to face him just yet. I ran and scooped Kenlee out of her crib, and thankfully she didn't start howling right away. I changed her, and fed her, but then she started fussing again, so I took her out into the hallway to try and calm her down. Luca trailed behind me, and I handed him the key to our room and told him to go get ready.

It was the weekend, and usually, Aleks watched Luca while I went to work on days that my son didn't have school. Obviously, that wasn't an option today, so as I bounced Kenlee on my hip, I used my free hand to get my phone out and call Addie, who answered after the first ring.

“Katya?”

“Hey, Addie—”

“Oh, thank God! Do you have any idea how worried I have been about you? I haven't heard from you in two days, so I went by your place to see how you were holding up after I saw Alek's arrest all over the news, only to find it trashed and you not there! I thought you were dead somewhere and I would never see you again!” I could tell she was crying, and I felt downright awful.

My heart was in my stomach. How could I do this to my closest friend? Addie has always been there when I needed her and I got so caught up in my own drama that I completely forgot to fill her in. With everything that happened in the last few days, it slipped my mind. I wasn't proud of my selfishness but that's what happened. My justification didn't ease my guilt.

“Addie, I am so sorry. I know I should have called. Luca and I are fine. A lot has happened so quickly that I forgot to call. I feel terrible. I am the worst friend ever. I know that is a horrible excuse, but it's the truth. Can you ever forgive me?” I asked.

I closed my eyes and prayed she found it in her heart to forgive me. But I also knew I would be livid if she'd done the same, and I could only imagine the horrible thoughts she had when she saw the apartment destroyed. She knew Aleks and what he was capable of.

After a moment, she let out a long breath and was quiet before she responded. “Of course, I forgive you, sweetheart. I was just scared. You and Luca are like family to me and the thought of losing you made me a little crazy. I am sorry for going all ‘Mommy Dearest’ on you but if you ever pull a stunt like this again... well, let's just say, I won't be sitting around waiting by the phone. Next time, I'm calling the cops.”

I was not sure who Mommy Dearest was, but I laughed to myself and smiled as I said, “There's no need for you to apologize. I was the one who was wrong, and I promise I will

explain everything to you later today but I do have to work so I was wondering if –“

Cutting me off before I could finish she said, “Stop right there. I already know what you are going to ask and you already know the answer is yes. Just tell me where you are and I will come to get my sweet boy,” she said in a voice with no room for argument. Not that she was going to get one.

I gave her the address to the lodge and my room number, and she said she was leaving right then. After we hung up, Kenlee was thankfully starting to calm down, so I thought now would be a good time to put her back in her crib. I turned to open Zane’s door and then realized my mistake. I’d locked myself out.

“Oh shit,” I said under my breath. I didn’t know what to do. If I knocked that would obviously wake Zane up, and the whole point of going out into the hall with Kenlee in the first place was to avoid seeing him just yet. Then again, it wasn’t like I could just walk away with a baby that wasn’t mine. Not without at least leaving a note to let Zane know I had her. Sighing, I looked down at the sweet baby girl in my arms and she smiled up at me.

“What do you think we should do?”

Instead of answering my question, Kenlee just spit up on my shirt and then started giggling.

“Alright, well, that answers that question,” I said, hiking her further up on my hip. “What we’re going to do first is go change my shirt. Yes, we are! Yes, we are.” I ran down the hall

and slipped into my room. I told Luca to get ready to spend the day at Addie's and then I put Kenlee down on my bed as I washed myself off and changed clothes. Ten minutes later, I heard a knock on my door. Luca answered it, and I sighed with relief when I heard Addie's voice coming from down the hall. I grabbed Kenlee and went to greet her, and she wrapped me up in a big hug the moment she saw me.

I was so happy to see her. I didn't realize how badly I needed a hug from my "mom." I had never told her that I thought of her this way but I think she knew. And after the conversation this morning, I think it was safe to say she felt the same. She released me and bent down to hug Luca who was already jumping up and down for her. He loved Addie and I was so glad he had her in his life. As she looked back at me, she seemed to only just then realize I had a baby in my arms and gave me a questioning look.

"Part of the story I will tell you later," I explained.

"Ok... but make sure I get *all* the information and details. I have a feeling this is one hell of a story."

"Addie, you don't know the half of it," I told her as I kissed her cheek and gave Luca a hug goodbye.

Addie and Luca left, and I turned my attention back onto the baby. I had to be at work in less than fifteen minutes, which meant I needed to figure out what to do with this little bundle of joy as soon as possible. I ran through a few different options in my mind but quickly realized that the only logical way to handle this situation was to go knocking on Zane's door and

just hope that he wasn't too hungover to see the humor in all this.

“You want to go see your daddy?” I asked in a sing-songy voice, as we headed toward the door. I reached for the handle and opened the door all while staring into Kenlee's big beautiful eyes. That's why I didn't notice Zane right away, and nearly ran straight into him on my way out.

“Oh, sorry!” I said with a laugh. “Good, you're up. I was just—”

If looks could kill, there wouldn't have been enough left of me for a funeral. Zane was looking at me with such fury in his eyes, that I stopped mid-sentence and stared back at him with disbelief. He snatched Kenlee from me before I could process what was happening.

“Wait, Zane—”

“Save it. Not a word. I don't want to hear a damn thing you have to say. You are unbelievable. I cannot believe you took my daughter without permission. From now on, stay the hell away from my daughter and me,” he growled before storming off down the hall.

Shocked, I walked back into the room and collapsed on the floor. Even if I wanted to, I could not have controlled the sea of tears that fell from my eyes. I sat on the floor and sobbed. I couldn't breathe. I could not even begin to process what just happened. I did not understand his reaction and behavior.

*Was he really angry at me for taking Kenlee without his permission or was he angry at himself for sleeping with me? Or was it both?* I honestly didn't know, but it didn't matter. All I knew for sure was that I was the definition of bad luck. No, better yet, I was the epitome of three strikes and you're out.

I was a 21-year-old single mom who had only ever slept with three men, and all three had broken my heart. But for some reason, this one hurt the most. It hurt in places I didn't know existed. I thought we had a connection and last night seemed to solidify it. I knew it had only been a few days, but I felt so close to him and I thought he felt the same.

I guess I was wrong. I often was, or so Aleks used to say. Thinking about what a fool I'd been made it worse as I sat on the floor and allowed myself to cry until no tears were left. Then I got to my feet, washed my face, looked in the mirror, and made myself a vow. No man would ever make me cry again.

I left the room and prepared to finish my shift. Staying busy always helped and I knew that if I didn't, the tears would fall again and I refused to go back on my own vow.

Katya Belinsky did not break promises. Even when I felt like falling apart.



## *Chapter Nineteen*

### **Zane**

I was fuming as I carried Kenlee back to the suite. I was pretty sure that I looked like one of those cartoon characters that has steam coming out of their ears. But once I had a moment to calm down, if you could call it that, I wasn't sure who I was the angriest at, Katya or myself.

When I woke up this morning to an empty bed and suite, I panicked. I soon realized that Katya probably had to work and needed to get Luca back to his own room, but when I discovered Kenlee was gone as well, I freaked out.

I saw red and completely lost my mind. I felt like I was reliving the nightmare of losing Sarah all over again. If I'd been able to think clearly, I probably would've come to the conclusion that Kenlee was safe and sound with Katya, just a few doors down the hall. That was the most logical explanation after all, and I should've operated under that assumption as I went to go knock on her door, but instead, all I could think about was the fact that Kenlee was gone and Katya

was to blame. My mind was dividing everything up into black-and-white categories. My baby was *gone*, and *Katya* was to blame.

This caused the panic to twist itself up into righteous indignation, and by the time I reached her door, I had somehow convinced myself that this woman was actually trying to kidnap my daughter. The idea of losing my precious baby engulfed my rational thinking and I became enraged. One second, I was calm like Dr. Bruce Banner, and in the blink of an eye, I became his alter ego. Instead of opening the door to Dr. Banner, *Katya* was on the receiving end of ‘The Incredible Hulk’. I’m not proud of that and there was not a doubt in my mind that I scared her to death.

I was no better than Aleks.

*Damn, I am such a fucking asshole.*

I just rescued her from an abusive situation only to turn around and treat her like trash.

*What was wrong with me?*

If I had given her a chance to explain, she probably would’ve had a good reason for taking Kenlee. But then again... wasn’t it a general rule among parents that you just don’t take someone else’s kid without permission? I realized I was still new to all of this, but that just seemed like common sense.

The more I thought about it, the more the events of that morning started to form in my mind. She had to leave early for

work and I was dead to the world. I didn't hear her get up or leave. By that time, Kenlee was probably wide awake, hungry, and needing to be changed. I could tell when I brought Kenlee back to my room, that Katya had changed and fed her, and that made me feel even worse for blowing up on her like that. She had been thinking of my daughter's welfare.

I had gone off *again* on the kindest woman I had ever met, next to Sarah, when all she'd done was put her own needs aside and thought only of my daughter's best interest.

Yes, she should have left a note, but that did not excuse my actions. I did not just overreact, I took that overreaction to the highest level it could go. I was a 15 on a scale of 10. I didn't know how I was going to do it, but once again I found myself needing to make this right.

I waited a couple of hours before heading out to find Katya. It gave me more time to calm down, and I figured she could use the time as well. I even tried to write out an apology but nothing sounded right. I wasn't even sure what to say to make this okay. I guessed I would just have to wing it and hope for the best.

I finally found her sitting in the employee lounge next to the fireplace. I stared at her beauty for a moment in awe. She didn't look sad. Instead, she looked defeated. Defeated but determined, in a way. In the span of 72 hours, this beautiful young woman had been put through the wringer and unfortunately, I was responsible for that twice. I was the headliner in this horror story and that had to stop.

I didn't want to startle her so I gingerly approached her. I had Kenlee in the carrier and she giggled as we got closer. Katya heard this and looked up from her sandwich. I noticed she had only taken one bite and it didn't look like she planned on eating more.

"You really should eat something," I told her. "You don't want to pass out during your shift."

"I'm fine," she said. "Please go away."

Her words weren't harsh, but they were cold and distant. It was like she was speaking to a business associate she barely knew. It hurt. Actually, it hurt a lot, but I knew I brought it on myself. I definitely deserved it. It wasn't like I expected her to be all gushy and sweet but I wasn't prepared for the hollowness in her voice.

"Katya—" I tried to start my apology, but the words wouldn't come, so instead, I just sighed and stared back at her food. "You must be starving."

Looking at me with even colder eyes, she stated, "No, in fact, I don't have an appetite at all.."

Pressing the issue was only going to aggravate her more so I dropped it. It was obvious that she had no intention of starting a conversation with me. And why would she? A part of me wondered whether or not I should do what she asked and walk away, but I wanted to give the apology one last go before giving up completely.

“Katya, I came to say I’m sorry. I was completely out of line this morning and had absolutely no right to talk to you that way. It was uncalled for. The only explanation I have is that I was frightened when I woke up and found Kenlee’s crib empty. It sent me into fight or flight mode, and I just panicked.”

“I wasn’t trying to take her,” Katya said, speaking so quietly that I had to take a step closer to hear everything she was saying. “But she started to cry after I fed her, so I went outside so she wouldn’t wake you, and then she spit up on my shirt and—”

“There’s no need for you to explain yourself,” I said. “You were just trying to take care of my kid and I was the one passed out with a hangover... If anything, I should be thanking you, and I know you would never do anything to hurt Kenlee.”

“Never,” she said, shaking her head, as if the suggestion alone was utterly unthinkable.

“Katya,” I said after a few moments of silence. “I do not want to lose you. Not after last night. I think there is something between us and I hope you feel the same. Do you think you could find it in your heart to forgive me?”

Her eyes were somewhat softer but her tone did not change. It was still cold, professional, and distant. I missed the voice of the Katya I had come to know in this short period of time.

“Thank you. I accept your apology,” she stated and started to stand up and leave.

I gently grabbed her arm to stop her before she could make a quick getaway.

“Please, Katya. Is that all? Can we try and pick up where we left off? I know I royally screwed up and I know I need to prove myself, but I feel there is something between us. It’s something I can’t explain and don’t really understand, but I want to. That is if you will let us. We can figure it out together.”

I didn’t know what I was expecting her response to be, but I was as honest as I could be so I stood there hoping for the best.

She closed her eyes and took a deep breath before responding. I could tell it was difficult for her but she finally managed to say, “Zane, I accept your apology and I agree, there was something between us.”

“Was?” I asked.

Sighing, she looked at me with sadness. “Zane, I can’t handle the mood swings. They are too much. I know you’ve been through a lot, even though I don’t know all the details, and I’m sorry that you’ve been struggling... But after everything I went through with Aleks, I hope you can understand why I wouldn’t want to bring another man with anger issues into my life. Or into Luca’s life, for that matter. I appreciate everything you have done for me, more than you will ever know, but I have to think about Luca and myself now,” she said before gathering her cart and leaving for her afternoon shift.

I let her go because I didn't know what else to do. Everything she said was true but I would be damned if this was the end of it. For the first time since Sarah died, I actually felt something and I refused to let it slip away from me because of my stupidity. Somehow, I would make this right.

###

I hoped I might get to process today's events and get some clarity during Kenlee's afternoon nap, but she had other plans. She refused to sleep, and I was back to square one. Nothing I did or tried was successful. I was grateful our room was at the end of the hall. If we had neighbors, Harry would've had to kick us out by now. For a tiny baby, her screams could wake the dead. After what felt like an eternity but in reality, was probably only an hour, I finally remembered some of the tips Katya gave me.

*Damn, I wish she was here. She would have had her down already.*

I was so lost in my own thoughts that I didn't even notice that the tips worked. By the time I snapped back to reality, Kenlee was sound asleep.

Once Kenlee was settled, I sat down at my computer to check my emails. I deleted the junk and responded to a few work emails before I saw it. It was an invitation to a local Bankers' fundraising charity gala event this Friday to raise money for Christmas gifts for children in foster care.

I was not in the mood to be sociable so I almost hit decline, but then I had an idea. I didn't know if it would work, but

maybe, just maybe I could convince Katya to go with me. I knew it was a long shot, but she was worth it. To get her to accept, I was going to have to “go big or go home” as the saying goes. I just hoped my plan was big enough to keep me from having to go home alone. I started making a few phone calls and began to write.

I felt hopeful that this could work, but only time would tell.



## *Chapter Twenty*

### **Katya**

I was exhausted after the emotional roller coaster of the last 24 hours and I wanted nothing more than to soak in a hot bath and crawl into bed, but I was a mom so that wasn't how my life went. I offered to pick Luca up but Addie insisted on bringing him home. I knew she was anxious for me to fill her in about what had happened. To be honest, I was grateful. At least this way I could take my shoes off and change clothes sooner. And, I'd rather tell her everything tonight and be done with it. The sooner I put this behind me, the better.

I poured myself a glass of wine and drank it faster than I planned. Zane had included a couple of bottles of a nice red in the grocery order he had sent to my room after I first arrived at the lodge. It was another example of just how kind and thoughtful he could be. But then he had that other side to his personality—the side that scared me and reminded me too much of everything I was trying to get away from.

My muscles instantly felt more relaxed and as tempting as a second glass sounded, I refrained. I knew alcohol was no way to deal with my problems. Four years with Aleks taught me that.

I could tell Zane had been honest and sincere in his apology, but I meant what I said too. I had no problem accepting his apology and being civil to one another moving forward, but I just couldn't let there be anything else between us. It was by far one of the hardest things I'd ever said to someone I cared about but I did what I had to do and I stood by it. I didn't just do it for me, but for Luca as well. He has already been through enough in his short life, and I didn't want to cause him more trauma. Not if I could help it.

I filled Addie in on all of this after she brought Luca back to my room later that evening, and she had pretty much the exact reaction I thought she would.

“You need to stay away from that man,” she said. “He sounds like he's trouble, and the last thing you need after getting out of that relationship with Aleks is more trouble.” Luca was in the bedroom, so it was just Addie and I sitting on the couch, sipping wine and chatting in soft voices.

“I know,” I said. “It's just weird, you know? Because when Zane is nice, he's *really* nice. Way nicer than Aleks has ever been to me.”

“It doesn't matter, love,” Addie said with a sympathetic smile. “He's snapped at you twice over the course of just a couple of days. That's just... it's not a good sign.” She looked

around the room and sighed. “Don’t get me wrong, I’m happy he helped you get away from Aleks the other night, and that he set you up in a safe place like this but... I think you need to just forget about him. If he gets mad at you for not going back to him, or if he tries to say you can’t stay here, then you can come crash at my place.”

I smiled and reached out to squeeze Addie’s hand. “Thanks. That means a lot.”

“I’ll always be here for you and Luca, you know that. Speaking of Luca, I’m planning on picking him up and taking him to school this next week, so don’t even worry about that.”

“You’re the best.”

She laughed and finished off her glass of wine, which was only half full to begin with. “Yeah, you’re right. I am.” She winked as she got up off the couch and said she was calling it a night. She went to go say goodbye to Luca, then kissed me on her way out, and left. Before I shut the door behind her, however, I lingered and she must’ve been able to tell that I had something on my mind.

“What is it, honey?” she said.

“I just—I just want to say, *Zane isn’t Aleks*. I don’t want you to get the wrong idea. He got upset, sure, but only because he was going through something. I really don’t think he’s a bad guy.”

Addie nodded encouragingly. “Alright... If you say so.”

“Are you just saying that to placate me?”

“No,” she said with a small laugh. “Well, not entirely. Look, Katya, I want you to have more people in your life looking out for you. I want you to be taken care of, okay? So, if you think there’s a reason to keep this man in your life in some capacity, then I’m not going to tell you what to do. Just promise me you’ll be careful, and that you’ll call me if he ever yells at you like that again. Deal?”

I grinned. “Deal.”

Then I shut the door and leaned my back against it on the other side. I let out a heavy sigh and shook my head. I was hoping that by talking to Addie, I would somehow find some clarity on the situation, but in all honesty, I was more confused now than I had been before. But there was no time to worry about that now. I had more important things to think about, like my son.

I found Luca sitting on the floor of the bedroom playing with his toys. “So, Little Man, how about I make you some of my famous blueberry pancakes for dinner?” I asked, already knowing the answer.

His eyes lit up and he excitedly asked, “With powdered sugar and butter?”

“Of course, you got it. Anything you want,” I told him.

“Yea! Can I help?”

“Absolutely! I can’t work without my assistant,” I said. He followed me to the kitchen and I started taking the ingredients out of the cupboard.

“Oh wait!” Luca said, then he ran to his room and came back wearing the superhero apron Addie bought him last year. He climbed up on the stool and began counting out the number of eggs we needed. For a brief moment, I forgot about my own problems and enjoyed the pure happiness that was Luca.

We were mixing the batter and singing, “Let It Go” when there was a knock at the door. I hadn’t ordered anything and Addie and Zane were the only people who knew we were here, so I couldn’t imagine who it was. It was a hotel though so I assumed someone must have the wrong room as I headed to open the door.

The bellboy was standing there with a smile on his face as he handed me the most beautiful bouquet of pink and red roses I had ever seen along with a mystery box. I thanked Zack, the bellboy, and took the roses and box to the table. Attached to the roses was a card.

Without knowing, I already had a good idea who they were from so I opened the card hesitantly. I didn’t know why I was scared to read what it said, but I was. I also didn’t know what to expect. I took the card to the couch and sat down to open it. Tears began to form as I read the words Zane had written.

*Dear Katya,*

*There are so many things I need and want to say to you but they all come out sounding inadequate. Saying I am sorry is not enough. I know that. Saying I am a blithering idiot is not enough. We both know that. I am a fool. A fool that has spent the entire day heartbroken over what I have done to you.*

*You, my dear Katya, deserve the world. You deserve better than me, but it is my deepest hope that somehow you will find it in your heart to grant me another chance. I know I don't deserve it, but desperate men do desperate things and I am desperate for you.*

*Please accept these flowers and dress as an apology and a token of my deep affection for you. I would be honored if you would do me the honor of agreeing to attend a gala event with me this Friday. I know my words have been short as I stumble over the right ones to say, so I will end by letting an excerpt from the words of the poem "I Am Sorry" by Leon Weate say what I cannot.*

*Yours,*

*Zane*

*"I scream at myself at how stupid I am  
For risking your love, for risking your hand,  
And I pray every day that you never see  
That I need you more than you need me.  
I bare my heart and my soul to you  
To say sorry for what I did and for what I do.  
I have no excuses and hide no more.  
All I can offer is my love for evermore."*

I sat on the couch and cried at the hauntingly beautiful words Zane had written. I'd never read that poem before, so I looked it up on the Internet and read the entire thing, just to let

the full beauty of it wash over me. I was overwhelmed. Finally, I pulled myself off the couch to open the box. Inside, I found the most devastatingly gorgeous sapphire blue dress. It even had shoes to match. I had absolutely no idea how he knew my dress or shoe size but both were perfect.

Luca saw it and said it looked like the dress a Disney princess would wear. I kissed his head and explained it was a gift from a friend and then sent him to his room to play. I needed to call Zane and I needed to do it in private.

I dialed his room and waited but he didn't answer. I decided he must be bathing Kenlee or putting her to bed, so I waited a few minutes and tried again. When he didn't answer a second time, I began to grow impatient and decided I couldn't wait any longer. I called for Luca to come out.

“What is it, Mommy?”

“We need to go to Mr. Zane's room for a minute so I can tell him something important, okay,” I told him.

“Okay!” He scrambled to get his shoes on. “I like Zane.”

Smiling at the love of my life I said, “Me too.”

*Most of the time...*

My hands were shaking as I knocked on Zane's door. I didn't know why I was so nervous but I felt like a schoolgirl about to go on her first date. The thought made me laugh considering I have a child and was definitely not a schoolgirl. Laughing at my own absurdity helped calm me down, but I was still anxious. Zane finally opened the door looking

frazzled and tired. I guessed today had been rough on him too. He looked shocked to see me but immediately motioned for me to come in and moved to allow us entry.

He saw Luca and spoke to him first which I appreciated.

“Hi, Luca. How have you been Buddy?” he asked him.

“Hi, Mr. Zane. I am good. Can we go play in the snow again soon?”

“You bet. Maybe this weekend we can all go,” he told him.

Squealing, Luca yelled, “Yea!” before running off to play with some of Kenlee’s toys, which were sprawled out on the living room floor.

Looking at me with hope in his eyes, Zane gently said, “I wasn’t sure I’d hear from you.”

I was not quite ready to address the elephant in the room so I didn’t acknowledge his statement. Instead, I said, “I see you used the lavender diffuser to help get Kenlee to sleep. That’s good.”

“Yes, thank you again for the advice,” he said, shoving his hands in his pockets and looking anywhere but directly into my eyes. I could tell he was nervous too, which made me feel a little more in control of the situation. I liked that. “Did you want to... talk in private?”

Luca made himself at home and was watching *Coco Melon*, but I wasn’t quite sure whether or not it was a good idea to come further into the room. Some of the excitement from the dress and poem was wearing off, and I reminded myself that I



hadn't fully forgiven this man yet. "Uh, yeah, okay," I said tentatively, hoping Zane would pick up on my hesitation.

"Kenlee is asleep in the bedroom," he said. "But we can talk in the bathroom." We shared an awkward laugh and he led the way.

His bathroom ended up being bigger than my bedroom at the old apartment. Once inside, he closed the door and started to speak before I interrupted him. "Katya, I – "

I put my hand up to stop him. "No Zane, let me go first. I'm—I'm not always very good at expressing myself in English, but I'm going to try. I want to say first, that you cannot buy my forgiveness with fancy dresses and shoes. You know that right?"

"Of course," he said. "I wasn't trying to buy your forgiveness. Did you—did you read the letter?" I nodded. "Yes."

"And?"

"And it was beautiful, and it touched my heart and made me feel things I've never felt before, but Zane—just saying the right things *now* doesn't make up for the way you treated me this morning. Or the first day we met."

"I know," he said with a sigh. "I know."

"But..." As I said this, his face lit up and he waited patiently for me to go on. "I would be lying if I said that I don't still... feel things for you. I wish they would go away,

I've been trying to push them aside this entire day, but they just keep coming back."

"So.. what are you saying?"

"I'm saying that I'm giving you *one last chance*," I said, my voice a little shaky. I still didn't know if this was a good idea or not, but I had to follow my heart on this one. "I will go with you to the gala so that we can see if these feelings that won't go away are real, or if it's just, oh what's the word—infatu—infatua—"

"Infatuation?"

"Yes. That. I'm still very nervous about everything," I went on. "And I'm not sure how long it will take for you to earn my trust back, but if you're okay with that, then I would happily be your date to the gala this Friday."

Zane didn't say anything for a while, so I had nothing to do but stand there in silence and wonder what he was thinking about. Eventually, the quiet was too much for my nervous mind, so I decided to be the one to fill it. Besides, there was one thing left to say.

"Also," I added, clearing my throat a little so that my words wouldn't be muffled. "I am sorry for taking Kenlee this morning. I thought about it while I was at work, and I probably would've lost my mind too if I woke up and found that Luca wasn't in his bed. I just wish you had given me a chance to explain but... well... anyway, I won't let something like that happen again. I promise."

Zane smiled at this and looked up at me. Our eyes locked, and I felt a jolt of energy run down my spine. I still didn't know what was going on between us, or if agreeing to go to the gala with him was a decision I would end up regretting, but there *was* one thing I knew for sure—I wanted him.

And he wanted me.

He took a step forward and reached for me. I didn't back away. He stroked my face and I closed my eyes and turned into him. I opened them again as he said, “Oh, Katya, you have nothing to apologize for. None of this was your fault. The fault was all mine,” he told me before leaning down to kiss me.

The kiss started off gentle but soon turned passionate and we could not seem to control ourselves. Not only did I want this man, but I also needed him. Suddenly it felt like we both had on entirely too many clothes and before I knew it, we were peeling each other's clothes off. Quickly he lifted me up and set me on the counter while continuing to kiss me as if it was the last time he would ever taste me.

Before I knew what was happening, he lifted me up, set my feet on the floor, and turned me around.

“I want you to be able to see me in the mirror,” he groaned as he thrust into me.

Looking at Zane while he cupped my breasts and thrust into me was incredible. His hand moved from my breast and began massaging my sensitive clit. The combination was too much and I felt myself clenching around his throbbing cock as my

orgasm approached. I could see Zane's expressions in the mirror, and I could tell that he was close too. I grabbed onto the counter and stifled my scream as we toppled over the edge together. While last night's never-ending love-making session was phenomenal, I had to admit, bathroom quickies were now on my *Favorite Things* list.

I didn't want to get dressed. I wanted to crawl into Zane's bed and continue exploring his amazing body, but I knew we couldn't. It was still early and Luca was in the den watching cartoons. I slid back into my jeans and pulled my sweater over my head and then reality started to set in. "That was... unexpected," I said.

"Yes, it was. I wasn't expecting it either but I can't seem to control myself when you are around. I can only hope it was the first of many experiences to come. You are incredible, Katya. I know I don't deserve you, much less this second chance, but I am damn grateful for it."

"Yeah, well..." I reached up and pushed some hair behind my ear. "I still want to take things slow, you know? I realize that what just happened may seem like the opposite of taking things slow, but... I just want to make sure that I'm being careful, and that I'm not putting myself in a situation where I will end up getting hurt again. You understand, right?"

"Of course," he said. "But for the record, I promise, I'm never going to hurt you again."

"I want to believe you..."

“But you can’t just yet,” he said. “I get it. I’m sure every person who’s hurt you in the past has said they were never going to do it again. I have to actually prove it to you, and I will.”

There was an intensity in his eyes, and I could tell that he was determined to make things up to me, for real. But that wasn’t something that was going to happen overnight, and we had already been tucked away in the bathroom for long enough. “We should probably go check on the kids,” I said. “And I need to go call my friend and see if she can watch Luca Friday night.”

“Yeah,” he agreed. “And I need to find someone to watch Kenlee. Unless you think your friend can do it? I would pay her of course.”

I smiled at him and told him, “It is no trouble at all. I don’t think she will mind. She loves babies. I will ask her and let you know, okay?”

“Sure. That sounds good,” he said as the two of us headed out the door.

Luckily, Kenlee was still sleeping and Luca was engrossed in his show. In fact, he was so enamored with whatever was going on that I doubt he even knew we were gone. I hated to interrupt him when he looked so serious but I had to. He had school tomorrow and I still needed to process everything that had happened in the last 24 hours. He was bummed we had to leave, but I told him we would see Zane and Kenlee soon. This

made him smile and he gave Zane a high five before reminding him about their snow date.

I guessed high fives had become their thing and as stupid as it seemed, it brought happy tears to my eyes. I checked on Kenlee and kissed Zane goodbye and we headed down the hall to our room. It had definitely been quite a day but it was ending on a much happier note than I expected.

I grabbed Luca's hand and we skipped to our room.

## Chapter Twenty-One

### Zane

Once Katya and Luca left, I bathed and fed Kenlee, put her down for the night, and poured myself a glass of scotch. I was blown away by how much my life had changed in such a short time. After my behavior and actions this morning, I thought for sure I'd lost Katya forever. I knew I shouldn't be surprised though.

If losing Sarah had taught me anything, it was that there were no guarantees in life. It made me think that maybe, just maybe she was sent here for me and that Sarah had something to do with it. I knew how crazy that sounded, but I was only 34, and I knew she wouldn't want me to be alone forever.

Deep down I had always known that eventually, I might meet someone else, but I never expected it to be so soon. *Is five months too soon?* I wondered. I didn't know for sure, but what I did know was this felt right.

Katya was amazing. She was so good with Kenlee, and I really liked spending time with Luca. He was a great kid. For someone who hadn't ever had a positive male role model, he was polite, respectful, and caring. He easily could have picked up some of Alek's bad habits and traits but didn't. It would've made sense. All little boys want to be like their dad or whoever is closest to that position. Somehow, even a four-year-old knew better than to act like that piece of crap.

I gave all the credit to Katya. It was yet another testament to her as a human being. She'd managed to raise him all by herself while working here at the lodge and with an alcoholic, abusive boyfriend at home. And somehow, she did it without Luca becoming spoiled or having behavior issues. That is an accomplishment for sure. One I doubt she would acknowledge.

I sipped my scotch and my thoughts came back to Sarah. *Was I moving too fast?* I had to admit that I did feel somewhat guilty. Like maybe I was moving on too soon, and I wanted to believe she would be okay with it because of my own selfishness. Maybe I was selfish. I wasn't sure, but then again... didn't I deserve to be happy?

I knew there were plenty of people that would tell me I needed to take things slow and date around for a while, but honestly, I didn't want to. There was one thing that losing someone you love taught me, and that was being able to know when something was real and worth holding on to. Katya was both.



Katya had captured my heart and soul, and I didn't want it back. In addition to being a fantastic mother and overall human being, she was also sexy as hell. Losing someone also teaches you to grab love and hold onto it while you can because you never knew what tomorrow would bring. I almost forgot that, and it almost cost me my chance with Katya. I still couldn't believe she'd given me a second chance. I couldn't screw this up. No, forget that, I *refused* to screw this up.

I moved from the sofa to the balcony and looked out at the magical night. The snow was reflecting off the trees, and the stars were twinkling in the clear mountain sky.

Looking up, I said, "Thank you." I wasn't really sure who I was saying it to, but it felt like it needed to be said. I could see Katya so clearly in my mind. Her physical beauty was obvious the moment you met her, but she was so much more than her physical looks. Her inner beauty was unparalleled. I was pretty sure she was the definition of kind, humble, and generous with a bonus of gorgeous.

Not to mention she turned me on like no one ever had before. Not even Sarah. I loved Sarah with all my heart and our sex life was great, but with Katya, it was off the charts. We connect in a way I never knew human beings could connect. I thought those romantic movies were all fluff and just a way to make money, but I was starting to think I was wrong. Katya was teaching me that the fairy tale really did exist. I just hoped I was worthy of being her prince.

Thinking about our bathroom encounter from earlier caused my pants to tighten. The way she responded to me was unreal. I closed my eyes and pictured her gorgeous body as I thrust into her from behind. *Damn, her ass looked perfect.* Being able to see her expressions and know that I was the one bringing her that intense pleasure was gratifying and it also intensified my own pleasure.

My pants became unbearably uncomfortable and thinking about baseball stats wasn't going to get my mind off Katya, so I began to unzip my pants. I did a quick glance around to make sure there weren't any spectators and then sat down in the lounge chair and let my imagination take over.

In my fantasy, Katya was here with me telling me how much she wanted me. My hand started to rub my throbbing hard cock as I imagined her taking it into her dainty but luscious mouth. *Damn, I can't wait to experience that again.* I began to stroke harder and faster as I imagined grabbing her platinum hair as she licked, sucked, and took me fully into her mouth. If this was a fantasy, I couldn't even imagine how good the real thing would be once I had her again. If it was half as good as it was before, I didn't think I'd be able to handle it. I felt myself getting close so I continued stroking as I leaned back and pictured Katya swallowing my juices and then licking up the rest. Just as I saw her do this, I released.

I took off my shirt to clean up my mess and went back inside to shower. It had been years since I'd pleased myself, and the wait was worth it. It might not have been as good as

having Katya there in person, but it definitely gave me ideas for the future.

I had just discovered a whole new use for my balcony.

## *Chapter Twenty-Two*

### **Katya**

I was able to finish my shift thirty minutes early, which was a God send. After clocking out, I ran to Zane's room to pick up Kenlee, and brought her with me back to my room. Addie arrived shortly thereafter, showing up nearly an hour early and letting me know she was there to help me get ready. I felt like that was her way of showing me she was happy for me, so I happily accepted her offer to do my hair. I was sure she still had her doubts about Zane, and so did I, but Addie's love and support had always been unconditional, and she respected my choices.

Kenlee was playing with her toys and after some bickering, I finally convinced Luca to sit quietly and watch a movie. I sighed and looked at Addie. I knew I must've smelled like sweat and industrial-strength bleach, and the hair she had so kindly offered to help me with, was gross and unwashed.

"First step," Addie said with a smile. "You need to shower."

“Good call,” I said. “You’ve got everything under control out here?” But as I asked this, Addie was walking across the room with a grin on her face. She scooped Kenlee up into her arms and the little girl giggled with delight.

“I’ll be just fine,” she said, and I knew there was nothing for me to worry about. At least, nothing in regard to the kids. In regards to the gala and getting ready—that was a different story. There was still *a lot* I needed to worry about. I thanked Addie and ran down the hall. I took the fastest shower I could, and when I came out ten minutes later with dripping wet hair, Addie told me to sit in one of the kitchen chairs. She then took a blow dryer and a round brush out of her oversized bag and started to style my hair with big, soft curls.

After my hair was done, I realized I only had about twenty minutes before Zane would be around to pick me up. Addie got started on dinner while I slipped into my dress and put on a little bit of makeup. The dress fit me like a glove and accentuated my blue eyes. I never wore a lot of makeup but since the occasion called for it, I applied light foundation and blush. On my eyes, I opted for a shimmery gold shadow with a light pink highlighter. I finished by lining my bottom lashes with black eyeliner and applying two coats of mascara. The final touch was my favorite raspberry red lipstick. I always felt confident when I wore it, and it looked great with the dress.

I hesitated before adding the final touch—my grandmother’s earrings. They were the only thing of sentimental value I brought with me from Russia, but they were also very classy and expensive, and I was always a little

scared to wear them out of the house. I adored my Babushka and although it made me sad to think of her, I knew she would've wanted me to wear them. I felt connected to her the instant I put them on, and I knew she was watching over me.

I walked into the den and Addie and Luca started gushing. They made me feel like I just won a beauty pageant.

“Wow, Mommy, you look beautiful! Are you a princess?” my angel asked me.

Laughing, I bent down and hugged him.

“No, Sweet Pea, I am just a regular Mommy. I just got dressed up to go out with Mr. Zane.” I grabbed my purse and turned to my friend. “Well, what do you think? Do I look okay? Be honest.”

She shook her head and declared, “Sweetheart, your man is going to stop dead in his tracks. You are stunning.”

“Oh, stop,” I said, getting embarrassed.

“I'm serious. You look absolutely gorgeous. Any man would be lucky to have you on his arm. This Zane is one lucky man,” she said while balancing Kenlee on her hip. Then she lowered her voice and added, “And don't you let him forget it. Giving him a second chance was very nice of you, Katya, and I just hope he knows that he's on thin ice.”

I laughed. “Yeah, I think he knows...”

Before we could discuss the topic of Zane any further, there came a knock at the door.

“Speak of the devil,” I said. I opened the door and almost fell to my knees when I saw how good Zane looked in his tuxedo. I’d seen him in one a few days ago, but now that we were more than friends, I was seeing him in a whole new light. I was trying not to let the image of him sway me too much. I wanted to keep my wits about me, to play things close to the chest, but he just looked so damn good.

*Tonight is either going to be the most fun I’ve ever had.*

*Or a complete disaster...*

Zane took one look at me and his mouth literally dropped open. For a second, I was afraid that something was wrong and he was disappointed. He immediately relieved my anxiety when he blurted out, “Oh Wow! I didn’t think you could get any more beautiful than you already were but I was mistaken. I am going to need security to keep an eye on you tonight. You take my breath away,” he said, leaning in to kiss my cheek. “Are you ready to go?”

Blushing, I smiled and nodded, and took his extended arm. We said goodbye to Addie and Luca and headed downstairs. When the elevator door opened and we began to walk past the reception area, I felt like I was in a real-life romantic Hollywood movie. The entire staff stopped what they were doing and stared at us. Some of them were whispering, others just smiled as I glided past them, feeling impossibly light on my feet. Harry was there, and when I saw the look he gave Zane and me as we passed him, I could tell he was really happy for us.

I may not have been a princess like Luca thought, but I definitely felt like one.

Zane led me to his car in the parking garage. It was a gorgeous black Mercedes Benz and I was in awe. I was sure I'd seen it the night he rescued us from Aleks, but I was in too much shock to notice. From where I was standing, that car was better than even Cinderella's carriage. We made small talk on the drive over and every so often, I caught a glimpse of Zane staring at me. I really did feel beautiful.

I knew the gala would be a fancy event, but I honestly had no idea how nice the event was going to be until I stepped inside the ballroom where it was being held. Everyone was dressed in their very best and the women were all drop-dead gorgeous. I accompanied Zane as he made the rounds and spoke to people he knew, many of whom were stock traders and bankers that worked with him.

I did my best to keep up and understand what they were talking about, but it was over my head. I never had a brain for numbers. They just never interested me. Even as a child, when my father and grandfather tried to get me to take an interest, I just couldn't get into it. Although I knew it could be fascinating to some, to me, it was just boring. I did my best to follow along, but eventually, my mind started to wander.

I didn't want Zane to see this though, so I masked it with a smile. Unfortunately, it caused my lovely friend, anxiety to start making an appearance and I began to feel stupid and completely out of place. This was compounded when a



stunning redhead appeared and started shamelessly flirting with Zane.

“Hey,” she said as she saddled up next to him with a playful smile. “Long time no see.”

“Oh, uh, hey Veronica,” Zane said with a sheepish grin. “I didn’t know you were going to be here tonight.”

The woman’s eyes glossed over me as if I was just a mosquito flying in front of her face, and not a human being currently on the arm of the man she was flirting with.

*Am I invisible? Can this witch not see that we are here together? Does she just not care? Maybe I should leave and let Zane talk to her. She is probably better suited for him anyway.* These were all the thoughts running through my head in less than two minutes. I needed a drink. Luckily, a waiter was walking around with a tray of champagne so I gladly took one when it was offered.

The champagne did nothing to help my nerves. I felt like I was wearing a neon sign that said, “I am just a maid and not good enough to be here.”

It might not be true, but that was how I felt and the more I tried to hide it, the more it was beginning to show.

“Listen,” Zane said, giving me an encouraging smile before turning back to the redhead. “As much as I would love to stand around and catch up, I have to go introduce *my date*, to a few of my friends across the room. Would you excuse us?”

She smiled at him but shot dagger eyes at me as we walked away. I finished my glass of champagne, took Zane's arm, and we headed out to the balcony instead of across the room like he'd just said. For some reason, I took this to mean that he had never intended to introduce me to his friends in the first place. He was embarrassed by me, I could tell, and that was why he wanted to go somewhere private, where there was no one around to see me make a fool of myself.

When we stepped out onto the balcony, Zane took his jacket off and put it around my shoulders before turning me to look at him. *Here it comes*, I thought mentally preparing myself for the worst. But what I saw in his eyes was concern. I wasn't ready for that.

"Katya, what's wrong? Please do not say "nothing". I can tell something is bothering you. Have I done something to upset you? I apologize for all of the boring "Shop" talk. Sometimes these events are the only chance I get to see these people. I've been sort of MIA the past few months, so I needed to make sure I shook a few hands tonight but didn't mean to exclude you."

I stared at him for a moment before blowing out the breath I had been holding all evening. "No, Zane, you haven't done anything wrong. It's me. I don't belong here. I feel like a fish out of water. You should be here with someone like that woman, Veronica, or whatever her name was. She seems to know how to do this sort of thing a lot better than me."

“Is that what is bothering you?” he asked, caressing my face. “I am sorry about that. I should have clued you in. We dated years ago and I’ve always made it clear that I am not interested, but she always tries. I have gotten so used to it that I don’t even realize she is doing it. I apologize.”

I was still hurt and uncomfortable, but I was also getting cold so I simply shrugged my shoulders and said, “It’s fine.”

“That’s not the answer I was hoping for,” he said.

“What do you want me to say, Zane? That it is okay and I will just continue to ignore it when it happens again? And it will happen again. You know it as well as I do. These women know I don’t belong with you and they are going to make damn sure I don’t forget it,” I said, holding back my tears.

Zane stepped back and frowned at me. “Is that what you think?”

“Yes,” I blurted out.

He walked back to me and held my face in his hands. “Katya, I am here with you because you are who I want to be with. Those women are not looking at you like you are less. They are looking at you with jealousy. There is not a woman in that room or anywhere else for that matter that can hold a candle to you and they know it. If I haven’t done enough tonight to make you feel like the most beautiful, amazing woman in the world, then that’s on me. I’m just going to have to up my game.”

“What—what do you mean?”

“I mean I’m going to kick it up a notch,” he said with a cocky laugh. “I’m going to make sure everyone here knows that there isn’t anyone else on earth I would rather be here with than you.” Then he leaned down and kissed me.

When we finally came up for air, he smiled and brushed my hair away from my face.

“Or, on second thought,” he said with a mischievous look in his eye. “If you’re sick of being here altogether, we could just leave? I’ve had just about all the socializing I can take for one evening anyway.” Then he leaned in close and whispered, “Plus, I can’t wait to get you back to my suite and peel that dress off you. To be honest, I have been thinking of nothing else since I picked you up.”

Blushing again, I nodded yes and he began to lead me inside. This time though, he took my hand. I couldn’t help but feel smug when we walked by the woman from earlier. She not only saw us holding hands but my lipstick was clearly visible on Zane’s lips. I knew it was petty and I wasn’t normally like this, but the woman had gone out of her way to dismiss me and make me feel insignificant. I’ve always believed in karma and she had this coming. It may be wrong, but inside I was thrilled to see her looking so defeated.

Zane had tunnel vision as we made our way through the crowd. He led me straight to the valet, never letting go of my hand while we waited for the car to arrive. It only took a few minutes and he tipped the driver before opening the door for me and hurrying to the driver’s seat. I buckled myself in and

when I did, the slit in my dress opened showing more of my thigh. I decided against closing it. I wanted him hot and bothered and yearning for me.

The noise that came out of his throat was sexual and primal. He looked at my legs and then at me and groaned, “I need to get you home now. I love that dress, but I need you naked and writhing underneath me.”

Before I could respond, he pulled out of the parking lot and started speeding toward the lodge. When we arrived, he didn’t bother to park the car himself, opting to let the valet take care of it. I didn’t have to ask why. I already knew. It would’ve taken more time and the sexual tension between us was at an all-time high.

There was no time to waste.

## *Chapter Twenty-Three*

### **Zane**

**T**he drive back to the lodge was agonizing. I wasn't sure why, but I had an overwhelming desire, no need, to make love to Katya immediately. I needed her to know she was the one I wanted to be with tonight. I should've been more aware of her feelings and not allowed her to feel uncomfortable at any point. I apologized profusely, but words can only say so much.

Now I had to show her with my actions. I planned on worshiping every inch of her with my hands, tongue, and cock, and then starting all over again. When we got to the lodge, I didn't even take the time to park. I got out, threw the keys to the valet, and let Katya out. Grabbing her hand, we rushed through the lobby on the way to our destination. The elevator ride was torture. I wondered if it had always taken this long. After what was probably only a couple minutes but felt like thirty, it finally stopped and the doors opened. I didn't want to waste any more time, so I picked Katya up and sped walked

down the hall, never stopping to put her down until we reached my bedroom.

I started by slowly helping her out of her heels. I won't lie. It wasn't just to help her. I also wanted to run my hands up her toned and silky legs. Ever since her slit fell open in the car, I had been wanting to get my hands on them. I also wanted to taste her. I turned her around and slowly unzipped her dress. I wanted to see her sexy back and ass as the dress fell to the floor. I didn't know what I was expecting to see underneath, but the iridescent silver jewelry and lace panties made my cock even harder.

My restraint was breaking and I was barely hanging on. I needed to be inside this woman, but first I needed her to know just how much I appreciated her, "As hot as you look in these, I think it is time for them to come off. That is unless you want me to rip them off you."

Seductively, she smiled as she slowly began taking them off. When she was bare, and her delicious breasts and perfect pink bud were in full view, she reminded me that I was not playing fair. I was still fully clothed. It wasn't on purpose. I had been so engrossed in Katya that I forgot to take them off. She slowly walked toward me, grabbed my cummerbund, and pulled me toward her. Kissing her passionately, I told her that tonight was all about her. I wanted to taste, touch, and feel every inch of this magnificent creature. I began by working my way down from her neck and collarbone to her breasts and stomach. I began slowly licking and kissing her stomach as I slid two fingers inside her slick folds.

*Damn, she felt good. She was already dripping wet.*

Moaning, she arched her back letting me know she needed more.

I slowly started tortuously kissing down her thighs which were already slick from her desire. When I reached her perfect pussy, her scent drove me wild. I began to lick and suck her clit while her moans grew louder and more intense. Her body tensed as her climax built, so I began sucking and flicking my tongue over her swollen bud. I loved the way her body responded to me so I intensified my touch. This sent her over the edge. She wrapped her taut legs around my shoulders and grabbed my hair and let her orgasm take over. I could hardly wait for it to be my cock inside her.

“You are so wet for me,” I told her as I lapped up her juices, “I might have to go for round two,” but she stopped me and began pulling me to her, reaching for my throbbing cock.

“Tell me what you want, Katya,” I whispered.

Breathlessly, she pleaded, “I want you, Zane. Now. I want your cock inside me. Please make love to me.”

She wanted it then and who was I to deny her? Slowly, I inched my way up her body, kissing and licking as I went. Stopping at her breasts, I pulled a taut nipple into my mouth and licked and sucked until she moaned and writhed underneath me. When neither one of us could stand it any longer, I kissed her, letting her taste her incredible juices, and entered her. She was so wet that she was able to take in all of me on the first thrust.



*Fuck! This is incredible!*

I knew this wasn't the first time we'd been together, but it might as well have been. The feeling of her tight walls clenching around my hard cock was unbelievable. I doubted I would be able to last long like this, but I also knew it was the first of many times I planned on having her that night.

We moved together in a rhythm that was distinctly our own. I moved slowly at first, wanting to experience the look on her face and the feel of her but before I knew it, the sensation was overwhelming and my cock was moving in and out of her faster. Soon, we reached our first mind-blowing climax together. I collapsed on top of her and then rolled over and pulled her to my chest. I needed her close. That sounded stupid considering I was inside her only seconds ago, but right now, any distance felt too far apart. Out of breath, I panted, "That was incredible. I don't think I'll ever be able to get enough of you, so get ready, that was just round one."

Katya groaned in anticipation and rolled on top of me.

We stayed there in bed, wrapped up in each other's arms, for a while. After some time passed, I began running my hands through her hair and thinking about her body. I started to get hard again, and Katya must've noticed because she smiled at me seductively and said, "Are you already ready for round two?"

"Maybe."

"Let me see if I can help change that 'maybe' into an 'absolutely'."

She crawled on top of me and kissed her way down my stomach before stopping at my cock. Mischievously, she grabbed my already-hardening dick and said, “You know, I never did get dessert tonight,” and proceeded to take me into her delicious mouth. My breath gasped at the sensation and I grabbed hold of her head as she began sucking and licking my growing pole.

*Damn! She’s fucking incredible!*

As good as it felt, I didn’t want to orgasm like that. Not yet anyway, so I desperately pleaded, “Katya, Damn, Baby, that feels incredible and I can’t wait to explode in your mouth, but right now, I need to be inside you again. I want to hear you scream as I bring you pleasure again.”

And with that, I made love to her for a second time but by no means the last time of the night. Eventually, we grew too tired to keep going, and she reminded me that she had to be up early for work in the morning.

I rolled over and kissed Katya goodnight and pulled her closer to me. I held her against my body and listened to her soft breathing as I stared at the ceiling. I already knew that I cared for her, but all of the sudden, I realized that I might actually be falling for her. The thought both terrified me and thrilled me at the same time. As I finally drifted off to sleep, I was aware that I was not freaked out by my sudden realization. Yes, there had been some speed bumps in the road so far, and there was still a lot that we needed to figure out, but I was up for the challenge.

*As long as we have each other, everything will be ok.*

## *Chapter Twenty-Four*

### **Katya**

**I** was relieved when I woke up early since I'd forgotten to set the alarm on my phone. Luckily, I was normally an early riser. I didn't usually work on Saturdays, but I was helping out a friend who had a sick child and needed her shift covered. I quickly slipped into my dress, grabbed my shoes, and left Zane a note.

*Zane,*

*I didn't want to wake you as you looked so peaceful sleeping.*

*I hope some of those dreams are about me.*

*I have gone to relieve Addie and get Luca ready for the day.*

*I will bring Kenlee by on my way to work.*

*Love, K.*

As I started to leave, I noticed the envelope with Addie's name on it. I could tell from how thick it was that he had paid

her generously. I knew Addie was okay financially, but I also knew she didn't have a lot of extra money to spend, so I hoped she would take Zane's gesture and treat herself. If she wouldn't, I would just have to do it for her. When I got back to my room, I didn't expect to find anyone awake, but Addie was sitting in the kitchen drinking coffee.

"Good Morning, Addie," I said, bending down to hug her.

"Good morning to you too, Sweetheart. How was your evening?"

"It was wonderful. I can't thank you enough for watching both Luca and Kenlee. Here, Zane wants you to have this so please don't try and refuse it," I said, handing her the money.

Setting her coffee cup down, she looked at me and said, "Okay, I won't. I understand pride. The same pride that wants me to refuse it, is the same pride that makes the two of you need to pay me. I would never allow it to come out of your pocket, but I get the impression that Zane Grey can more than afford to throw this kind of money around."

"I think that's a safe assumption," I said, laughing under my breath.

I kissed Addie on the cheek and told her to take the coffee with her in my to-go mug. Since the kids were still asleep, I took advantage of the peace and quiet and slipped into a warm bath. It was just what I needed. The hot water worked to ease my tired muscles and soothe the soreness between my legs. It wasn't completely unpleasant and I enjoyed the reminder of my night with Zane, but it would be easier to get through the

day if I wasn't aching. I soaked for a while and then got out and got ready for the day. I washed off the remainder of last night's mascara and applied some moisturizer to combat my tiredness. Today called for concealer and a little lip gloss. I wanted to at least look somewhat put together.

Once I was dressed for the day, I went to the kitchen and found Luca trying to pour himself a glass of milk.

"Good morning, Angel. Would you like me to pour that for you?" I asked, taking the heavy gallon of milk from his small hands.

"I can do it!" he said, but he didn't actually fight me when I took the gallon from him. He knew he needed help, but he wanted to pretend like he didn't. I said nothing and just poured him a glass. He took it from me but then made a pouty face as he walked away.

"What's wrong, honey?" I asked.

"I wanted to pour it."

I sighed. "I know, honey, but the jug was just too heavy for you. Soon, you'll be big enough to do it by yourself though."

He looked down at his feet. "Don't tell Zane."

I laughed, then quickly covered my mouth so that he wouldn't feel like I was mocking him. "Luca, why don't you want me to tell Zane about this?"

"I want Zane to think I'm strong."

I walked over and bent down so that I was at eye level with my son. “Oh, honey, I’m sure Zane *does* think you’re strong. And you want to know something else, your mommy *knows* you’re strong. How about this, next time, we can pour it together?”

He shrugged. “I don’t know...”

“Or I could ask Zane to show you how to pour milk when the jug is really full. Would you like that?”

I could see just a hint of a smile, but then he looked away, obviously embarrassed, and made a little animal-like sound in response. I tousled his hair and got up, letting him drink his milk in peace.

I woke Kenlee and changed her diaper before feeding her. She was a beautiful baby and it was easy to see why Zane was so protective. Once I had both kids fed and ready, I took Luca to the in-house daycare for the day. I had left him there a few times before so he was familiar with the staff. They were always happy to see him and vice versa. I liked that he was able to play with other kids without having to worry about him running off. It was a win-win. I said goodbye to Luca and told him I would pick him up after work. He kissed me goodbye and ran off to play with his friends.

I barely knocked on Zane’s door before he opened it and greeted us with an enormous smile. It was a complete change from the previous out-of-control greeting, and I was happy to see it.

Taking Kenlee from me, he looked at both of us and declared, “I doubt too many other men were lucky enough to answer their door this morning to two stunningly beautiful women.”

Kenlee giggled and he kissed her cheek before setting her in her swing. Before turning back to me, he told her, “Good morning, Angel. Daddy missed you.” Then he turned back to me. “Good morning to you too, gorgeous. I hope you slept well.”

“I slept quite well as a matter of fact. For some reason, I was completely worn out,” I said, winking at him.

Walking toward me he moaned, “Hmmm. Good to know. I will have to see about making that happen more often.”

“I hope you do,” I said.

Once he was close enough to touch me, he pulled me in and gave me a hug that said he couldn’t wait for more. I was looking forward to it as well.

“Would you be willing to have dinner with me tonight when you get off work? Don’t worry about bothering Addie again, I will take care of childcare for the kids tonight.”

I smiled. “Yes, I would love to. I get off at 5:00. I’ll just need a couple of hours to shower and spend some time with Luca.”

“Of course. I’ll make reservations for 8:00. Nothing too fancy though. I don’t know about you, but I for one, am tired of getting dressed up,” he told me playfully.



I was relieved. I didn't mind dressing up, to be honest, I enjoyed it, but my options were limited. The dress I wore last night, the one he gave me as a gift, was the only nice dress I owned.

"That sounds perfect," I told him and leaned up to kiss his cheek, then headed for the door. I stopped before walking out of his room, however, and turned back. He looked at me with curiosity in his eyes, and I smiled. "I had a really nice time last night, and I'm glad that we decided to see where this thing might lead us. I'm still a little worried, but I think I'm beginning to trust you again."

"Really?" His face lit up.

"Yeah," I said. "We're taking baby steps, but at least we're going in the right direction. And I wanted to thank you again—for helping Luca and I get out of a bad situation. No matter what happens between us, I will forever be grateful for the way you took care of us when we needed somebody the most."

"I was happy to do it," he said, walking over and stroking my cheek. "I just hope you'll let me continue to be there for you. And for Luca."

I leaned my face against his hand but said nothing. After a few seconds of silence, I had to leave so I wouldn't be late. I waved as I stepped backward out of the door, and he watched me walk away with a big, bright smile on his face.

## *Chapter Twenty-Five*

### **Zane**

I had been feeling so good after Katya agreed to have dinner with me, that the overwhelming wave of guilt that crashed over me shortly after she left, felt like it totally came out of nowhere. I knew I needed to talk to someone, to get some perspective on everything I was doing and feeling, but I didn't know who to call.

Chase was a good friend and he has always had my back, but he'd never had a lasting relationship, so I doubted he would understand. I wasn't judging him, but three months is the longest he has ever been with the same girl. I immediately scratched him from the list. I thought about calling Sloane as well, but I knew she was too supportive to tell me the truth.

Harry, on the other hand, wasn't afraid to tell me exactly what he thought. He was the obvious choice, especially considering I knew exactly where to find him.

I strapped Kenlee into the Baby Bjorn and headed to Harry's office. His secretary told me he was in but I knocked before entering. We may have known each other our entire lives but this was still his place of business, and I respected that. Plus, for all I knew, Sloane could be in there and I didn't want to interrupt anything.

Harry called for me to come in and looked up from his computer as we came through the door.

"Hey," he said with a smile. "What a surprise. You never come and visit me at the office."

"Yeah, well, I was hoping you'd have time to chat..."

He must've been able to pick up on my not-so-cheery mood because he frowned and motioned for me to have a seat across from him. "I've always got time for you."

"Thanks, man," I said. I lowered myself down into the chair, and Kenlee made a little cooing sound before putting her head back down against my chest and closing her eyes.

"I've actually been wondering how long it was going to be until you came by for a little chat," he said.

I raised a brow. "Oh yeah? Why's that?"

"I saw you and Katya leaving the lodge last night looking like a million bucks." He smirked. "I had a sneaking suspicion something might've been going on between you two, but after seeing the way you were smiling at each other on your way out the door, now I know for sure."

“Sorry I didn’t stop to say hi or anything,” I said. “We were just sort of in a hurry.”

“Don’t apologize,” he said. “I was just really happy to see you smiling again. And I take it this means she’s no longer with that deadbeat boyfriend of hers. People talk around here, and everything I’ve heard about that guy makes me want to go teach him a lesson on manners.”

“I know what you mean.” Thinking of Aleks made my blood pressure rise, but I calmed down when I remembered the son of a bitch was in jail. At least for the time being. “But that actually brings me to what I came to talk to you about. You know how you set up that room for ‘my friend’?”

Harry nodded. “Yeah...”

“Well, the aforementioned ‘friend’ is Katya, and I needed to get her a place to crash because Aleks is more than just a jerk. He’s an abusive jerk, and the other night when I went over to her place to apologize for snapping at her, he was in the middle of throwing a tantrum and was about to lay a hand on her.”

Harry balked. “He hits her?”

“He used to,” I said. “But I’m never going to let him near her again. Anyway, I ran inside and... well... I took care of things, and brought Katya and her son back here.”

“What do you mean you ‘took care of things’?”

“Let’s just say, I showed that piece of shit that I’m not someone he should mess with.”

Harry leaned over onto his elbows and frowned at me. “I don’t want to know all the details, but if I’m hearing you correctly...” He shook his head and made a clicking sound with his tongue. “Just tell me this—do you have an alibi or anything, in case the guy presses charges?”

“He won’t,” I said. “He’s got too much of his own shady shit with the cops right now to blame someone else.”

“You’re sure?”

I sighed and looked down at Kenlee. “Pretty sure...”

Harry didn’t exactly seem satisfied with this answer, but he let it go for now. “Alright, so you brought Katya and her son here, and they’ve been staying in that room down the hall from you for the last couple of nights?”

I nodded.

“Good,” he said. “That’s good. I feel a lot better knowing that Katya is here and that she’s safe.” He clenched his jaw. “If I had known that he was hitting her, I would’ve—would’ve—”

“Would’ve what? Done what I did?” I gave him a look. “No, Harry, there was nothing you could’ve done. In fact, what I did was stupid and reckless, but it was the only option at the time.”

Harry looked down at his hands for a few seconds and said nothing. After a while, he looked back up at me and let out an audible exhale. “So, is that all you came here to tell me... or is there more?”

“No. There’s more.”

“I thought there might be.”

I slumped my shoulders and fell back into my seat. “Katya and I—there’s something between us. Something real and amazing and electric, but...”

“But what?”

“But I feel like I’m all over the place man,” I said. “I’m confused about Sarah, and I feel guilty because she’s barely even been gone for six months.” I got up and walked over to the window at the back of Harry’s office. “It’s too soon, isn’t it?”

Harry came up behind me and put his hand on my shoulder. “Zane. Sarah would want you to move on and be happy. She wouldn’t want you dwelling on her memory and pining for her. You know that. As for what other people think, screw them. It isn’t their life and they don’t get a say.”

Still staring out the window, I let out another breath. “I know, but that isn’t the only problem. Katya is so young... She's only 21.”

Harry didn’t say anything for a few seconds, and when I looked back at him over my shoulder, I expected his expression to be one of judgment or admonishment. But instead, he offered me a kind smile and said, “Look, Katya is a smart, capable young woman. As long as you’re not putting pressure on her—”

“I would never do that,” I said.

“I didn’t think you would. I know you, Zane, and I know you wouldn’t be having these feelings for Katya if she wasn’t someone who truly excited you. It’s not just the sex, right?”

“No.” I shook my head. “It’s more than that. She makes me laugh, and I like hearing her thoughts on anything and everything. She’s smart, and she’s lived such a different life than I have, which I find thrilling, but I also want to protect her from all the pain of her past.”

“It sounds to me like you’ve found a woman who you find really engaging, and that you’re not just interested in her because she’s young and pretty.”

“I guess you’re right...”

“If that’s the case,” he said. “Then don’t worry so much about the age difference, because in all honesty, based on all the dumb shit you’ve pulled since you met her, it sort of sounds like you’re the immature one in the relationship.”

I laughed. “You’re not wrong.” Then I smiled at him. “Thanks, Harry. I really needed to hear all of that. And now, like the selfish friend that I am, I have to ask you for yet another favor.”

“Let’s hear it.”

“Can you and Sloane watch Luca and Kenlee tonight? I’m taking Katya out for dinner.”

Harry smirked. “Well, since I was the one who just convinced you to see where this relationship might go, I sort of have to babysit for you while you go on your date, don’t I?”

“You don’t *have* to,” I said. “But you would possibly be ruining any chance I had at happiness in the future if you didn’t... so... there is that.”

“When you put it that way,” he said, walking me to the door. “Drop them off whenever. Sloane will be stoked.”

“Thanks, man. I owe you one.”

“At this point, you owe me like at least ten.”

###

When I got back to the room, I changed Kenlee’s diaper and put her down for a nap. My little tyrant was not wanting to cooperate so I used some of the tricks Katya taught me and before I knew it, she was snoring soundly. Who knew that a lavender diffuser and a *Sounds of the Ocean* CD could solve all my child’s sleep problems? I would have tried it months ago if I’d known. I suddenly realized that Katya was all alone when she had to figure it out with Luca. Not only that, she was a scared teenager who barely spoke English. When I really stopped to think about all that she’d been through, I was sure she was the strongest and bravest person I’d ever met.

And realizing that only made me want to get to know her that much more.



## Chapter Twenty-Six

### Katya

I went through my day with an extra spring in my step. The thought of seeing Zane that night made it hard to focus. I hurriedly picked Luca up from daycare after finishing up at work and then headed to our room to relax for a while before getting ready. We were sitting on the sofa eating cookies, chatting about what Luca did at daycare when my cell phone rang. At first, I was excited to see that Zane was calling me but that quickly turned to panic.

*What if he was calling to cancel? What if he changed his mind about us?*

I'd never know if I didn't answer the phone, so I braced myself and took a breath before picking up. Sometimes I really hated my anxiety.

"Hello," I finally managed to say.

"Hey, Beautiful. How was your day?" he asked.

“It was fine,” I said, taking a deep breath and letting it out slowly. So far, so good. “Thanks for asking. How was yours?”

“It was ok but something has come up. Would you be ok with a slight change of plan?” he asked nervously.

*I knew it! He is totally bailing,* I thought before he continued.

“So, I had planned on Sloane and Harry watching the kids for us, but Harry just called and Sloane has a nasty case of strep throat, soooo since they are not an option, and I really want to see you, how do pizza and a movie with the kids at my place sound?”

I was so relieved that I could’ve cried.

“Pizza and a movie sound great,” I said, a huge grin spreading across my face.

“Awesome. And I know you just got off work so no rush. Take your time. Kenz and I will be here when you are ready. Oh, and tell Luca I have a surprise for him,” he said excitedly.

“A surprise?” I saw Luca smile when I said this, and I wished I had taken the call in the other room. Getting up off the couch, I walked into the kitchen and put my hand over my mouth to muffle the sound. “Zane, you really didn’t have to do that. You’ve done so much already.”

“I wanted to.”

“... Okay. But—well—just please don’t go to too much trouble. I don’t want Luca to think that he gets a toy or something every time he sees you...”

“Right, no, of course not... Don’t worry,” he said, although he sounded a little nervous all of a sudden. “It’s not a big deal really. Just a little dumb thing I picked up at the store earlier.”

“Okay then,” I said. “We’ll be over in a little bit.” We hung up the call, and I went to go sit back down on the couch.

I was still a little uncomfortable with the whole thing, but I tried to remind myself that it was a good thing how much Zane wanted to be there for my son. I was grateful for all that he’d done, for both me and Luca, but I also knew that eventually, we would have to move out and find a place of our own. I couldn’t expect Zane to continue taking care of us, it was too big of a burden, and I refused to become a charity case.

A little later, I took a shower and threw on some cute but comfortable leggings and a fuzzy oversized sweater. I had to admit, this is way better than having to put on makeup and fancy clothes. Not that I wouldn’t do that for Zane, I would in a heartbeat, but this was nice. Plus, I got to spend the evening with Luca as well, and I could tell he was excited for “our” date night at Zane’s. He packed his favorite superhero backpack full of his favorite things that he just “knew” Zane would want to see and we headed down the hall. I had to speedwalk to keep up with Luca. His excitement was contagious. I knocked on the door and Zane answered a few seconds later.

“Oh hey, you made it,” he said with a smile. “How was traffic?”

I laughed. “No traffic at all.” I offered him my cheek and he kissed me, then invited us inside. I could tell he’d tidied up a little for us, which I thought was very sweet. “The place looks great.”

“Yeah, I did a little cleaning,” Zane said. Then his eyes widened and he looked at Luca. “You don’t have dirt on your shoes do you?”

“Uh—” Luca started to pick up his feet and check, but before he could say anything else, Zane picked him up and tossed him over his shoulder.

“Oh my god, he’s got the dirtiest shoes in the world! I can’t let him walk around like that.” Luca laughed and screamed as Zane spun him around the room. “I’m going to have to hold him up the whole night.”

I smiled. “Yeah, you just might have to.”

“My shoes are clean! My shoes are clean!” Luca said, and Zane chuckled and put the kid back on the ground. “See!” Luca lifted his foot up in the air. “No dirt.”

Zane pretended to scrutinize the shoe and nodded. “Yeah, okay. They look pretty clean. I guess you can walk around on your own. Now, I can’t remember, did you want us to have pizza for dinner or broccoli?”

“Pizza,” Luca said.

“Really? Huh. I could’ve sworn you said broccoli.”

“No! I want pizza!”

Zane clapped his hands together. “Okay, pizza it is. Good thing I checked, or else, I might’ve ended up just ordering three massive plates of broccoli.” He smiled at me, then Luca pulled on his sleeve and asked if he wanted to see what toys he brought over.

“Sure, buddy,” Zane said. “Let’s go sit in the living room and we can play until dinner.” The two of them walked over to the living room and sat on the floor. I sat in the chair next to Kenlee’s playpen and made funny faces at her.

“Look,” Luca said, pulling his action figures out one by one. “I brought my Batman and Spiderman to show you. Do you like them?”

Zane looked at Luca and in a very serious tone said,, “Luca, these are the coolest superheroes I have ever seen. Thank you so much for bringing them to show me. Do you know what else I think?”

“What?” asked Luca curiously.

“I think that you and these superheroes have kept you and your mom safe. Batman and Spiderman are very important superheroes and they would not hang out with just anybody. They chose you because they know how special you and your mom are.”

I’d never seen Luca hug anyone but Addie or me but that just changed before my eyes. I actually witnessed my shy little boy reach up and grab Zane’s neck and pull him into a hug. Zane immediately returned the gesture and picked Luca up. My heart was full as I watched them hold each other like they

never wanted to let go. It made me realize I did not want to let go either.

Zane finally released Luca and suddenly his excitement returned.

“Hey Luc, I have a surprise for you. Do you want to bring Batman and Spiderman with you while we go check it out?”

I loved that he included Luca’s special toys in the surprise. It showed me that he cared about Luca’s feelings as much as mine. That alone meant everything. Never again would I be with a man who didn’t love my son also. I followed Zane and Luca down the hall and into the spare bedroom where he had hidden Luca’s surprise.

Luca was stunned into temporary silence when he opened the door. He could only stare at the gigantic stuffed Mickey Mouse that sat in the middle of the room on top of a Spiderman sleeping bag. Luca’s love for Disney knew no bounds, and when he finally got his wits back, he ran into the room and crashed into the big plushie toy. “I love it!” he said.

“Good!” Zane came over and Luca hugged him again. “I was hoping it wouldn’t be too big.” He looked back at me guiltily. “Sorry if it takes up too much space in his room, but I just couldn’t resist when I saw it earlier today.”

“Can Mickey sit with us for the movie?”

I laughed. “He can sit on the floor by the couch,” I said. “Otherwise, there won’t be enough room for the rest of us.”

Luca struggled to carry the thing all by himself, but Zane helped him, and soon enough Luca got settled on the floor by the couch again and got lost in play. I pulled Zane aside into the kitchen and gave him a look. “Tell me honestly, was that the original surprise?”

Zane rubbed the back of his neck. “That was part of it...”

“There was more?”

He nodded. “Yeah. A lot more. I basically went a little crazy at the toy store today, and if you hadn’t said that thing on the phone earlier, Luca would’ve walked into that room and seen \$500 worth of new stuff. The rest is all hidden in the hall closet. I figured I can give him another toy on his birthday, and another one at Christmas.”

I stretched up onto my tiptoes and kissed him. “Thank you for understanding. I know you only bought that stuff because you wanted to make him happy, and I appreciate it but I also want to make sure that Luca knows that sometimes there aren’t going to be new toys, but that he can still play with his old ones and be happy.” I frowned. “I don’t know if I’m explaining this right... I just...”

“I get it,” he said. “You don’t want him to think that happiness comes from getting new things. You want him to be able to enjoy other things in life.”

“Exactly,” I said. “And he already loves spending time with you so much... You don’t have to get him anything, because just having you around is a gift in and of itself.”

Zane smiled. "I feel the same way." He then reached for me and held me close. "But also, with your permission, I would really like to give Luca this one other thing I bought him at the store. It doesn't have to be tonight, but maybe soon. I bought these matching Nerf guns that look really fun. Honestly, buying them for him was really just so that I could have an excuse to play with them too, seeing as Kenlee is still a little too young for a Nerf war."

I laughed as I imagined Zane and Luca running around chasing each other with the Nerf guns. "I guess that would be okay," I said. "As long as you're the one who has to go around picking up all the loose bullets afterward."

"I'd be happy to."

The pizza arrived a few minutes later and Zane went to get Luca while I set the table. I opted for paper plates and napkins for easier cleanup. I poured Luca a glass of milk and Zane and I each a glass of wine, and soon we were all sitting around the table together. The pizza was delicious and when we were finished, I began to clear the table before Zane stopped me.

"Leave that. It will still be there in the morning," he said, drawing me into his muscular arms.

I felt so safe when he held me, so I gave in and sank into the hug. And if I was being honest, a night off from cleaning did sound pretty nice.

"Come on, I have *Strange World* queued up on Disney +. I heard that's a good one," he said, taking mine and Luca's hands and leading us to his bedroom.



“I thought we could watch it in my room. There is more space for us all to sit and the television is better,” he said, turning on the TV.

“Your bedroom is fine,” I replied. Making himself at home, Luca kicked off his shoes and climbed onto the bed. He’d been dying to see this movie, so I knew he was excited. Zane got him a pillow and he set up a front-row seat. He lay on his stomach with his little face propped on his hands and his legs bent. I might be biased, but I didn’t think there had ever been anything more adorable. The movie entranced him which gave Zane and me a chance to talk in hushed voices amongst ourselves.

I sat next to him and he had his arm around me playing with my hair while we chatted about nothing in particular. About halfway through the movie, however, he looked down at me and his tone shifted into a more serious one.

“So, Katya, I have a question.”

Curious, I raised an eyebrow. “Okay, and what is your question?”

“Don’t get me wrong and please do not be offended, but I’ve been thinking about it, and I was wondering if being a maid at a ski lodge was perhaps not the job you dreamed about having when you were a little girl.”

I shrugged. “It’s... it’s fine,” I said. “I don’t know. A job is a job, right?”

“Right, but, if there was something else you’d rather be doing... You’re just so smart and hardworking, I thought there might be something else you thought about doing with your life.”

“Of course, I’ve thought about it,” I said. “But I can’t exactly chase down my dreams when I have a four-year-old kid to think of. It would be selfish of me to put my own wants ahead of his. What he needs right now is consistency and a roof over his head. My job here allows me to give him those things... Sort of.”

“Okay, but just for the sake of this conversation, if you could have any job in the world besides this one, what would it be?”

My first thought was to say, “Stay in bed with you,” but since I knew he was being serious and Luca was at the end of the bed and could hear us, I gave him the most honest answer I had.

“Honestly, I don’t know.” I’d never allowed myself to dream of what could be. Any dreams or aspirations died when I got pregnant with Luca and left home. “Ever since I had Luca, all I’ve really cared about was trying to give *him* the best life possible.”

He looked at me and smiled. “Your dedication to your son is admirable, but you have to think of yourself too. For his sake as well as yours. If you’re happy and fulfilled, then it will rub off on him. But if you’re miserable, that will also have an effect. Kids can tell when their parents are overworked or

unhappy, and I can tell that you mean the world to Luca. He would want you to do what made you the most happy.” Lifting my face to meet his stare, he implored, “Promise me you will at least think about it. Life is too short to spend it doing something you hate.”

“Okay,” I whispered, not knowing what else to say, “I’ll think about it.”

“Good, I am happy to hear that. Now let’s see what is going on with this movie. Luca is being awfully quiet,” he said, raising his eyebrows. We both covered our mouths to quiet our laughs when we noticed Luca was sound asleep at the foot of the bed. We weren’t laughing about him being asleep though. We were laughing that we were so engrossed in our conversation that we never noticed him slip out of the room to get his new Spiderman sleeping bag. He was curled up inside it with his trusted action figures next to him.

“I should get him back to our room,” I started to move off the bed.

Zane put his hand on my leg to stop me. “It’s ok. Leave him where he is. There’s plenty of room in this giant bed for all of us. Plus, I bet he will like it when he wakes up and thinks that he and all his superheroes protected us during the night.”

Still hesitant, I looked at Luca and then back at Zane. “Yes, he would love that, but are you sure? I don’t want to inconvenience you.”

He kissed me. “Does that answer your question? Katya, you and Luca are never an inconvenience and I love having you

here. Now, I am going to go check on Kenlee, and then we can go to sleep. There is an extra toothbrush in the bathroom medicine cabinet if you need one.”

Smiling, I nodded and said, “Okay. Thank you.”

He left to check on the baby and I sat there wondering how my luck changed so drastically in such a short time. When he returned, he crawled into bed, and I settled into his shoulder. With Luca asleep at the end, and Zane and I snuggled together, it was like we were a real family.

I drifted off to sleep hoping that night would never end.

## *Chapter Twenty-Seven*

### **Zane**

**T**he next few weeks flew by in a blissful blur of dates, sleepovers, and ‘family’ movie nights. Katya and Luca had been staying at my place more nights than not, and having them around was great, but it also made me miss having a real home.

I looked over at Katya one night, as she was getting ready to go with me to another stuffy work event. She had no idea how beautiful she was. Initially, she declined the invitation because she didn’t have anything to wear and was adamant about not wanting me to buy her another dress. It was a never-ending discussion and argument.

“You have already done too much for me, I can’t allow you to keep spoiling me,” she declared.

So of course, I responded like the smartass I am. “Gee, thanks, but the last time I checked, I didn’t need your permission to spend my own money.”

Clearly frustrated by this, she threw her hands in the air and stomped her foot in exasperation.

“Ugggg, that is not what I meant and you know it.”

She was so cute and sexy when she was flustered. I finally got through to her when I told her that buying her a new, glamorous dress was really more of a gift to me than it was to her. “Because this way, I’ll get to admire your beauty all night. But if you don’t get a new dress, and you don’t go with me, then I’m going to be bored and sad the whole time. So, don’t think of it as me doing you a favor, but really, you doing me one.”

She tried not to smile but I could tell she was amused. “Fine. I’ll go.”

That argument ended with her going shopping earlier that day, and picking out a stunning backless gown that was now draped across the bed as she finished doing her hair. I was sitting on the bed, half-dressed, and thinking about how the month was almost over. I tried to do the math, to calculate exactly how long I’d been staying at the lodge, but I kept getting my days mixed up. Those first few weeks after I lost Sarah were just one big blur.

“What’s on your mind?” Katya asked, frowning at me in the mirror.

“I was just thinking about my house,” I said, absentmindedly. “I might have to seriously consider moving back there soon. I can’t keep raising a baby and doing my job out of a place like this.”

Katya's face fell. "Oh."

I looked up at her and smiled. "But, I was also thinking... It would be nice if you and Luca came back home with us. At least, part of the time. I don't want you to feel pressured, but I have gotten used to having you around and to be honest, I don't want to go back to sleeping without you," I explained.

Appearing stunned at the suggestion, she laughed a little before replying. "Zane, I don't know what to say. Are you sure, I mean, do you really want us to? I don't want you to feel like you have to take us in just because we're living in a hotel."

I got up from the bed and took her hand. "Yes, Katya. For the first time in a very long time, I know exactly what I want, and that is you. I won't lie and tell you I'm not scared; I'm scared to death. But what I can promise you is that this is what I want. You and Luca have become a part of me and I want both of you with me as I take this step. You are my future."

With tears in her eyes, she said, "Thank you, that means more to me than you could know. I will need some time to think about it if that is okay, but I like the idea of trying it out on a part-time basis. I think that could work for now."

"Take all the time you need," I said before leaning over and kissing her. I couldn't seem to keep my hands and lips off her. Laughing to myself, I realized that wasn't the worst problem to have.

"It is a large house so we wouldn't be on top of each other and Luca would have his own room and playroom. Oh, and

did I mention, I have a jacuzzi tub big enough for two?” I said, raising my eyebrows suggestively.

She grinned seductively and guided us back toward the bed. “HMMMM, that sounds promising. I might have to get extra dirty just for that.”

I could feel my pants tightening, but we were going to be late if we didn't get a move on, so I kissed her and said, “I will hold you to that, but right now we have to get going. But when we get home, I plan on ravaging every inch of your delectable body.”

Katya climbed off my lap and began walking to the bathroom, grabbing her dress on the way, but before she entered, she turned and said, “I plan on seeing that you keep that promise.”

I sat on the bed to get my thoughts under control, then got up and put my tux on. Realizing my cuff links were in the bathroom, I walked in to retrieve them only to be stopped short when I saw Katya. The sapphire blue dress I had given her for the previous gala had been stunning on her but tonight she took my breath away. The crimson-red strapless dress against her porcelain skin, platinum hair, and ocean-blue eyes left me speechless.

Katya looked at me with questions in her gorgeous eyes. “What? Is something wrong? Does the dress not look okay?” she asked nervously.

I walked toward her and turned her around in the mirror so she could see what I saw. “Darling, look at yourself. You look



more than okay. When I saw you, your beauty left me speechless, that's all. Once again, I am going to need security to ward off the other men."

Blushing, she smiled at me and said, "Thank you. I wasn't sure when I bought it if it would be appropriate. I am so happy you like it."

"I absolutely love it, but as always, I cannot wait to get you home and out of it," I whispered into her ear.

Katya finished getting ready by putting on her earrings and nude-colored heels and then helped me fasten my cufflinks. We headed out to tell Luca and Addie goodbye and found them engrossed in a game of 'Candy Land.' They looked up and both gushed over how beautiful Katya looked. I couldn't blame them. She was a work of art.

Addie stood and hugged us both goodbye and told us to have a good time. Katya bent down to kiss Luca while I checked on Kenlee in her crib. When I returned, Luca ran up and hugged me goodbye as well. I could see the tears forming in Katya's eyes and I had to admit, it made me a little emotional as well. In a short time, I was really starting to care for Luca and sometimes forgot he wasn't mine.

I escorted Katya down to the car and headed to the event. The drive was peaceful and calm. We made small talk, but I couldn't quit thinking about what was underneath her dress. I felt like a high school kid who just scored a date with the prom queen. This made me chuckle and Katya raised an eyebrow.

"What is so funny, Mr. Grey?" she asked playfully.

“Oh, nothing Sweetheart. Just realizing that I will be the luckiest man in the room tonight. All the others will be eating their hearts out after seeing you.” I winked at her.

Katya smiled and took my hand. “Thank you. You don’t look too bad yourself. Maybe I’m the one who needs security for you.”

I kissed her hand, and we drove the rest of the way in silence. Tonight was going to be a good night.

Just as I thought, all eyes were on Katya the moment we arrived. Women and men were either whispering about her ravenous beauty or they were vying for a chance to meet her. I was humbled because of the sheer honor of being the man she was with, but I also had to admit that it inflated my ego. It wasn’t just her beauty that captivated people, it was her charm and grace. The first time we went to one of these things, Katya said she didn’t think she fit in, but she could’ve fooled me. It was hard to imagine that she had not done it a million times before. We worked the room and made small talk with many of my business colleagues and acquaintances before finding our way to the bar.

Katya said she just wanted a glass of water, so I gave our order to the bartender and we waited. I brushed a strand of hair out of her eye and told her, “I knew you’d be the belle of the ball. No one can take their eyes off you.”

Katya’s cheeks turned a sexy shade of pink as she said, “Thank you, but I think it might be my date they are staring at.”

Chuckling at her humility, I said, “I seriously doubt that but thank you. I guess I clean up pretty well, but it is the stunning siren in the red dress that has captured everyone’s attention.”

The bartender brought us our drinks and I tipped him and suggested we go find our table. Nodding, Katya took her drink in one hand and mine in the other and we made our way to our reserved table. We had just sat down when Chase walked up. He wasn’t drunk, but I could definitely tell he was on his way. He sat down and I introduced him to Katya.

“Katya, I would like you to meet one of my oldest friends, Chase Covington.”

“Chase, this beautiful woman is Katya Belinsky.”

Katya spoke first. Extending her delicate hand, she said, “It is a pleasure to meet you, Chase. Zane has spoken so highly of you, I feel like I already know you. Won’t you sit down and join us?”

Chase willingly accepted Katya’s hand and kissed it gently before accepting her invitation to join us.

“The pleasure is all mine, Katya. But I can’t say that I have heard too much about you. Tell me, how did you two meet? Oh, I know, never mind. I am so stupid; you must be from the same agency as the last one. Although, I must say, you’re a lot prettier than she was.”

*Damn it, Chase, For God’s sake!*

“Do you have a card?” he asked. “I was thinking about maybe reaching out and hiring my own date for the next one

of these?”

Looking at me with a confused frown, Katya searched my face for an answer to his question. I stumbled. I didn't know what to say and it wasn't really a conversation I wanted to have at the gala, so like the colossal dumbass I am, I said, “No Chase, you don't understand. She's not—I mean—she's—she's my babysitter.”

For some reason, I didn't think Chase believed me but he didn't press me on it so I downed my drink and changed the subject.

I knew I screwed up but didn't know how to make it right so I carried on as if everything was fine. Of course, it wasn't. The hurt and confusion I saw in Katya's eyes was something I never wanted to see again and what was worse, I caused it.

Just like last time.

## *Chapter Twenty-Eight*

### **Katya**

I wasn't sure what to make of Chase's question or Zane's comment about me being the 'babysitter' but I didn't want to cause a scene. I knew this wasn't the appropriate place for that discussion so I decided I would wait until we left to bring it up.

Besides, I had more pressing things on my mind.

I'd been feeling a little sick the last couple of mornings, and I had a sneaking suspicion that there was something I perhaps needed to talk to Zane about. It was just that—a suspicion—but I wanted to be cautious just in case. Try as I did that night to have a good time and forget about all my worries, I was distracted, and my mind kept wandering off.

I was only half paying attention to the conversation Zane was having with Chase, and when Zane said my name and snapped his fingers in front of my face a few minutes after we sat down, I realized I'd totally been zoning out.

“Hey,” he said. “Are you okay?”

“Wha—yeah! Yes! I’m fine. Sorry, I just got lost in thought.”

He was standing up and he had his hand outstretched. “Do you want to dance?” I smiled and placed my hand gingerly on top of his. He helped me to my feet and whisked me out onto the dance floor. It was the first time we had ever danced together and I never wanted to stop. Now that I could focus my mind on something concrete, like finding the rhythm and putting my feet where they needed to be, it was easy for me to stay present and have a good time.

We danced the night away until the band finally signaled it was the last song. Luckily, it was a slow one and I was more than ready to feel Zane’s body closer to mine. He held me as we swayed to Frank Sinatra’s “Just the Way You Look Tonight.” It was turning out to be a magical evening, but I couldn’t wait to get home. For the first time in my short life, everything was looking up.

The drive home was peaceful and we continued our conversation about the possibility of me and Luca moving in with him. I couldn’t help myself and began joking with him.

With a straight face and a very serious voice, I said, “So, this large house of yours... do you expect me to clean it?”

Zane was so rattled it took all of my restraint not to bust out laughing.

“What? No, absolutely not. I have a housekeeper for that. I would never ask, I mean I would never expect...”

Finally, I couldn't contain myself and I lost it. Barely able to breathe, I assured him, “Zane, calm down, I was only kidding. I'm sorry it flustered you.”

Calming down from his panic, he playfully grabbed my leg, grinned, and said, “I'm so going to get you back for that.”

We spent the rest of the drive talking about his house, and I finally got the courage to ask him why he hadn't been staying there. I knew it wasn't technically my business but seeing as we were sleeping together and he did ask me to move in, I thought I had a right to know.

Taking his hand, I gently said, “Zane, I don't want to pry and I know we haven't known each other long, but before I agree to move in with you, even temporarily, I need to know why you moved out of that house in the first place.” Sighing, he looked at me, lifted my hand, kissed it, and began talking. “Because of Sarah.”

Hearing another woman's name come out of his mouth made my stomach twist up into knots. I assumed Sarah was Kenlee's mom, and I'd been waiting for Zane to tell me more about her for a while now, but I hadn't been prepared to feel such immediate and strong jealousy toward her.

It was childish, and I did my best to push those feelings aside before saying, “Tell me about her.”

“She died six months ago,” Zane said. “And after the accident, everything about that house reminded me of her and it was just too much. It was driving me crazy, so thankfully Harry told me I could move into the lodge for a while. That’s why Kenlee and I have been staying there.”

I looked down at my hands and felt ashamed for having let my jealousy rear its ugly head, even for a single second. “You were married?” I asked, hoping he would be able to tell from my tone of voice that I wasn’t angry or envious. Only curious.

He nodded. “Yes. She was beautiful and funny, and I was very much in love with her. We thought we had our whole lives to be together, but then she was taken away from me... from us... in the blink of an eye.” He paused as we came to a stop at a red light. “Kenlee wasn’t even a month old.”

“Oh my god, Zane.” I gasped and put my hand on his leg to reassure him. “That must’ve been awful. Having to take care of a newborn baby all on your own *while* grieving the death of your wife...” I shook my head. “I can’t even imagine.”

“Yeah, well...” He glanced my way. “Now I hope you’ll understand why I got so upset with you when you washed that shirt. It belonged to Sarah... And when you took Kenlee that one morning, the reason I got so mad then, is because I had this panic moment where I thought I’d lost her too.”

I felt tears in my eyes, and I nodded. “I understand. You’ve been through so much, and it makes perfect sense why those things would’ve affected you like that.”



“It’s still no excuse for my behavior,” he said. The light changed and he drove ahead in silence. After a few seconds, he went on. “I just—I feel like I have no idea how to do any of this. I don’t know how to be a widower, how to raise a child on my own, and some days I think about what I’m going to tell Kenlee when she’s older. How will I ever be able to express to her what an amazing woman her mom was?”

I could feel the love he had for Sarah, and it was both beautiful and tragic. He clearly cared deeply for that woman, and it must’ve broken his heart to think about Kenlee growing up without Sarah in her life. After a while, I cleared my throat and said, “You could start by putting up pictures of her.”

This seemed to catch Zane off guard. “What?”

“Because she is Kenlee’s mother and someone you loved,” I explained. “You shouldn’t try to forget her just because you are moving on. That isn’t fair to either of you. Honor her memory and the love you shared by living your life but by recognizing hers as well. Then Kenlee will grow up having Sarah in her life—in a way.”

I sat back and hoped I had not gone too far. Zane said nothing as we took a right at the next intersection and came to a stop in front of the lodge. Finally, after what felt like a lifetime, he looked at me with tears in his eyes. “Katya Belinsky, just when I think you could not be any more amazing, you go and say something as beautiful as that. Thank you.”

Leaning over, I kissed his cheek and said, “Always.”

We were both tired and eager to get to the room, so he tossed the keys to the valet on our way inside, and we headed up to his room. At the door to my place, I told him I'd be right there, but that I needed to grab something from my room first. He smiled wickedly at me and told me to hurry. "I will. Don't forget, you put the cash for Addie on your dresser."

"Good call," she said. "It totally would've slipped my mind."

I ran into my room and grabbed my nightgown and an extra pair of socks, and then took a second to flip through the stack of mail I'd been letting pile up for the last few days. I was so tired, I nearly threw away a bank statement but realized at the last second what it was. I hadn't recognized the name at first, but then I remembered it was the bank Zane used to set up my secret account.

I opened the letter and retrieved the debit card that had been sent. Deciding Zane could wait another five minutes, I sat down to activate it. I was hoping to use it to go shopping for presents for both him and Luca. I dialed the activation number and waited. I almost dropped the phone when I heard the balance.

\$10,000?

That wasn't right. I'd only ever deposited the \$5,000 that I'd been given as a Christmas bonus. How could there be another \$5,000 in there? It didn't make any sense.

The machine prompted me to hit the number 7 if I needed further assistance, so I did that, and the call was put through to

an operator. I gave them my name and card information and asked if they could pull my account up.

“Okay, I've got your account right here,” the woman said. “What can I help you with?”

“Yeah, hi, I'm just wondering if you can tell me when all of this money was deposited into my account? And by who? I put in \$5000 a few weeks ago, but now it says I have \$10,000.”

“Let's see... let's see...” I could hear her typing away on the other side of the line. “Well, it says here that both deposits were made on the same night. One of the deposits is in your name and the other one is from an account linked to someone named Zane Gray. Does that name mean anything to you?”

“Uh—yeah. Yes. It does. Thank you.”

“Is there anything else I can help you with? Do you have any more questions?”

I had about a million more questions, but none that this woman would be able to answer. I said no and hung up the call, then sat on my couch and tried to figure out why Zane would put so much money into my account without telling me.

After all that he'd done, all the other things he'd bought and paid for... why would he feel the need to give me a large amount of cash like that. As opposed to the rest of the trappings of his generosity, this almost felt like... like a *payment*.

Then it hit me like a lead balloon.

Chase's comment about the agency, Zane buying me clothes and Luca toys; it was all part of his plan. Zane was buying our time and affection. I was an 'escort' without even knowing it. I grabbed the debit card before storming out to find out what in the hell was going on.

## *Chapter Twenty-Nine*

### **Zane**

**L**uca and Kenlee were both dead asleep, so I paid Addie and said goodbye to her in a hushed voice. After she left, I lit some candles and waited for Katya in the bedroom. She had an extra key, so she was able to just let herself in. She took longer than I thought she would, and I was about to send her a text when I heard the front door close and her footsteps coming down the hall. I smiled and turned to greet her as she came through the door, but could tell right away from the look on her face that something was wrong.

“What is this?” she asked, holding up a piece of paper and what looked like a credit card of some sort.

“What? Katya, honey, what’s going on?”

She threw the card at me, her face flush with anger. “Don’t ‘honey’ me. I want answers.” She bent down and picked up the debit card from where it fell on the floor and shoved it in my face. “This! What the fuck is this?”

“Uh... a debit card?” I said.

She scoffed at me. “So you do know what it is. You know this is the debit card connected to the account that you set up for me.”

“... I know that now.”

“Well tell me this,” she said, putting her hands on her hips. “Do you know how much money is *in* that account?”

Now it was starting to click. Katya found out that I put another \$5,000 in her account. But what I still didn't understand was why she was so angry about it. “Katya,” I said, reaching for her, but she shrugged away from my touch. “I'm confused. Are you mad at me because I gave you some money?”

“You didn't have to buy me, Zane,” she said, and the accusation was like a slap to the face. “I was with you because I wanted to be, not because I wanted something from you. I am not a prostitute!”

“A prostitute?” Shocked, I couldn't imagine why she would ever think I thought she was a prostitute, but then I remembered Chase's asinine comment and knew this was bad. When would I stop screwing up?

“Why would you do this?” she said, shaking with anger. “What makes you think you can get away with paying women to keep you company? I know I shouldn't be surprised. Rich men do it all the time, but I thought you were different. I believed in you. I believed in us.”

I was helpless as she fell to a heap on the floor, still in her evening gown, but now with a face streaked with mascara.

*Fuck!* I didn't know what to do.

I closed the door and crouched down to hold her but she pushed me away. I needed to explain myself. I had to make her understand.

Standing up to give her space, I started explaining.

“Katya, the night you got your bonus money was also the night you first told me about Aleks, and how he didn't let you have access to all your own money. That's why I offered to help you set up the account, and also why I put some of my own money in there.” I sighed and shook my head. “At the time, I didn't think anything was going to happen between us. I just wanted to help you and Luca. I had the money, and I thought this would be something worthwhile to spend it on. That's all I was thinking, I swear.”

Her crying had slowed to a snuffle and she looked at me through her tear-stained eyes. She didn't speak, only stared, so at least I knew she was listening.

“I wanted you to have control over your own money. It was never meant as a payment for your company. I realize I should have told you, but to be honest, with everything that has happened in the last couple of weeks, I sort of forgot. I know that's a lame excuse, but it's the truth.” I stopped and waited, not wanting to go on if she had already made up her mind about us. I prayed she hadn't, but I didn't know.

“You should’ve told me,” she said, wiping her nose, “\$5,000 is a lot of money to just ‘forget’ about.”

I handed her a tissue and sat on the ground beside her. “I know and I am sorry. As for Chase’s foot-in-the-mouth comment, well, that’s my fault also.”

She raised an eyebrow in confusion, so I continued.

“The first night you kept Kenlee, my date was not... well, she wasn’t really a date. She was an escort I hired so I wouldn’t have to go alone.”

Katya gasped, but I kept talking so that I would have enough time to explain before she slapped me across the face or walked out or something.

“I regretted hiring her the second she arrived that night, but it was already too late,” I said. “And when I showed up with that girl, Chase put two and two together and figured out she was an escort. The dumbass obviously assumed that you were too, but I take the blame for that as well. I should’ve told him, but seeing as all of my free time has been spent with you and the kids, I haven’t exactly gotten around to telling anyone other than Harry that I have a girlfriend.”

*Girlfriend.*

I hadn’t meant to use that word, but now that it was out there, I quite liked the sound of it. Then again, Katya was so much more than a girlfriend. She had quickly become the other half of me.

“Do you see how this all got so mixed up?” I asked.



“I guess but...” She shook her head. “It still hurts, you know. I mean, how many other people at the gala thought you paid me to be there with you? Do you have any idea how humiliating that is? And, why me? If you weren’t ready to date before, why are you suddenly ready now?”

I gently placed my hand under her chin and lifted her face to look at me. “No one thought that. Chase was the only one who knew about Melanie. I promise. As for the other part of your question, the answer is simple. Because there is something about you that I cannot stay away from. I’m a better man when I am with you. You make me happy.”

“I want to believe you, but...”

“What’s holding you back?”

“I’m just scared, and confused. Every time I start to feel like you and I are on solid ground, something like this happens and it makes me feel like the rug is being pulled out from under me. I never know what’s going to be around the corner, what secrets you’re keeping that are going to totally derail our relationship.”

“I’m not keeping any other secrets, I swear,” I said.

“Okay, but even if that’s true, what about your wife!” she said. “You said it yourself, you weren’t sure if you were ready to date before you met me. What if you wake up one day and realize you did move on too soon, and that you still love her?”

“... I’ll always love Sarah,” I said, taking her hand in mine. “And Katya, I’m scared too, but that’s how I know this is real.”

Because it scares me.”

She looked at me with confusion, but I continued before she could interrupt me. “My feelings for you are intense. More intense than anything I have ever experienced and that frightens me but excites me also. They have developed so fast and I am not quite sure what to do with them, but what I do know is that I want us to be together. I want you if you’ll have me. I know I can’t keep screwing up and expecting you to forgive me, so even though I can’t promise I will never screw up again, I can promise to try my hardest not to. All I want is a chance to prove myself to you. Do you think that’s possible, even after everything I’ve done?”

She seemed to be nervous before timidly answering, “Yes, I think it could be but I ...”

“What? What do you need? I’ll do it, whatever it is. Just tell me, baby, please.”

“I need to know this is real, for both of us. It’s not just my heart on the line. Luca’s is at stake also. He’s become very fond of you and if his heart was broken, mine would be too. If I am going to dive in head first, I need to know I’m diving into the deep end with a life preserver waiting.”

I lifted her face to meet mine again. I wanted to look her in the eyes when I said, “Katya, I am in this 100 percent. This is what I want. You are what I want. You, Luca, and Kenlee are all I need.”

Her voice sounded hesitant and shaky when she replied, “I’m just not sure...”

Panic started building inside and I knew I had to make her see how serious I was. I couldn't risk her running out of fear. "I have an idea. Next week we can both check out of the lodge and move to my house. I want you and Luca there full-time. I want your gorgeous face to be the last thing I see at night and the first thing I see when I open my eyes in the morning. I want Luca to run through the house playing with Kenlee following along as she gets older. How's that for real?"

"You want us to move in? Full-time?"

I smiled and nodded. "Yes. Please. I'm telling you, that's how committed I am. That's how sure I am that you're the only woman for me."

Katya let out a breath that neither one of us seemed to know she had been holding. She cupped my face with her soft hands, looked me deep in the eyes, and said, "Okay."

I could hardly control my excitement. I picked Katya up and swung her around.

Laughing, which was a welcome change from her crying, she finally begged me to stop by saying, "Okay, I'm going to get sick if you keep spinning me around."

Never taking my eyes off her, I stopped and lowered her to the ground. "Katya, you have made me the happiest man alive. I promise to spend the rest of my life showing you just how much you mean to me," and then I kissed her passionately and from the bottom of my soul.

Katya returned the kiss with equal passion and hunger, driving me crazy in the process. I lifted her up and she wrapped her sexy legs around me as I moved us to the bed, never breaking the kiss. When we finally took a breath, I looked at the woman in front of me. I was completely enamored and had no intention of ever letting her go.

She gasped and arched her back when I began licking and sucking on her ear and made my way down her neck. She dug her pointed fingernails into my back letting me know I had found an erogenous zone. I didn't think I would ever tire of finding ways to turn her on. As ready as I was to thrust deep inside her, I was enjoying our make-out session. Exploring Katya's body was an adventure I would go on over and over again. I couldn't get enough. The anticipation of what lay ahead was exciting. Knowing that I would eventually feel her tight pussy clench around me as she orgasmed, aroused me in a way I'd never experienced. I had never been a selfish lover, but with Katya, her pleasure was at the forefront of my thoughts. This caused me to slowly and torturously explore her body through her dress.

My lips moved to her collarbone as she began untucking my shirt. She deftly pulled it out and ran her hands up my back. Her touch was electric.

Panting she whispered, "Zane, I need to see and feel you. I want to explore your body before you make love to me."

She didn't have to say more. In an instant, I sat up and began unbuttoning my dress shirt.

Katya took the opportunity to tease me as well. Knowing I loved looking at her amazing body, she slowly scooted off the bed, stood up, turned around, and unzipped her dress, letting it fall to the floor.

God, she was so hot.

If I thought the silver bra and panties had been sexy, they were nothing compared to the see-through black lace bra and thong she was wearing tonight. It was just sheer enough to make you think you were seeing her precious assets but not enough to completely give them away. But her ass in that thong was more than I could handle.

Fully aware that her ass drove me crazy, she slowly bent over to unbuckle her ankle strap heels, giving me a full view of her perfectly peach-shaped backside.

“Fuck Baby, are you trying to kill me? I am barely hanging on as it is and seeing your delicious ass in that thong makes me want to take a bite out of it,” I say, throwing my shirt to the side.

She seductively looked over her shoulder and smiled wantonly as she stepped out of her heels and turned around to face me. “Come here,” I groaned and she sauntered toward me like a panther stalking its prey.

“Is there something I can help you with Mr. Grey,” she moaned as she pushed me back onto the bed before straddling me. Slowly she began licking and sucking on my neck and ear while grinding her hips against me.

*Fuuuuuck!*

I buried my face in her gorgeous breasts and grabbed hold of her perfect ass pulling her closer to me. She threw her head back and arched her back when I began massaging her ass and sucking on her nipple through her bra. I looked up at the woman who had stolen my heart and vowed not to fuck this up. She needed me, but I needed her more.

Grabbing the back of her head, I kissed her passionately and prepared to spend the rest of the night showing her just how much she meant to me.

## *Chapter Thirty*

### **Katya**

**S**lowly, Zane pulled my bra off and took my already erect nipple into his mouth as his hand dipped inside my barely there panties. I could feel the effects of our foreplay as his fingers easily slid between my soaking-wet lips. Looking at me with desire I'd never seen before, he said he wanted to smell and taste me, so he kissed his way down my stomach on his way to my aching pussy, ripping my panties off along the way. The flimsy barrier instantly dissolved under his strong grasp and I arched and moaned in anticipation. Zane licked, kissed, and teased my wet inner folds and thighs before finally making his way to my swollen clit. He slowly flicked his tongue over my pleasure button causing me to stifle a scream.

The kids were asleep, after all, so I had to keep quiet.

“Oh Fuck, yes!” I whispered. “Don't stop, Baby. Please, Zane, I'm going to come.”

I grabbed his hair like I was trying to pull it out and wrapped my legs tighter around his neck as he continued to pleasure me until the pleasure got so intense, I had to bite down on my knuckle to keep from moaning too loudly.

“That’s it, Baby. Come for me,” he said looking up at me from between my muscular legs before continuing to suck on my clit. He flicked his tongue over my throbbing bud, sending me over the edge. Digging my fingernails into the sheets and holding on, I sighed heavily with my release.

He slowly licked up my juices and began kissing his way up my body but he wasn’t fast enough for me. I wanted him now. Panting and out of breath, I looked at him like he was the oxygen I needed to breathe as I reached forward for his cock.

I grabbed hold and began stroking up and down as I sat up. Something raw and wild had come over me, and I was taking what I wanted. Zane didn’t seem to mind. It was even more of a turn-on.

“Lie down,” I demanded.

He knew better than to argue, so he did as he was told. Still stroking his throbbing cock, I smirked and then positioned my body down as I took him in my mouth.

“Fuck yes, Baby!” he moaned.

I licked the tip of his cock and ran my fingernails along his shaft. I groaned when his hips raised to thrust into my mouth.

“Oh My God, Katya. That feels so fucking good,” he moaned as he lay back and enjoyed the ecstasy of my oral



pleasure. His breath gasped as his orgasm grew close and I knew he wanted to climax with me, so I let him lift me off his cock and flip me over.

“That was incredible, baby but I want to be inside you when I come. I want to feel your gorgeous pussy tighten around me as we come together,” Zane hungrily groaned.

I moaned, letting him know I wanted it too. He kissed me passionately and then slowly grabbed my arms, placing them above my head, so my hands were against the wall. Agonizingly slow, his cock teased my entrance and I tilted my hips toward him begging him to take me. Zane seemed to know what I wanted so he grabbed my hips and thrust into me. For a moment, he was still, letting us both enjoy the feel of my tight, wet pussy clenched around his cock. I never wanted to lose this feeling. I had never felt this way with a man before and at that moment, I knew that Zane was made for me. He began pounding harder and faster as his mouth made its way to my nipple. He sucked and pulled lightly with his teeth.

“Fuck, yes! Don’t stop! Harder, please!” I begged.

Giving me what I wanted, he continued thrusting into me as our bodies melted together and I began to feel my insides tighten. I dug my heels into his ass and pushed against the wall with my hands as my orgasm grew. I was overwhelmed by the connection we seemed to have and soon I felt my pussy tighten as his cock swelled and we orgasmed together.

After I caught my breath, he kissed me and rolled to the side bringing me with him. He stroked my back as I lay my head

on his chest and draped my leg over his. I wasn't ready to break contact, and it didn't appear he was either.

We lay together for a while, panting and saying nothing. I got up at one point to use the bathroom, and when I came back, Zane wrapped me up in his arms once more and didn't let go. We cuddled, and I could've fallen asleep there if Zane hadn't gotten up to turn out the light. He sighed as he settled in close to me and said, "I don't know what I did to deserve you, but I am one lucky son-of-a-bitch."

I felt him growing again against my leg. Having my naked body close seemed to have that effect on him. I nuzzled into his ear and whispered, "I am the lucky one." I began slowly trailing kisses down his stomach. In the past, Zane had been the one to initiate round two, but tonight I was letting him know what I wanted, and what I wanted was him.

When I could feel his cock against my thighs, I sat up, grinned, and positioned him at my entrance. Slowly I sunk down onto him before starting to ride his cock. Being in charge aroused me more than I could have imagined and I began moving faster. Moving my hips in a circle, I threw my head back and let the rhythm take over. When I felt his orgasm approach, I rode his cock faster until my own orgasm built. Before I knew it, I was seeing stars as my orgasm exploded like a shooting star. Collapsing on his chest, I lay there panting as our breathing slowed to a normal pace. If it were up to me, I would stay like this forever. When I was with Zane, I was not only happy, I was safe.

###

I was curled up on top of Zane a short while later when I remembered that in all the excitement over the debit card, I'd left my nightgown at my own place once again. I had nothing to wear in the morning, and I wanted to be able to sleep in late and make pancakes with my son. I couldn't exactly do either of those things very comfortably in a ballgown.

"Stay right here," I said, rolling off him. "I will be back in a few minutes." I slipped my dress on.

Groaning at the loss of contact, he sat up and asked, "Where are you going?"

Walking over and sitting in his lap, I said, "I was so upset earlier when I got the debit card, I didn't grab any clothes which was the whole reason for going to the room in the first place. I need something to put on in the morning. You may not be aware of this but there are many guests who get up early, and I would prefer it if they didn't see me slinking out of your room in an evening gown."

Sighing, he kissed me gently and said, "Okay, but hurry back. I already miss you and you haven't left yet. Things will be so much easier when we are living under the same roof."

"Yes, they will, but if you don't let me go, I can't get back to you, so..."

"Oh, yeah right," he chuckled realizing he had a death grip on me.

I stood up, grabbed my shoes, and hurried out of the room.

I quickly snuck down the hall and packed an overnight bag. In addition to the silk nightgown, I had also packed my favorite leggings and sweater. I made sure my toothbrush was in there as well, then grabbed a few things for Luca, and hurried back.

Back in Zane's bedroom, I took off my dress, hung it up, and slipped into the nightgown before crawling into bed next to him. He was asleep but somehow seemed to know I was there because he pulled me close to him and buried his head into my neck. I inched back closer to him and lay there for a while listening to the sounds of his breathing. I still had a hard time believing this amazing man was mine.

His breathing slowed and he sounded content and for the first time in a long time, so was I.

## *Chapter Thirty-One*

### **Zane**

**I**n the early hours of the morning, I rolled over and reached for Katya, but felt nothing but cold sheets and an empty bed.

Frowning, I pushed myself up onto my elbows, and was about to call out to her, when the words got stuck in my throat. I felt the chilling weight of something pressing into the side of my temple, and before I even turned to look, I knew it was a gun.

*But who the hell is on the other side of it?*

I slowly moved so that I could see who was in my room, pointing a lethal weapon at my face, and wasn't really all that shocked when I saw that it was Aleks. I knew I had to tread carefully, so I cleared my throat and scooted back on the bed. "How did you get in here?" I asked.

Chuckling, Aleks replied, "It's pretty easy Pretty Boy. All I had to do was flirt with one of the maids. You'd be amazed

what kind of information you can get by talking to a girl who's been working all day and is looking for a little sympathy.” He grinned. “I asked her what room you were in, and she sang like a canary. Then I nabbed her universal key card, and here we are.”

“What do you want?”

“You know what I want.” He moved closer to the bed and held the barrel of the gun just inches from my face.

“Is the gun really necessary?” I asked. “Can’t we just have a normal, civilized conversation?”

In a voice full of hatred and disdain, Aleks clearly stated, “Shut the fuck up and tell me where Katya is. And don’t lie to me you piece of shit.”

“Aleks, calm down. I honestly do not know where she is.”

“Liar.”

“It’s true! She was here last night, but I woke up and she was gone. What do you want with her anyways?”

“It’s none of your business.”

“It might be,” I said.

He made a face. “Why because you’re the new *boyfriend*? What the fuck do I care.”

“Why can’t you just leave her alone! You don’t love her, do you?”

Aleks smirked. “Who said anything about love? I *never* loved that worthless piece of trash. She was only good for two

things, her ass and her money. The ass I can find other places, but I do want her money and I damn well deserve it for putting up with her all these years.”

“What are you talking about?” I shook my head. “Katya barely makes enough here at the lodge to support her and Luca. Are you so desperate you are willing to go back to jail over a maid’s salary?”

Laughing, Aleks said, “Don’t act so innocent. You know damn well what I am talking about. If you think I am going to let you swoop in and steal her inheritance from me, think again.”

I had absolutely no idea what Aleks was talking about. “What inheritance? Aleks, are you okay? Katya, is a maid at a ski lodge, not an heiress.” I said, dumbfounded.

Still pointing the gun at my head, he sat down in the chair by the window and started telling me everything.

“Oh, that’s what she wants us all to think because she doesn’t know that I know the truth. Little Miss Innocent thinks she gave that all up when she ran away, but a few years ago, I discovered what she’d been hiding. Why else do you think I stayed with her?”

I was starting to get frustrated but since there was still a gun aimed at me, I had to play along. “Okay, what is the truth? As far as I know, Katya is a single mom who left her family in Russia because they didn’t approve of her teenage pregnancy.”

Sighing, Aleks said, “But did you ever stop to think about why she ran all the way to Montana? Why didn’t she just go somewhere else in Russia?”

“I guess I just thought she wanted to give her unborn child a shot at the American Dream so to speak,” I said.

“Wrong, lover boy. She ran away because she knew she would be found back home and she wanted to escape. I thought her last name sounded familiar from stories my grandfather and uncles used to tell, so I started digging. I have some ‘acquaintances’ in Russia who were happy to ask around for me,” he said, grinning.

“And what did they find out?”

“As always, my instincts were correct. It turns out, the bitch is the heiress to one of the oldest toy companies in Russia. The Belinsky family is filthy rich, and she stands to inherit a fortune,” he explained.

The news shocked me but I still didn’t understand how this helped Aleks. “Okay, even if she is an heiress, how does that benefit you or me for that matter? The money is hers, not ours.”

“It doesn’t help you, because you won’t be in the fucking picture. Me, on the other hand, I’m going to take it all. I plan on marrying Katya and when her parents die, we will go back to Russia, and inherit everything. The property, the wealth. All of it.” He twisted the gun to the side. “Of course, I’ll have to tie up any loose ends back here first...”



“Aleks, calm down. I don’t want Katya’s money. I just want her safe, that’s all,” I told him.

“Yeah right, and I just want world peace. Who do you think you’re fooling with the Nice Guy routine? Stop stalling and tell me where the fuck she is!” he said, shaking the gun.

“I already told you, I don’t know! She has the day off so she could have gone anywhere,” I said.

I was just about to attempt getting off the bed when I heard the front door close. Then I heard Luca calling for his mom in the next room over. I opened my mouth to scream for them, tell them to run, but Aleks closed the gap between us and pressed the gun against my head once more. “Don’t. Say. A word.” His breath was hot against my neck and he smelled like stale booze.

I heard Katya whispering something to her son, and then she went to check on the baby, and I prayed to God that she didn’t bring Kenlee in here with her. A few seconds later, she appeared in the doorway, and a look of horror fell across her face.

Her already pale skin turned even whiter when she saw Aleks pointing a gun at me and smiling.

Her past had come back to haunt her.

## *Chapter Thirty-Two*

### **Katya**

I walked into Zane's suite expecting to have a nice 'family' breakfast. We weren't technically a family but it was starting to feel like one and I couldn't have been happier. I set the bagels on the counter, put Kenlee in her swing, and then Luca and I went to surprise Zane. The last thing I expected to find was the love of my life sitting in bed with a gun pointed at his head and my abusive ex-boyfriend snarling at me.

Luckily Luca was behind me, so he hadn't seen what was happening and I was able to cut him off at the pass. "Luca, go to the den and watch cartoons. I need to talk to Mr. Zane for a minute," I said, ruffling his hair. Luca ran down the hall excited to watch cartoons and I turned to face Aleks and Zane. I felt surprisingly calm for someone who just walked into a real-life episode of a "Dateline" special. I knew I needed to get the gun off of Zane, so I tried reasoning with Aleks.

"Aleks, whatever the problem is, it is with me, not Zane. Why don't you put the gun down and then you and I can talk?"

I asked.

Aleks scoffed at the suggestion. “There is nothing to talk about, Bitch.”

“Aleks—”

“No, you’re not the one talking,” he said. “I’m the one talking. I’m the one in charge. Now this is what’s going to happen — You and that little worthless waste of a human you call a son are coming back to the house with me. You’ll never see Lover Boy again and if you try, then I won’t hesitate to put a bullet in his brain. Or Luca’s brain.” He grinned at me. “I’ll let you pick.”

Fear began to set in, and my voice trembled as I made another attempt to reason with him. “What is this even about?” I asked. “Why do you want me to come with you? You don’t love me, and Luca isn’t even your son.”

Laughing, Aleks said, “Well, you finally got one thing right. I don’t give a damn about you, but you do have something I want, and I am going to make sure I get it. So, march your ass out there, get the kid, and let’s be on our way.”

It broke my heart to see Zane looking so helpless but what could he do? Aleks was crazy and had a gun pointed at his head. I should’ve known something like this would happen. For whatever reason, the universe was against me, and I wasn’t meant to be happy.

I wasn’t going to make it out of this one, but I could at least do something to make sure Zane did. If I refused to go with

Aleks, he might shoot Zane or Luca, or all of us. I wasn't willing to risk it, so I agreed.

Nodding, I sighed in exasperation. "Okay, Aleks. You win. You always win. I will go as long as you promise not to hurt Zane."

"Maybe you aren't as stupid as I thought, Sweetheart. As for your lover boy, I don't give a fuck about him, just you and your inheritance." He shoved Zane down onto the bed but kept the gun pointed at him as he walked over and grabbed me roughly by the arm. When he was standing in the doorway, he turned back to face Zane. "Don't even think about following us, or I will kill the kid."

I looked back at Zane and tried to say with my eyes everything I felt as Aleks shoved me out the door. I hadn't had a chance to tell him, and now I doubted I ever would, but I loved him. In a world that never seemed to make any sense, of that I was certain. I loved Zane Grey. I could only hope that somehow, he knew.

I picked up Luca on the way out urging him to stay quiet. Kissing his head, I softly whispered, "Shhh. Stay quiet, Angel. It will be okay, Sweet Pea. We have to leave with Aleks for a little while, but Mommy is here, and I will take care of you. Everything will be okay, I promise."

I wasn't sure if I was trying to convince Luca or myself. My life was crumbling before my eyes and there was nothing I could do to stop it. I felt like a zombie as I walked to the car in silence, holding Luca, and praying that Zane wouldn't try and

be a hero. As long as he was alive, I could get through whatever Aleks had in store for me. I hadn't been to church since I left Russia and felt unworthy of God's grace, but I silently prayed anyway.

*Dear Lord,*

*Please watch over Luca and me. Please keep us safe from Aleks. And please keep Zane safe. Do not let him do something stupid to try and save us. I thank you for my time with him, and I pray that he moves on and has a happy life. Please have mercy on us.*

*Thank You,*

*Your Estranged Daughter,*

*Katya*

I knew it wasn't the most eloquent prayer ever said, but it was from the heart and I was short on time. Plus, I meant every word. Aleks could do whatever he wanted to me as long as my son and Zane were safe. I'd offer up my life for both of them over and over again if I had to.

What broke my heart, even more, was that I did not get to tell Zane my good news. At least, I had hoped he would think it was.

That morning, I'd been woken up early by an aggressive wave of morning sickness. I ran to the bathroom, and threw up everything in my stomach, then went out into the kitchen to get a glass of water.

The sun hadn't even risen yet, but I was desperate to know the truth, so I snuck out of Zane's room and picked up a pregnancy test at the pharmacy around the corner. I took it in the bathroom in my own suite, and learned I was pregnant just five minutes before returning to Zane's place and finding Aleks there with a gun.

I knew it was Zane's because I had my cycle the week after the last time I was with Aleks so thankfully that ruled him out. I wanted to be excited about this news, but at the moment, it really just felt like another thing to worry about.

I wasn't sure what to do. Would I have to pretend it was Alek's baby to keep him from going off the deep end? I didn't know for sure, but I was pretty confident that if he thought the baby was Zane's, he would make our lives even more miserable than he was already planning on doing. I made up my mind to do whatever I had to do to protect my unborn child.

It was a thirty-minute drive from the lodge to Alek's grandmother's house, and we didn't bother talking. There was nothing to say. Aleks had completely lost his mind and nothing I could have said was going to change that. Aleks had tunnel vision when he wanted something and the best thing I could do for the sake of my children was to stay quiet and go along with whatever he said.

I always knew he was abusive, but I had no idea that he was this evil. The suspicions surrounding his grandmother's disappearance should've been red flags, but I was dumb and

naïve when we met. I didn't want to believe he was capable of something so violent. Seeing him with a gun pointed at Zane's head quickly changed that. Hitting me was one thing, but threatening Zane's life as well as mine and Luca's, well that was something I hadn't been prepared for.

For the remainder of the trip, I held Luca who was quietly crying in my lap and thought about the last few weeks. It was so nice to feel safe and comfortable for a while. It had been so long since I had experienced that feeling that I had taken it for granted.

As devastated as I was over losing what I had, I knew I had a choice to make. I could choose to wallow in my misery or be grateful for the time I'd been given with Zane. I decided to be grateful. It might have only been for a few short weeks, but in that time, I felt safer and more loved than I ever had before. We might've had some rocky patches, but I always felt safe and that's something I will always keep with me. I looked out the window and said a silent thank you to God and to Zane for allowing me to feel that at least once in my life. I told myself I would get through whatever was in store for me. I always had.

But for some reason, this time, it just didn't feel like I was going to make it. It felt like I was lying to myself.

## *Chapter Thirty-Three*

### **Zane**

**A**s soon as Aleks and Katya left, I wasted no time.

I had to get them back and I was willing to do whatever it took. I just didn't know where to start. I threw on some clothes, grabbed Kenlee, and made a beeline for Harry's office. I needed help and a rational voice of reason. All I could see was red. In the last two hours, I'd been held at gunpoint and forced to watch as a psychotic lunatic took Katya and Luca away from me. But come hell or high water, I would get them back. This was not the end and I would not go away quietly. Aleks Petrachova had messed with the wrong man.

Losing Sarah had been out of my control but I would be damned if I lost Katya too, not if I could still do something about it. I began wondering if there was any truth to what Aleks said about Katya being an heiress. I supposed it could be true, but it didn't make any sense. If her family was that wealthy, why did she leave? I understood that getting pregnant at sixteen was never any parent's dream for their child, but I



doubted that it could have been that bad. Or was it? I didn't know and I couldn't spend any more time thinking about it. I had to find a way to get her back and put Aleks away for good. If that didn't happen, the answers to my questions wouldn't matter.

When I arrived at Harry's door, I banged rather than knocked. I didn't have time to wait. Harry didn't even ask who it was, he flung the door open ready to take someone's head off, but his face changed to worry when he saw me. He quickly hurried me inside, shut the door, and locked it. He could tell something serious was going on.

"Zane, what the hell is going on?"

I could barely get out the words. "Katya... He took her. I think he's on his way to his grandmother's house, but I have to move fast."

I knew I wasn't making any sense but it was the best I could do. Panic had taken over and I was frozen. Harry went to the kitchen and got me a glass of water, but when he handed it to me, I could only manage to take small sips.

"Ok take a deep breath," Harry said in a low, calming voice. "Start over. Who took who? And who's grandmother's house are they going to?"

Sighing, I put the glass down and fixed Harry with a serious look. "Katya's ex-boyfriend showed up in my room with a gun and took her and Luca. I don't know for sure, but I have a feeling that he's taking them to his grandmother's house."

Harry's eyes widened. He reached out and took Kenlee's baby carrier from me, and put my sleeping child down on the floor by the kitchen table. "How the hell did the bastard get into your room?"

Waving him off I said, "He stole a universal key but that really isn't what's important right now. He has Katya and Luca and I am scared to death. He said if I followed them he would kill me, and after seeing the look in his eyes, I believe him. But I have to get them back."

Tears began to form in my eyes, and I slumped down into one of Harry's kitchen chairs. "I don't know what to do," Harry. I can't lose her."

Harry pulled out a chair and sat next to me. He put his hand on my shoulder. "First things first, you need to breathe. C'mon, now, I'll do it with you. Breathe in... breathe out..."

This did make me feel a little better, and the oxygen helped to clear out my foggy brain a little. I took another deep breath and then let it out slowly, and Harry got up from the table and grabbed his phone from the counter. "I'm going to call my friend who's a cop," he said. "Maybe he'll know what to do."

"What if the cops show up at his grandmother's house and spook him?" I asked. "What if he shoots her or Luca when he sees them?"

"You can't think like that," Harry said. "You can't spiral right now, or else you're not going to be able to do anything for them. You need to try to stay calm and focused, okay?"

I nodded, even though I wasn't sure I was going to be able to do either of those things. Harry pressed the phone to the side of his face and I forced myself to finish the glass of water sitting in front of me. After a while, Harry sighed and hung up the call.

“Didn't pick up?”

“Nah,” he said, shaking his head. “But I'm sure he's awake. He's been put on this killer early-morning patrol route, so let me try him again.” He re-dialed and sat down again. We waited. And waited. Then finally, someone answered.

“Yes, hello, Tom?” Harry sat up a little straighter and cleared his throat. “Yeah, hey, it's Harry. Listen, a buddy of mine needs help, and I didn't know who else to call. He was held up at gunpoint and his—uh—girlfriend?” He looked at me for verification on this and I nodded frantically. “Yeah, his girlfriend and her kid were taken.”

Harry stopped talking and listened, but I couldn't hear what the officer was saying. After a few seconds, he handed the phone to me and said, “Tell him what happened.”

With shaky hands, I took the phone and tried my best to fill in the gaps. “Uh—yes, hi, officer. My name is Zane Grey, and this morning I woke up with a gun in my face and my girlfriend's ex was there to kidnap her and her kid.” When I said it all out loud like that, I felt like I was in a movie.

Or the *Twilight Zone*.

“Okay,” Tom said. “Tell me your girlfriend’s name and anything you know about the ex.”

“Her name is Katya, Katya Belinsky, and her ex is named Aleks.”

“Aleks Petrachova?” he asked, his voice suddenly dropping into a deeper, more serious tone. “Are you talking about Aleks Petrachova?”

“I... I might be. Look, all I know about him is that he’s an abusive asshole who I’m pretty sure was arrested recently for breaking into his grandmother’s house, but apparently, the charges didn’t stick. Or he broke out of jail, but something tells me he’s not that smart.”

“I know exactly who you’re talking about. We’ve been trying to nail that guy for months, but he somehow keeps getting bail and showing up at the last second with air-tight alibis. But if what you’re saying is true, and if you’ll agree to testify, then I think we could actually get him this time.”

“I’ll do whatever it takes,” I said. “But right now, what’s important is that we get them back. I think he’s taking them to his grandmother’s house.”

“That would make sense,” Tom said. “That’s his ‘base camp’ so to speak. I’m going to call this in and get some cops and a SWAT team out there as soon as possible.”

“Great,” I said, standing up out of my seat. “Just send me the address and I’ll meet you there.”

“No,” he said. “We can’t have any civilians there if we’re bringing in a SWAT to do a raid. It’s way too dangerous. You can wait at the station, and I swear, we will bring your girlfriend and her son straight there after we get them out of the house.”

I scoffed. “You can’t be serious. I’m not just going to sit at the station while you guys go in and get them. I have to be there.”

“I’m sorry sir, but that’s just not an option. Tell Harry to take you to the station, and I’ll meet you guys there as soon as everything is over and everyone is safe.” Then he hung up the call. I gawked as I handed Harry his cell.

“He... he just wants me to wait at the station. I can’t believe this. Harry—I have to be there. I have to be the first person she and Luca see when they get out.”

“Okay,” he said, nodding affirmatively. “Then we’ll go to Aleks’ grandmother’s house.”

“You know where it is?”

He rubbed the back of his neck. “Yeah... yeah I do. After you told me more about him the other day, I started to look some stuff up. I found the footage of his arrest a couple of weeks ago, and they showed his grandmother’s house in the background. It’s in a neighborhood I used to live in a while back before I met Sloane. I know exactly which house it is.”

“This is great! Let’s go!”

He got to his feet as well and picked Kenlee up. “I’ll meet you outside. I have to fill Sloane in and let her know she’s in charge of this little one.” He sighed and shook his head as he started to walk down the hall. “I’ll try to go as quickly as I can, but I don’t think Sloane’s going to be thrilled to let me leave once I tell her where we’re going.”

###

Harry met me in the hallway a few minutes later. His face was set in a determined frown, and we took off running toward the elevators. In the parking lot, we jumped into Harry’s car, and he sped down the freeway towards his old neighborhood.

I was grateful Harry was driving, I was not in the mental state to be behind the wheel. My hands were still shaking and my breathing was back to being shallow and insufficient. Harry got off the freeway and turned into a somewhat older neighborhood. He took a right at the first stop sign and then crawled to a stop at the end of the street. “Is this the house?” I said, pointing to the small white house directly to our right.

“No,” he said. “It’s a few doors down, but I didn’t want to get too close in case Aleks was watching from the window or something.”

Seconds after Harry put the car in park, a barrage of police cars and SWAT vehicles came rushing passed us. They didn’t have their sirens on, but they did park much closer to the house than we did. Harry and I leaned forward in our seats and watched as a group of armed officers, wearing full SWAT padding and protection, circled the house. They positioned

their guns high up onto their shoulders and used hand signals to communicate with one another as they all slowly began to creep closer to the house.

It felt like they were moving at a snail's pace, and it was agonizing to just have to sit there and watch.

I pushed back against the urge to run in after them, and instead, waited with bated breath as they entered the dark, quiet house.

And then—nothing happened.

All remained perfectly still and silent, and I looked at Harry as if he could somehow know better what was going on inside that house. The seconds ticked by, and I felt a cold drop of sweat running down the side of my face. “What’s happening?”

“I don’t know,” Harry said. “But we just have to—”

I unbuckled my seat belt and opened the car door. “Zane, what are you doing?”

Saying nothing, I stepped out onto the sidewalk and took off sprinting toward the house. Harry had gotten out of the car too, and he whisper-yelled after me, “Zane, get back here! Let them do their jobs!”

I tuned him out as I ran. I was on a mission and nothing was going to stop me. I might not have been able to stop that 18-wheeler from crashing into Sarah, but there was still a possibility I could do something to save Katya.

I burst through the front door to find the SWAT team in a standoff with Aleks. He had a gun pointed at Tom and one arm

holding Katya and Luca back. I took them by surprise, and Aleks broke his staring contest with Tom and turned his attention to me. This gave the officer just enough time to rush forward and tackle him to the ground. The gun went off, but thankfully, the bullet went straight through the roof overhead and nobody was struck.

I ran to Katya and Luca who were huddled together in the hallway. They were crying and rocking back and forth when I reached them. “Katya, honey, are you okay? Did he hurt you? Please look at me,” I begged.

She looked up through tear-stained eyes and shakily said, “I.. I.. I’m ok.”

I noticed a red mark on her cheek so I gently turned her face to get a better look. “What is this?” I asked, still holding her face. “What did that son-of-a-bitch do to you?”

Nervously she said, “It’s nothing. He slapped me when I wouldn’t let go of Luca, that’s all. I’m fine, Zane. I promise.”

The sadness in her eyes begged me to let it go so I did. Besides, the cops already had him in handcuffs and were marching him out of the house, so what else could I do? Instead of walking over and punching him in the gut like I wanted to, I pulled Katya and Luca closer and held them while they cried in relief. Their nightmare was over and I was going to do everything in my power to make sure they never re-lived it. When their tears stopped, I lifted Katya’s face to mine and kissed her.



“Katya Belinsky, I promise you here and now that I will protect you and Luca. Nothing like this will ever happen to you again. As long as I have breath in my body, I will keep you two safe,” I said, choking back my own tears.

I looked at Luca and smiled, hoping the gesture would help him understand that he was out of danger now. He squirmed out of his mom’s grasp and put his arms around my neck and hugged me so tight, it actually restricted my breathing. Not that I cared. It suddenly hit me that I loved Luca too. In a short time, he had become my own, and I knew at that moment that I would do anything to make him feel loved and safe. I might not be his father, but since when did biology matter? It didn’t. Not in this situation anyway. From now on, Luca would know he had a dad who’d always be there.

I kissed his forehead and told him, “It’s okay Buddy. I’m here and nothing bad can happen. The cops have taken Aleks away and he will never hurt you or your mom again.”

Luca sniffled and said, “Okay. Zane?”

“Yeah, Buddy?”

“Can we go home now?” he asked.

I looked at Katya and Luca before responding, “Yeah, let’s go home.”

“Zane,” she said, her lower lip still trembling. “I’m sorry that you got dragged into this. It must’ve been so scary to wake up with Aleks there, holding a gun. I just—I’m so sorry.”

“Katya,” I said. “Don’t worry about that now. I’m fine, you and Luca are fine, and that is all that matters, okay?”

Still seemingly shaken by the day’s events, she said, “Okay. You’re right. Everyone is okay and that is what is important.”

About this time, Harry walked in to see what was keeping us. He came over to where we were huddled up together and said in a voice barely above a whisper, “Hey... Tom is outside. They’ve already hauled Aleks off, but he said he needs us all to go down to the station to make a statement. I know you all probably just want to go home, but he said it’s best to do these things when everything is still fresh in your mind.”

I looked at Katya, who nodded and said, “I can do that.” She got to her feet and picked Luca up, holding him tightly in her arms. “We’ll be happy to go make a statement if it means we have a better chance of sending Aleks away for good.”

Harry nodded and walked out of the house. Katya started to leave as well, but I touched her arm and said, “Katya, wait...”

She turned and looked at me with confusion and said, “Yes?”

“I just want to say... before anything else happens—I—I love you.”

She smiled at me with watery eyes, then ran her hand down the back of Luca’s head and said, “I love you too, Zane. *We* love you.”

## *Chapter Thirty-Four*

### **Katya**

**W**hen we finally arrived back at the lodge, I was mentally and physically exhausted. It was only 2:00 in the afternoon but it might as well have been midnight. Sloane and Harry had offered to keep Kenlee for the night and although I felt selfish for wanting it, I was relieved. My selfishness wasn't just for me though. I was thinking of Zane as well. He'd been through hell today also, and I wasn't sure either of us had the strength to deal with an infant, and to be honest, I didn't want to try. He did go over there shortly after we got back to the lodge, however, to spend a little bit of time with her. I was sure the fear of losing Luca and I had brought back a lot of painful memories for Zane, and it made sense that he would want to check in with his child, to remind himself that she was safe and sound.

Back in his room, I put Luca to bed for a much-needed nap and headed straight for the bathroom. My muscles were begging for a hot bubble bath. I filled the tub and made sure

the massage jets were on and stepped in. The minute the water hit my aching muscles, I began to relax. I leaned back and closed my eyes but opened them when I heard Zane rustling with a bag.

This amazing man was too much. Not only had he saved my son and me again after being held at gunpoint, but now he was pouring Epson salts into my bath. “What are you doing?” I asked. “You should be resting. You have had a hell of a day yourself.”

“Yes, *we* have, but I don’t want to be away from you and the salts will help the tension in your body. And I know it might not be the best time, but we need to talk,” he said matter-of-factly.

I knew this conversation was coming but I thought I’d have more time to prepare. Looking at Zane’s face as he sat on the edge of the tub, I knew there was no time like the present, so I reached up, grabbed his hand, and said, “Okay, what do you want to know?”

His answer was simple. “Everything.”

“Everything?” I asked, raising my eyebrow.

Softly he raised my hand and kissed it to reassure me and continued. “Yes, Baby, everything. If I am going to protect you and I plan on doing that for the rest of my life, I need to know the truth. I need to know about your life and family back in Russia and what made you leave. If what Aleks told me is true, he might not be the only person looking for you.”

I sighed and blew out the breath I hadn't realized I had been holding for the last four years. I had always been so afraid of anyone finding out my truth that I had always been on guard. But I realized that if Zane and I were going to work, he had to know everything. No, he deserved to know everything, so I let go and didn't hold back. I turned the jets in the bathtub off so that he could hear me clearly, then started my story.

“As you know, my name is Katya Belinsky. My family is one of the oldest and wealthiest in Russia. We, I mean, my family owns one of the oldest toy companies in the country in addition to other businesses and properties. The family wealth is vast even by American standards, and I stood to inherit it if I had stayed. That's what Aleks was after apparently. I had no idea that he knew who I really was.”

Zane's expression at my admission seemed to be one of confusion and concern. “So, how did an heiress end up here in Montana cleaning rooms in a ski lodge and barely making ends meet?”

Reaching up and stroking his face, I said, “I'll explain everything. Just listen. When I got pregnant with Luca, I was only sixteen. Like any young girl in trouble, I was frightened and didn't know what to do. I told my boyfriend, Sergei, Luca's father, and he seemed to be happy. We knew it would be hard, but he said he wanted to make it work. He said he wanted us to be a family. I sat my parents down one evening and told them the news.”

I looked down at the water, which was now a little murky from the salt and sighed. “I knew my parents wouldn’t be happy about it, but I honestly thought that they would eventually get on board. Seregi was devoted to me and the baby, so what could they really be all that mad about?”

I laughed, remembering the look in my father’s eyes as I delivered the news all those years ago. “I was naive. I didn’t understand just how much our family reputation would mean to them. I’d been the Golden Child once upon a time, but after I got pregnant, I just became some slut whose bastard child was going to tarnish the Belinsky name. The fact that Seregi was the father only made matters worse. They hated him. He was poor, and came from the type of familial line that my parents looked down on.”

“What did they do?” Zane asked. “Did they tell you to get rid of the baby?”

I shook my head. “That wasn’t an option anymore. Too many people knew I was pregnant, so the scandal had already broke. They forbade me from moving in with Seregi and told me that if I chose to live under their roof and use their money to support my baby, I had to do everything they said. I tried to call Seregi that night, thinking he would come and rescue me the second he heard about how awful my parents were treating me... but he didn’t answer.”

Once I got to this point in the story, I had to stop and catch my breath. Thinking about Seregi and the days leading up to

my escape from Russia was painful, and I'd been walling myself off from those emotions for years.

“After calling about a dozen times, his sister picked up and told me that he hadn't come home from work that night. I called the store, where he was employed at the time, and they said he hadn't shown up for his shift that day. As far as everyone knew... he'd just vanished. I had my suspicions, but for a while, I kept them at bay and just kept holding on to hope that Seregi was coming for me, and just... I don't know... got held up.”

I smirked sadly at my own childhood ignorance, then looked up at Zane, who was staring back at me with nothing but compassion in his eyes. “What were your suspicions?”

I opened my mouth to explain, but all that came out was a gasp. I put a hand over my lips and took a moment to collect myself. “My parents did something to him,” I said after a while. “It was the only explanation that made sense. I was terrified, convinced they would do something to me or my child next. I packed a small bag and headed to the nearest train station. I didn't have a destination in mind, I just knew I had to get the hell out of there. I got to the station and purchased a ticket to St. Petersburg. Once I was safely out of town, I felt like I could breathe again but I knew I needed a plan. Although St. Petersburg is 400 miles from Moscow, I knew they could find me there. My family has connections all over Russia so I decided the safest bet was to come to America.”

Zane clicked his tongue. “God, you were only sixteen, and you had already traveled so far... I can’t even imagine.”

I smiled. “Yeah... those few weeks of travel were a lot. But I got through it. I chose Montana because I’d seen pictures of it once in a brochure. My parents were planning a ski trip and thought about going to the States, so they ordered all these brochures to be sent to us from the snowiest places in the West. I remember thinking Montana looked so beautiful and peaceful. I used the rest of my money to buy a plane ticket across the globe, and then road trains and buses all the way from the East Coast to here.”

I stopped for a few minutes and let Zane process and absorb the bombshell I had just dropped on him. Some would run for the hills after hearing that so my nerves were on high alert. When I thought about it, I had to seem like a disaster waiting to happen. My ex-boyfriend had held him at gunpoint and kidnapped Luca and me, and now I was telling him that my parents were probably responsible for the disappearance of Luca’s father. If he decided to stick around, that could mean only one of two things.

He really did love me.

Or he was an idiot.

Starting to shiver, I couldn’t sit in the now cold water any longer, so I slowly got out of the tub, dried off, wrapped the towel around my body, sat down on the vanity stool, and waited for Zane to speak. When I couldn’t take it anymore, I



finally said, “Please say something, anything. I know it is a lot to process but your silence is killing me.”

Zane looked at me but said nothing. He slowly stood up and walked to me and knelt down in front of me.

“Katya, you’re home now. You’re safe. I apologize for my silence. I was simply trying to wrap my head around how parents could treat their child like that. Especially a child who was frightened and in trouble. But you found a way to take care of yourself, even when the people who were supposed to take care of you refused to do so.” He smiled and caressed my face. “Once again, I am amazed by your strength and resiliency.”

I started to cry. “Thank you. I’ve never thought of it that way. I only knew that it was no longer just about me, and even though I was only sixteen, I knew I would do whatever it took to protect my unborn child.”

He looked at me and hesitated before saying, “As a parent, I completely understand that. I cannot begin to imagine the fear that ran through you. That definitely explains how you ended up here in Montana, but how did you end up with Aleks? I know you were young and scared, but there had to be another option.”

“No, at the time there wasn’t.” I shook my head. “At least I didn’t think there was. I was seven months pregnant and living on the streets. I was barely scraping by and was scared and alone. Aleks came into the café I was working at. For a while, he played the part of Prince Charming, and like most abusers,

he was sweet and romantic in the beginning. He offered to get me off the streets and take care of us, and since I did not want to give birth in a homeless shelter, I agreed. The abuse started about a year after Luca was born. I guess he wanted to make sure I was all in and had nowhere else to go before he showed his true self. Luckily, I met Harry at the café and he offered me a job with a steady paycheck.”

Zane didn't look at me with pity but like he was genuinely sad for the life I had lost. The life I could've had. “I am so sorry you had to experience that. No one should have to live with a monster like that just to stay off the streets. If I could take away the pain of those days, I would.” He wiped away a tear that was rolling down my cheek.

“Thank you. I have never told anyone my story before and it actually feels good to finally be free of it.”

“There is nothing to thank me for. I want you to always feel like you can tell me anything. We are a team now, Katya. Your joys are my joys and your worries are my worries. You have been so brave for so long, but you don't have to be anymore. I will take care of you and Luca from now on, and I promise that no harm will come to either one of you while you are with me,” he said as he leaned up to kiss me.

Realizing that I needed to tell him about our impending arrival, I decided I might as well rip the band-aid off. “Hearing that makes me happier than you know, but...”

Looking concerned, he asked, “But what?”

“What if a new little one was to join us? How would you feel then?” I asked nervously, biting my lip. In my heart I knew I shouldn’t be nervous, this was Zane, and not Sergei or Aleks, but I couldn’t help it. I didn’t exactly have the best track record with men. I sat with my eyes on the floor and anxiously waited for the ball to drop.

He looked like he was thinking about the possibility of adding to our new family in the future and was about to say something when I saw the realization come over him.

His eyes widened and he started stuttering, “Wait... are you...?”

“Yes, Zane, I am pregnant. I took a test this morning to confirm it. I was going to tell you after breakfast, but well, we both know how that turned out.”

Zane took my hands. “Katya, Baby, why are you trembling? Are you not happy? This is wonderful news!”

“It is? I mean, I think it is, but I was not sure how you would feel considering Kenlee is so young and you and I are so new. It’s a lot to take on, so I just wanted to make sure you were ready for all of this...”

“Oh Sweetheart, so many men in your life have let you down that you don’t think you deserve to have one stick around and love you, and that breaks my heart. I am thrilled about this baby. I admit I was not expecting it so soon in our relationship, and having three so young will definitely be challenging, but some of the best surprises in life are unexpected. You were an unexpected surprise, and now I

cannot imagine my life without you. This baby is a symbol of our love and I have more than enough room in my heart for all of you. You, Luca, Kenlee, and this baby are going to be spoiled rotten, so get ready,” he said before picking me up and spinning me around.

Laughing I said, “Zane, put me down! I’m getting dizzy.”

“Oh, sorry. I guess I got excited. We are having a baby! Does Luca know? He’s going to be the best big brother and Kenlee will be so happy to have another baby around to play with. This is a lot to take in, but Wow! Thank You, Katya!”

“For what? Why are you thanking me?” I asked.

Just as he was about to kiss me, he said, “For turning one of the worst days of our lives into one of the best.”

In all my life, I’d never felt as safe and as loved as I did at that moment.

## *Chapter Thirty-Five*

### **Zane**

**A** week had passed since the incident with Aleks and we were slowly getting back to normal. Or whatever normal was for us. Luca was still dealing with nightmares and slept between us every night and we were looking into finding a child psychologist who dealt with this kind of trauma. I knew that kids were resilient but this poor kid had been through more in four years than most adults go through in a lifetime. I wanted to make sure that he got all the help he needed.

We had decided to wait to tell him about the baby until after Katya's first doctor's appointment and the excitement on his face when we finally did was contagious. Bouncing up and down, he asked, "Is it a girl or a boy?"

"We don't know yet, Buddy. It is too early to tell but you know, you kind of already are a big brother," I told him.

Looking adorably confused, he asked, "I am?"

Handing him a juice box, Katya said, “You sure are. Kenlee is going to need you for all kinds of things.”

“She is? Like what sorts of things,” he asked curiously.

“Oh, like teaching her how to tie her shoes and how to scare off the monsters under her bed. Only the best big brothers know that kind of stuff,” she told him encouragingly.

Luca scooted off the kitchen stool and walked proudly over to Kenlee’s swing. She started giggling and smiling the minute she saw him.

Putting my arm around Katya, I looked at Luca and said, “See? She already loves you.”

“But she’s so little,” he said with scrunched-up brows.

“Yes, she is and the new baby will be even smaller. It will be your job as the big brother to protect both of them just like Batman protects the people of Gotham,” I said.

That got his attention. “Like Batman? You mean, I have to keep all the bad guys away from them?”

“You sure do and I cannot think of a better person than you to do it. So, what do you think about that?” Katya asked.

Not able to say his L’s correctly yet, he adorably yelled, “I’m going to be the best big brother to Kenwee and the new baby!”

Katya and I started laughing as he took off running down the hall toward the playroom. Sliding her arms around my

waist, Katya looked up at me and said, “Thank you for saying that.”

“What did I say exactly?” I asked her.

“That Luca is also Kenlee’s big brother. It may not seem like a big deal to you but to that little boy in there, it’s huge. I am not sure I have ever seen him that excited or that proud. I’m not sure if you could tell, but he is taking his new job very seriously,” she said laughing.

“I could tell. Maybe we should get him one of those “I’m the Big Brother” t-shirts. I think he’d like it.”

This made Katya laugh even harder. “Like it? We might not ever get it off of him. But, that’s a great idea. Thank you for thinking of it,” she said and then leaned up to kiss me before heading back to the kitchen.

“Don’t mention it,” I said, tickling her sides a little before she walked away.

###

We spent the next few days packing and getting ready to move back to my house. Saying ‘my house’ felt weird as I wanted Katya to feel like it was her home too. Deep down I knew that in order for us to both feel at peace living in the home I once shared with Sarah, there was something we needed to do. Or maybe it was something I needed to do, but I wanted Katya there with me. So, while we were lying in bed one evening, I got the courage to bring it up. Katya was laying

on my chest and I was playing with her hair. “Katya, I was wondering if you would do something for me?”

She sat up pushing her hair behind her ears and looked at me puzzled. “Zane, you know I would do anything for you. What is it?”

Sighing, I said, “Well, I was wondering if you would be willing to visit Sarah’s grave with me? I haven’t been since the funeral and I think it’s time. When we buried her, I was functioning on autopilot, just getting through the days. I know I was there, and I know we had a service, but I can’t even remember the details. I don’t remember actually telling her goodbye. That was the hardest part. It all happened so fast that I never got to tell her goodbye. I never got to say ‘I love you’ one last time.”

Katya placed her hand over my heart and said, “She knew it here, Zane. No matter what you had to do to get through those horrific days, Sarah knew what you felt in here. But of course, I’ll go with you.”

I pulled her to me and kissed her. “Thank you. Having you by my side will make it easier. This might sound cliché, but I want the only two women I have ever loved to meet,” I said, somewhat embarrassed.

Katya smiled softly. “It doesn’t sound cliché at all, my love. I want nothing more than to pay my respects to her. I want her to know that she can rest easy now. Although I can never replace her, I will do everything I can to be the best possible mother to Kenlee and the best partner to you.”



“Somehow, I think she already knows that, but thank you,” I said, kissing her goodnight. Before turning out the light, I tilted her chin up to look at me. “Katya, I love you. Now and always.”

She settled into the crook of my shoulder and said, “I love you too, now until infinity.”

###

The next morning, I looked outside and saw it was a beautiful day for January in Montana, so I decided it was the perfect time to make our trip to the cemetery. It was cold but the sun was shining which helped with the chill. I stopped at the florist on the way and bought a dozen StarGazer Lilies to put on her grave. I knew most people bought roses, but lilies were Sarah’s favorite, so that’s what I got. Katya smiled when she saw them.

“The flowers are beautiful, Zane. Sarah will love them,” she said when I pulled out of the parking lot.

“I hope so. She always joked that I never bought her flowers. I guess I’m making up for it now,” I said sadly.

Katya kissed my cheek and settled back into her seat. We made small talk or listened to the radio the rest of the way there and I was grateful for the way Katya let me be without trying too hard. I didn’t know why, but the closer we got, the more nervous I felt. I think Katya could tell because she reached over and grabbed my hand but never asked me what was wrong. She didn’t have to. She already knew.

When we arrived, I put the car in park and sat staring for a moment. I closed my eyes and said a silent prayer to help me get through it. The day of Sarah's funeral was a foggy memory and I hoped I could remember where her headstone was. I turned off the car and grabbed the flowers. Katya and I walked through the graveyard, hand in hand, and thankfully I remembered the way.

Or maybe Sarah guided me, I didn't know.

Seeing her name on the headstone sucker punched me. The finality of it. In my mind, I could still see, smell, and hear her, but seeing the headstone reminded me she was gone. It was a glaring reminder that there was an end date. Sarah's had come much too soon, but I realized there was an end date for all of us which also reminded me of how close I came to losing Katya. Of course, I couldn't prove it, but over the last few days I had started feeling like Sarah had something to do with saving her. Like she was our guardian angel.

I started crying. Not really out of sadness, although that was present, but more out of guilt. I had spent the last five months wallowing in my own self-pity that I had not even bothered to come out here. Sarah deserved better than that. I felt like a worthless piece of shit, but I also knew that Sarah would call me out for that. I could hear her saying, "Shut up, you fool. You're only human."

Grabbing Katya's hand, I gently pulled her toward the grave. Together we laid the flowers down and when we stood back up, I spoke in a gentle, shaky voice.

“Sarah, hi Sweetheart. I brought you a dozen of your favorite flowers. I hope you like them. I know, it took me long enough, but they are here now. I’m sorry it has taken me so long to visit, but I couldn’t bring myself to until now. I know that is no excuse and I promise to do better, I just didn’t know how to face it. I didn’t want to accept that you were gone. Not until now anyway. I didn’t bring Kenlee, but I promise to bring her soon.”

A laugh escaped me. “I wish you could see her, Sarah. She’s gotten so big and is crawling around everywhere. The pediatrician thinks she will be walking before she’s one. I’m not surprised though. She is a determined little girl. She looks just like you too. Every day I see more and more of you in her. She is a constant reminder that even though you are not physically here with us, part of you will always be here. I thank you for that. For the last five months, the angel we created together has kept me going. Without her, I am not sure I would have had the will to go on.”

I looked at Katya who had quiet tears in her eyes and squeezed her hand before continuing. “Sarah, there is someone I would like you to meet, although I can’t help but feel like you already know her. This beautiful woman is Katya Belinsky. I know you had a hand in rescuing her from her psychotic ex and I wanted you to meet in a more personal setting. Thank you, Sarah. Thank you for giving Katya and me the second chance that you never got. I promise we will make the best of it.” I bent down and touched the engraved heart on her stone.

I stood back up and looked at Katya. “Thank you again for being here today. Having you beside me has made it easier to face. I know that she is gone but having your support means more to me than I can possibly express.”

Softly, she said, “Zane, I am happy to support you in any way I can. I do not ever want you to forget about or stop loving Sarah. She is part of who made you who you are.”

I pulled her close, hugged her, kissed her gently, and then said, “Thank you. The truth in your words warms my heart. I hope this does not upset or offend you, but would you mind if I had a private moment with Sarah before we leave?”

“Of course. Take all the time you need. I will wait for you in the car,” she said as she kissed me gently and walked toward the Mercedes.

The moment felt surreal. I was watching my future walk back to the car that would take us to our home while I stood next to the grave of my past. A past that taught me how to love and be a partner. A past that I would never stop missing or loving, but that I had to move on from. I had thought you only got one chance at love in your lifetime, but I was wrong. I just hoped Sarah understood.

“Hi, Sweetheart. I’m back. I hope you liked Katya because I need to talk to you about her. Sarah, I want you to know how much I love you and will always love you, but I love Katya too. I know you haven’t been gone very long, and I didn’t expect this to happen so soon, but it has. She makes me happy, Sarah. Happier than I ever thought I could be after you

passed...” I shuffled back and forth from one foot to the other, nervous about what I was going to say next.

“Sarah,” I went on. “Katya is really special. In some ways, it is like you picked her out for me. Who knows? Maybe you did, but I wanted you to be the first to know that I am serious about her. I plan on spending the rest of my life with her and taking care of her the way I would have taken care of you. I pray that you are at peace and smiling down on us knowing you will always be a part of us. I will keep you close to me and I promise to keep you updated on Kenlee. In the future, I will smile every time she rolls her eyes at me the way you used to. Oh, I know it’s coming, and I am ready,” I said laughing softly.

I placed two fingers over my lips, kissed them, placed them on her gravestone, and then stood up. “Goodbye Sarah, rest well sweet angel, I love you.” Slowly I turned and began walking back to Katya. I wasn’t sure what that future held, but I knew that whatever came our way, Katya and I would get through it together.

I’d locked the car so Katya was standing outside waiting. I could tell she was cold but she never let on or complained. She simply smiled and kissed my cheek as I let her in. I still wasn’t sure what I did to deserve her, but I was grateful. We sat in silence for a moment while I gathered my thoughts. It had been an emotional experience but one I was grateful for. I now had a sense of peace and the feeling that I had Sarah’s blessing. Finally, I turned the car on and pulled out of the parking lot.

Katya's eyebrows were scrunched like she was debating on saying something, so I finally broke the ice by taking her hand and asking, "What's the matter, Sweetheart? Are you ok?" She quickly looked at me and said, "No, nothing is wrong. I'm fine. I was just thinking about something. Well, actually I had an idea but I'm not sure how you will feel about it."

Intrigued, I smiled and said, "Why don't you tell me what this idea is and find out?"

Taking a deep breath she said, "Well, I know you said you want to start going to Sarah's grave more often and I totally think you should, but I also know there will be times when life gets too busy and you can't make it, so I was thinking we could call the florist and arrange to have a dozen lilies delivered monthly. We could even change it up depending on the season."

I smiled at her. "I think that is a wonderful idea. Why don't we call the florist when we get back and set it up?"

Her smile melted what was left of my heart and I knew she was a gift from above. She had come to the cemetery with me to show her love and support and had thought of having flowers delivered monthly so Sarah's grave would always look nice. Katya had no idea that her simple gesture showed her love for me more than words ever could. I kissed her hand, smiled, and said, "Okay, then it's set."

We spent the rest of the drive talking casually about plans for the house and the baby's nursery. Katya wanted to go with gender-neutral colors since we had both decided we didn't

want to find out the sex of the baby. We already had a girl and a boy so whatever this blessing turned out to be would just be a bonus. Most of our stuff had already been sent over to the house and we were planning on sleeping there tonight, but I had one last surprise up my sleeve. When I made the exit for the lodge, Katya turned and frowned at me.

“Zane, where are you going? This is the way back to the lodge. I thought we were going to the house to meet Addie and the kids.”

Laughing at her confusion, I said, “Don’t worry, we are. I told Harry we would come by and see him before heading to the house. He hasn’t seen us much since the incident with Aleks and I think he just wants to see with his own eyes that we really are ok.” It wasn’t the best lie, but I was still feeling a little frazzled and emotional after visiting Sarah, so it was the best I could come up with.

I could see the tension in her body release as she sat back. “Oh, okay. That makes sense. I would like to thank him again also. If it weren’t for Harry... Well, we never would’ve met. I owe him for a lot of things, but that’s by far the most important one.”

Shortly thereafter, we arrived back at the lodge. Inside, some of the staff grinned and smiled as we walked by. I led Katya to the elevator under the ruse that I had forgotten something in the room I wanted to pick up before we went to Harry’s office. My nerves were frazzled and I felt like a teenager on prom night, but I prayed she couldn’t tell. I

pressed the button for the floor, pulled her close, and turned her to face me. I wanted to look at her gorgeous face one last time before stepping into the unknown. It felt like the elevator was purposely taking longer than normal and I was beginning to get antsy. After what seemed like thirty minutes but was probably only three, the elevator arrived on the 4<sup>th</sup> floor. I held the door and escorted Katya out. We walked to the room and I stopped to kiss her before we entered.

I opened the door to let her go ahead of me and immediately her hand flew over her mouth in shock. Spread out all over the floor were lavender and red rose petals and soft music was playing. I stood behind her and let her absorb what was going on. I hoped she etched every image into her brain and remembered this moment forever. Today was a day I never wanted her to forget. When she finally turned around to face me, I was down on one knee with an open ring box. She gasped.

“Katya Belinsky,” my voice was beginning to crack as well but somehow, I managed to get out what I wanted to say. It wasn’t what I had rehearsed in my head but that was okay. For this, I let my heart do the talking. “In such a short time you have swooped in like an angel and completely changed my life for the better. Somehow, you looked past the grieving, grumpy, asshole I was and gave me a chance. You showed me how to be a patient and more attentive father to Kenlee while also showing me that it was okay to take care of myself too. Until you came along, I thought I would be miserable and alone for the rest of my life. I can only hope to aspire to be half as kind,



loving, generous, and patient as you are. Being with you is not just thrilling, it is an honor. I know I do not deserve you, but if you'll have me, I will spend every day of the rest of my life trying to be worthy of your love. What I'm trying to say is, Katya, will you make me the happiest man in the world and be my wife?"

Maybe it was because I was down on one knee, but Katya's petite frame knocked me over when she jumped into my arms.

"Is that a yes?" I said laughing.

Speaking through her tears, she said "Yes! Yes, Zane Grey, I will marry you."

I held her tight and kissed her passionately.

Having her this close and knowing she was going to be my wife aroused me in ways I hadn't expected. Tilting her face to look at me, I hungrily said, "I am going to start by worshiping every inch of your amazing body and making love to you until you can't walk." Slowly, I began licking her ear and neck since I knew that drove her crazy.

Moaning, she said, "I wonder what it will feel like to have sex now that we're engaged." She began peeling my coat and shirt off.

I tore at her clothes with hurried fingers. Once I had her fully naked, I picked her up and pressed her against the wall. Her legs wrapped around my waist and I could feel her delicious pussy rubbing against my cock.

*Damn, will I ever get enough of her?*

Luckily, I had the rest of our lives to find out.

I kissed her passionately against the wall for a while before she broke away and panted, “I need to feel you, Zane. I need you inside me.”

Following my bride-to-be’s orders, I carried her to the old bedroom. The bedroom where I first made love to her. Gently, I laid her on the bed and grabbed a rose. Softly, I began caressing her erect nipples and inner thighs with the soft, fragrant petals. Katya began writhing and squirming which told me she was enjoying it but needed more. I discarded the rose and replaced it with my tongue. I could taste and smell the subtle floral hints as I licked and kissed from her ankle to her pussy. She gasped and braced her hands against the headboard.

Sliding two fingers into her already wet pleasure cave, she gasped and clenched tightly as her ecstasy grew. I took this as a sign and began licking her again and finally sucking on her clit.

“Yes! Oh, Zane, yes, baby, yes!” she screamed out, banging her hand into the wall behind her, apparently not caring who might be on the other side of it.

When she was on the verge of climax, she grabbed a fist full of my hair. Her back arched off the bed as her orgasm exploded and I had never been more turned on.

Panting, she said, “I need you inside me now.”

I kissed her and she sat up.

“I want to ride you, Baby. I want to see your stunning face when we climax together,” she groaned.

Before I knew it, Katya was on top and positioning my cock at her entrance.

She moaned as she began slowly riding me.

“Fuck, that feels incredible!”

Her pace quickened and I could feel myself building inside her. She must have been close too because she leaned back and put her hands outside my legs as she continued to ride harder and faster.

“Oh my God, baby. Fuck, yes! I am going to come,” I screamed as I watched her face form a perfect ‘O’ shape. Together, we fell off the cliff and into oblivion. At that moment, nothing else mattered besides the two of us. It was perfect. She collapsed onto my chest while we both came down. I wasn’t sure how long we stayed like this, but neither of us wanted to break the magic of the moment.

I held her and kissed her until both our arms went numb and we finally had to get up. Wishing we could stay like that forever, I took my time getting dressed. Afterward, we took one last look around the suite that brought us together and I brushed her hair out of her eyes as I said, “So, should we tell Harry and Sloane the good news before we head home?”

*Home.* I couldn’t wait to get there but I also knew that home was wherever Katya was.

She walked to the mirror to wipe the mascara from under her eyes and said, “Let’s do it.” We headed for the door, but she stopped short of leaving. “Can I ask— why did you decide to propose to me here?”

I shrugged. “Well, because... this is where it all started. This is where I first saw your stunning face, where I first pissed you off, where I first hurt you, where we first made up, and where I first made love to you...”

Tears formed in her eyes again but she didn’t say anything. Nodding, she reached up on her tiptoes and kissed me before resting her hand on my cheek.

Together we walked out of our old life and into the new, but this time we were walking out as one.

## *Chapter Thirty-Six*

### **Katya**

**S**hock did not begin to describe what I felt when Zane proposed. I had dreamt about my proposal and wedding my whole life but had given up hope that it would ever happen after Sergei and Aleks. I didn't exactly have good luck with men, but Zane was different. He had proven his love for me over and over again and I truly believed that he would do everything in his power to protect me.

Now, we were engaged and on the way to our home. A home that can only be described as a mansion, and it was all ours. I was already excited to live with him, but now I could not wait to start our life as a married couple. My leg started shaking up and down in nervous anticipation the closer we got to the house. I couldn't wait to show Addie my ring. Gorgeous was not strong enough of a word. It was absolutely stunning. It was at least 2 carats but tastefully done so it didn't look gaudy. It was something I would've picked out myself if I'd had that kind of money.

We pulled into the driveway and before we could park, Addie and Luca were running out to greet us. Looking at Zane who was grinning from ear to ear, I crossed my arms, raised an eyebrow, and said, “I’m assuming they already know.”

“Well, I might have had a little help picking out the ring. I picked that one out myself, but I wanted to get a second opinion just in case. I snuck Addie along on one of my shopping trips and she verified that it was the right choice.”

Caressing his face and smiling, I asked, “And Luca? I’m pretty sure he doesn’t know too much about jewelry unless it’s a Ring Pop.”

Laughing, he said, “No, he didn’t help me with that, but I did ask his permission.”

I smiled. “You did? That’s so cute.”

“Yeah, well, I didn’t want him to think I was swooping in and stealing his mom from him. I wanted him to know that I was not just marrying you but that I was also welcoming both of you into my family.”

“Thank you. That means a lot,” I said, pushing back tears as he turned off the car.

As soon as I stepped onto the driveway, Luca’s arms were wrapped around my legs and Addie was gushing over the ring. Like most small children, Luca wasn’t interested in my ring for very long and soon ran off to play in the front yard.

After we got through the onslaught of hugs and congratulations, Addie took the kids to the playroom so Zane

and I could begin unpacking and making plans. She was staying in one of the many guest rooms for a few days to help with the kids while we got settled and adjusted. Zane had already told me to design the second nursery any way I wanted, but he also told me to pick out new bedding and furniture for our room if I wanted. I didn't think it needed changing, it was beautiful as it was, but I guessed he wanted me to feel like it was our room and not like I was moving into the room he had shared with Sarah.

Zane took my hands and led me up the stairs to the kids' rooms. Luca's was next door to Kenlee, and the baby would be across the hall. The idea of them being close together in such a big house eased my mind. We put the kids' clothes and toys away and then made our way to our bedroom. I'd seen it before, but every time I saw my new room, it took my breath away. It was huge. It reminded me of my room back in Russia, but when I left that life behind, I thought I'd given up this kind of luxury as well.

The gorgeous mahogany king-sized bed sat high off the ground with the softest gray comforter and the plushiest cream-colored pillows I'd ever felt. I wanted to get in it right then but I knew I had to wait. If we didn't unpack our bags now, we might not ever get around to it. Lost in thought, I stood staring at the bed when Zane walked up behind me, put his arms around my waist, and began whispering in my ear.

“So, Mrs. Grey, I have been having some very naughty thoughts that I thought you might be able to help me with?” he groaned seductively.

Leaning back to press against his muscular body, I put one hand around his neck and one on his cock that was pressing into my ass. He started kissing and nibbling on my ear as he made his way down my neck, and I could feel the wetness between my legs beginning to pool.

“And what might that be, Mr. Grey?” I asked breathlessly.

Groaning, he said, “I have an overwhelming urge to rid you of all of your clothes, lick every inch of your delicious body, including your succulent pussy, slide my throbbing cock inside you, and fuck you until you orgasm all over me. Do you think you could help with that?”

“Ummmmm, yes, I believe I can,” I groaned as I turned around and began unbuttoning his shirt, “but you forgot one thing.”

“Did I?” he asked hungrily. “And what might that have been?”

“Well, you forgot to mention the part where I take your cock into my mouth and slowly lick and suck until I taste your delicious juice running down my throat.” I pulled his shirt out of his pants and slid it off his toned and muscular body.

Gasping, he grabbed the back of my neck and kissed me like I was the last trace of oxygen on Earth. The thrill of turning Zane on excited me and gave me the confidence I never knew I had. I kissed him again and began undoing his belt. When I had it undone, I dropped it close by as I had plans for it in the near future, but first I had other ideas. Breaking the kiss, I looked at Zane, stepped back, and slowly took off my



sweater and leggings. Wearing nothing but a bra and panties, I sauntered back toward him, pushed him onto the bed, and dropped to my knees.

Before he could protest, I began licking his inner thighs making my way to his balls. I carefully sucked them into my mouth while running my nails up his chest. His breath caught and I began to flick my tongue across them before making my way to his cock. Grabbing his shaft, I torturously began stroking him before stopping to get the discarded belt. Smiling mischievously, I looked at Zane and said, “I think this belt will come in quite handy for what I have planned for you.”

I grabbed his wrists and held them above his head while I secured them to the headboard with the belt. My breasts grazed across his face and I shivered when Zane’s tongue flicked across my nipples. The sensation enhanced my arousal and I began to work faster.

“What are you doing, baby?” he groaned.

Smirking, I replied, “Shhhh, trust me,” and then I began licking his nipples. His stomach muscles twitched and his breath became rapid as I licked across to the other nipple and down his stomach, stopping below his belly button.

“Umm, what do we have here?” I asked once again, grabbing his shaft and stroking it up and down. “Looks like dessert,” I said, inching further down on the bed. I looked up at Zane to see his eyes glazed over with lust and desire. Slowly, I licked the tip of his cock and swirled my tongue around the top before swallowing his entire length and girth.

He was huge, but it felt like he was made for my mouth. The scent of his body wash combined with the musk of his arousal made my nipples hard and my pussy wetter. I was aching with anticipation, but I was on a mission and nothing was going to stop me from completing it. I began sucking harder and faster.

“Yes, Fuck yes. Don’t stop. That feels so fucking incredible,” Zane panted between breaths.

His arms kept jerking from where they were tied, and I could tell he wanted to break free and touch me. I had to admit, having the power was more of a turn-on than I imagined.

Begging, he said, “Please, baby, I need to touch you. I am so close. I want to run my hands through your hair when I come in your gorgeous mouth.”

Reaching up with one arm, I undid his restraint. Immediately, his hands went to my hair and he held them there as his climax built. Suddenly, he drew in a sharp breath and moaned, “I’m going to come...” but before he could say anything else, his delicious juices were spilling down my throat. He tasted sweet and masculine.

Slowly, I crawled up his body and straddled him. Sensuously, I slid my bra off one arm at a time and then unhooked it, letting it fall to the side. Seemingly still turned on from his oral pleasure, Zane groaned and grabbed my hips.

“It is my turn to feel and taste you,” he said hungrily.

He hooked two fingers into the crotch of my panties and moved them aside before sliding his fingers all along my wet walls, stopping his thumb on my swollen and aching clit.

“I love how wet you always are for me. I can’t wait to taste you and then slide my cock inside of you,” he said, sitting up and flipping me over.

How he did it with his fingers still inside me, was beyond me, but I didn’t care. I was too far gone to give a damn. I moaned and cried out for more.

Lustfully, he said, “Just wait. I am just getting started.”

Before I could protest, he grabbed the band of my panties and ripped them off.

My back arched as he licked my inner thighs and up my slick walls. Keeping his fingers inside me, he flicked his tongue across my engorged bud and a small spasm shot through me. Wrapping my legs tighter around his neck, my body beckoned him to continue. Feeling my orgasm approach, I reached back and grabbed the center post of the headboard to steady myself. My muscles tightened and my pussy clenched around Zane’s mouth as the first shock wave overtook me.

“That’s it, Baby. Come for me,” he whispered before continuing to lick and suck on my clit.

The final flick of his tongue sent me over the edge and I saw stars as I screamed out, “Yes, oh God, yes!”

Groaning, he licked his lips.

Still speechless from my earth-shattering orgasm, I pulled on his arms to show him that I needed him close. Zane got the message and quickly made his way up my body leaving kisses along the way. When his tongue slid into my mouth, I could taste my orgasm which turned me on even more. My need for him was desperate, I needed him inside me filling me up the way only he could. Tilting my hips against him, I wrapped my legs around his waist letting him know I was ready. He moaned huskily into my mouth as he thrust into me.

“Yes, Zane. Harder!” I begged.

He immediately complied, and I could feel my body begin to tense. The connection between us was unlike anything I had ever experienced before, and I didn’t want it to end.

Zane hit his peak at the same time and screamed out, “I love you, Katya,” and then collapsed on top of me. Out of breath, he rolled over bringing me with him to rest on his chest. When his breathing slowed and returned to normal, he wiped the sweat from his brow and kissed my forehead. I was still coming down from my post-orgasmic high and wasn’t able to form words yet.

“Sweetheart, that was unbelievable. I hope you like this bed because I plan on making love to you in it over and over again until we wear the mattress out,” he said chuckling. But, I could tell he wasn’t kidding.

Still trying to regain my breath, I kissed his chest and lay there for another minute. When I finally had the strength to

speaking, I pushed myself onto my elbows so I could look my fiancé in the eyes.

“Darling, I love this bed, and I love you.”

“I love you, too. And I always will.”

We spent the rest of the afternoon making love and talking in ‘our’ bed in ‘our’ house, and I couldn’t help but feel that for the first time in my life, I was finally home.

## *Epilogue*

### **Zane**

#### ***T****wo Months Later*

As we waited to board our flight, my mind wandered, and I thought about how we'd ended up here. It was a couple of weeks ago, after we'd gotten back from Katya's latest check-in, and got the good news that the baby was developing perfectly, that she first looked at me and said, "I wish I could talk to my parents."

The admission took me by surprise, but when I asked her a follow-up question, she became sullen and quiet. I decided to let it go, chalking it up to pregnancy hormones, but then a few days later, she expressed something similar while we were lying in bed.

"I know this might sound crazy," she said, rolling over to face me. "But now that I'm pregnant again, and you and I have created this amazing little family, it's been making me think about everything I left behind back home."

“Do you think you might want to make contact with your family again?”

She sighed. “No... well... I don’t know. What do you think? Am I being an idiot for even considering letting them back into my life?”

“I definitely wouldn’t say you’re being an idiot... But I also don’t think I can be the one to tell you what to do. This sounds like something you need to decide for yourself.”

She frowned. “I was afraid you were going to say something like that.”

For the week that followed, she didn’t bring it up at all, but then randomly on a Saturday night, she came into the bedroom and announced that she’d made up her mind. “I know this is all really sudden, but just hear me out...”

“Okay,” I said.

“My parents were horrible people,” she said. “And they might *still* be horrible people. But they aren’t the only family I have back in Russia. There are other people I left behind who cared about me, who I’ve missed dearly. Luca deserves to know that side of his family, and who knows... maybe my parents have changed.” She came over and sat next to me, and took my hand in hers. “I’m not going to hold onto hope or anything, but I just hate the idea of cutting off everything from my past and just pretending that I don’t miss my homeland.”

“I understand.”

“Does that mean you’ll go to Russia with us?” she asked. “Because I won’t go without you. I wouldn’t feel safe going without you.”

“Of course, I’ll go with you,” I said, squeezing her hand. “I will always be there for you and Luca, no matter what.”

“I’m not going to bring Luca this first time I go back,” she explained. “It’s too risky. I want to go, just with you, and see if I can start rebuilding some of my familial relationships.”

“Whatever you want to do,” I said. “That’s what we’ll do.”

We booked the tickets the next day and arranged for Addie to watch the kids while we were gone. That was about a month ago, and now that the day had come to actually pull the trigger, it was obvious Katya was more than a little nervous.

She was tapping her foot restlessly, and when they finally called us to board, she shot up out of her seat like a rocket.

The flight was ten hours, but she didn’t sleep the entire way. I couldn’t blame her, I was nervous too and I didn’t have as much at stake. I held her hand and encouraged her, reminding her that if things didn’t go well, we would leave. We could spend the rest of the trip exploring her favorite childhood memories or catch the first plane home, the choice would be hers. She smiled softly and thanked me and then looked out the window.

We arrived in Moscow by 11:00 am and were able to check into our room at The Four Seasons. The room was incredible but Katya was too anxious to notice. We still had over an hour



before we were scheduled to meet her parents, so I drew her a bubble bath to help her relax. It seemed to help and we held hands as we walked to the corner café to wait for Katya's parents.

I noticed Katya's parents right away, considering Katya was the spitting image of her mother. The older couple stood near the doorway, eyes scanning the crowd. When they saw her, they nearly took off running in our direction. Still holding my hand, Katya stood and waited for her parents to approach. They rushed toward Katya, and when her mom wrapped Katya up in her arms, all three of them began to cry.

They held each other in silence for a full five minutes before finally letting go. Without saying a word, I motioned for everyone to take a seat. Still holding onto Katya like they were afraid she would disappear again her father spoke first.

“Katya, my love, my daughter, it has been so long. Your mom and I were beginning to think...” He shook his head, unable to say his fears out loud.

Her mother nodded in agreement before saying, “For the last four years, we've wondered and worried about you and the baby. I prayed that you were alive and safe with enough to eat. I thank God that he has brought you back and you are sitting before me now.”

Swallowing her tears, Katya mustered the courage to tell her parents what was in her heart. “I'm happy to see you both as well... but... but you have to understand why I left.”

Her dad nodded grimly. “We know it was because of us, Katya. We did not react well to the news of our sixteen-year-old having a child and we pushed you away and for that we are sorry. We have lived with the guilt every day for the last four years, but we have prayed that we would get the chance to make things right. And now here you are.”

“Yes, Dada,” Katya said, wringing her hands. “I was angry with you and Mama for how you handled the news. I was young and scared and needed your love and guidance but that is not what made me leave.”

“It wasn’t?” asked her mother.

“No, Mama. By then, I was used to you and Papa trying to control my life. I left because of what happened to Sergei,” Katya stated.

Looking at each other in confusion, her mother finally looked back at Katya and asked, “Katya, my dear, what are you talking about? What do you mean what happened to Sergei?”

Sighing, Katya responded, “Mama, please do not play dumb or act as if you do not know. For days after you forbade me from seeing him. I tried to reach him but no one had heard from him or seen him. When he stopped going to work, I realized something must have happened to him. No one simply vanishes like that unless they had help or were forced. I knew how much you despised him so it wasn’t hard to figure out which of the two it was. Realizing that I needed to protect my baby from his own grandparents, I fled.”

Her mother's hand flew to her mouth as she gasped in horror so her father spoke for both of them. "Oh, Katya, no... No, my love, that's not what happened."

"What do you mean, Papa?" asked Katya.

"Sergei did not vanish for the reasons you thought. He ran away to avoid taking responsibility for you and the baby. About a year after you left, I saw him working as a chauffeur for one of our neighbors, so I stopped and confronted him. He admitted that he had not wanted to be a father and rather than tell you, he left. Eventually, someone told him you were gone and so he felt it was safe to come home. Your mother and I have made many mistakes in our life, especially when it comes to you, but we would never do what you suspected us of."

Katya's tears began to flood with the realization that her parents were not the monsters she had believed them to be. Her mother quickly went to her oldest daughter and held her while they cried together. It was a beautiful moment and I struggled to hold back my tears.

When their tears finally subsided, Katya's mother took her seat, and Katya grabbed my hand and smiled. "Mama, Papa, I would like you to meet Zane Grey, my fiancé. It's because of him that I had the courage to come back here. He made me feel safe and brave, and I would never have had the confidence to do this if it wasn't for him. He is also... the father of this baby." She put a hand on her stomach and her mother gasped again.

Her dad took a moment to collect himself after hearing this news, then looked at me. “Mr. Grey, it is a privilege to meet you and we are forever indebted to you for making our daughter feel safe. If there is anything we can do to repay you for helping reconnect us, don’t hesitate to ask.”

Humbled, I replied, “The privilege is all mine, Mr. Belinsky. The honor of loving your daughter and seeing her happy is more than enough but since you mentioned it, there is something you could do for me.”

Katya and her mother looked confused but as a businessman who was used to negotiations, her father quickly said, “Of course. Tell me what it is and it is yours.”

Smiling at their nervousness, I said, “I have already asked Katya to marry me and she has said yes, but it would mean a lot to both of us to have your and your wife’s permission and blessing?”

The tension at the table eased and in unison, they responded, “Of course!”

“It is obvious you love our daughter,” her mother said. “And her happiness is all we have ever wanted. We would be honored to have you as a member of our family.”

“Thank you. That means the world to me.” I smiled at them both. “We are planning on a Christmas wedding next year after the baby is born and we would be thrilled if you would attend. Of course, we hope that you will visit much sooner than that as well. There is a special four-year-old who I know would love to meet his grandparents.”

They immediately said yes and started planning a visit in the spring. I had a feeling there would be quite a few FaceTime visits in between and I couldn't be happier. We spent the remaining time at the café with Katya showing them pictures of Luca and telling them all about him. They couldn't wait to meet him and were ecstatic they would not miss out on the birth of their next grandchild.

It had been quite an emotional afternoon and we all needed some air, so we agreed to meet at their house for dinner that evening. Now that she could relax, Katya wanted to show me around her hometown. We strolled through the city streets and she pointed out important buildings and places she had loved as a child. As we were walking among the snow-capped trees in one of her favorite parks, I heard the cooing of a dove and saw it staring at me from a high branch. I no longer questioned how I instinctively knew certain things, but I knew this was Sarah telling me she was happy for me and that she was okay.

I smiled at the dove and then at Katya and continued our stroll into the rest of our lives.

**THE END**

## *Also By*

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Tabloids call him a washed-up rockstar, but that grumpy Silver  
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Loud music, a party boat, and a fake relationship with a  
billionaire playboy that I don't like, what could go wrong?

I didn't bargain for his heart of gold, love songs, and wild  
nights of passion.

Now I've fallen for him and he's leaving town for the next gig.

I didn't show up for his last concert so he thinks I don't care.

He is sooo wrong!

It's six weeks later and my world has turned upside down.

Two pink lines changed everything.

My heart aches for his strong, protective arms around me and  
a future for our child.

Then, I heard his sweet, sexy voice on the radio singing about  
*us*.

Will he just belt out an award-winning hit or come find me and  
make that life come true?

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I had a hot night with my boss and soon he'll be my baby's  
daddy.

But the second time we meet, he's an obnoxious drunk who  
fell off the dock, bumped his head, and has amnesia.

The silver fox woke up in my cozy houseboat and in my bed,  
but he doesn't remember a thing for weeks as we spend  
passionate days and nights together.

As his memories start to resurface, he begins to question the  
life he has with me.

I fear that all my dreams will be washed away as he returns to  
the city.

Will there be anything left of our relationship?

Will I still have my dream job at his company?

But more importantly, will my surprise baby have a daddy?



## **Grumpy Billionaire Boss: Age Gap Enemies to Lovers Surprise Baby Romance**

NEVER make out with your billionaire boss on your first day  
of work.

He ditched me on a first date years ago. Now the cocky lawyer  
wants to offer me a job.

This was supposed to be my first career job, not a race to burn  
down the office, and every other bed we could find.

Rocking my new job was so not going as I planned.

The silver fox's drive for work turned into trying to drive me  
mad behind closed doors.

Now, my career and my life are turned upside down.

Especially when two pink lines point to an unexpected surprise  
AND then the mafia shows up.

Instead of carrying the boss's coffee, I'm secretly carrying his  
baby and hoping we all make it out of this alive.

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