

SAGE PARKER

CHRISTMAS
AT
GLACIER
GROVE



BOOK ONE

HOLIDAY HOMECOMING

Christmas at Glacier Grove

Holiday Homecoming Series



Book One

SAGE PARKER



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CHAPTER 1

“I’m sorry, but you’re fired.”

Mrs. Withers, the kind-hearted and good-humored mother was standing in the entryway of Loretta Meyer’s Boston apartment, and she simply could not keep a straight face. She was there to pick up her son, Jackson, whom Lori had been privately tutoring for the last six months. When Lori first met Jackson at the beginning of the summer, the poor kid was facing the threat of being held back and having to repeat the fifth grade. He was disorganized and falling behind in both math and English, but he wasn’t by any means an unintelligent child. In fact, Lori could tell just how bright he was after only working with him for a single afternoon.

She had been doing this for years, and she was really good at reading kids. Now, just two weeks before Jackson was scheduled to finish his first semester of sixth grade, he was getting A’s in almost all of his classes. Which is why Lori knew Mrs. Withers was joking when she said that Lori was fired. Still, it took the tutor by surprise, considering Mrs. Withers didn’t really seem like the pranking type.

“Is that so?” Lori asked, raising a single brow. “What did I do that was a fireable offense?”

“You see,” Mrs. Withers said, nodding her head but smiling with just the corners of her mouth, “I have to let you go because I’m fairly certain you’ve kidnapped my actual son and replaced him with someone else entirely.”

Lori laughed and started putting Jackson's study materials in his backpack for him. Jackson himself was sitting on her living room floor, playing with her yorkie, Milo. Lori always gave him ten minutes at the end of their tutoring sessions to hang out with the dog. She knew he loved animals, but couldn't have any pets of his own because his brother was allergic to basically everything.

"I swear to you, Mrs. Withers," Lori said, putting her hands up in surrender, "I haven't taken your son. He's right there, the same kid he's always been. I just helped him see that school doesn't have to be a drag and gave him the tools to be successful." She smiled as she handed Mrs. Withers her son's backpack. "If anything, Jackson is just too smart, and that's why he was falling behind. He was *bored*."

"Well, whatever the explanation is," Mrs. Withers replied, "I'm just really grateful for all that you've done to help him. You've really turned things around, not just for him, but for our whole family. It used to be so hard watching him come home from school feeling down on himself. Now, he comes home and shows off his test scores and tells me about everything he learned that day. It's really nice to see how much more confidence he has."

Lori beamed. "I'm glad to hear it."

"Anyway, we best be on our way. C'mon Jackson!" Mrs. Withers motioned for her son to follow as she headed toward the door. Jackson scratched Milo between the ears and then begrudgingly made his way over. "Put your coat on."

The middle schooler shrugged his oversized puffer jacket over his shoulders and looked at Lori. "Do you think I

can come over one time during Christmas break and see Milo?”

Lori laughed. “Maybe,” she said. “I’m still not sure whether or not I’m going to be in town though.”

Mrs. Withers smiled. “You’ve got holiday plans? Are you going home to see your family?”

“Oh—um, you know it’s all really up in the air right now.” Lori opened the door for them, suddenly very excited to have her apartment to herself. Her friend Stella was coming over later that night to discuss that very same subject, holiday travel plans, and Lori still needed to shower and order dinner for the two of them. “But I’ll touch base with you two after the holidays, and we can make sure Jackson’s tutoring schedule is all set up for the rest of the school year.”

“Sounds great,” Mrs. Withers said as she stepped out into the hall. “Have a wonderful holiday season, Lori.”

“You too!” Lori waved as they walked down the hallway and then closed the door and let out a heavy exhale.

Finally. Time to relax.

She was now officially on her first work vacation in over a year, and it had been a long time coming. Walking into the kitchen, she opened up a bottle of red wine and left it out to breathe while she showered and changed into more comfortable clothes. Stella arrived an hour later, just as Lori was finishing up her online order from the Chinese restaurant down the street.

“Oh, did you get extra egg rolls?” Stella asked as she removed her many layers of winter clothing and tossed them

absentmindedly on the floor. Underneath her heavy coat, scarf, and hat, Lori's friend Stella was wearing her work uniform—leggings and a sports bra. Stella was a yoga instructor, and even when she wasn't working, she pretty much lived in spandex.

“Yes, of course, I did,” Lori said, closing her laptop and getting up to pour the wine. “This isn't my first rodeo.”

“But last time—”

“Last time I *did* order extra egg rolls,” Lori interrupted her. “You just ate them so fast and then accused me of not buying enough.”

Stella cocked her head to the side and laughed. “Yeah, okay, that does sound like me.”

Lori handed Stella her glass of wine, and the two of them went to sit down and wait for their food on Lori's plushy couch. “So...” Stella said as she got settled, “I was looking at vacation packages today between classes, and I found a trip to Paris for two. It's a total steal, but we have to act fast because the offer expires in a couple of days.”

“Paris?” Lori said. “I don't know... Doesn't that sound a little...romantic? Are you sure that isn't like a couple's package or something?”

“Who cares if it is?” Stella replied. “It's super cheap! The airfare is basically free, and yes, technically we would be staying in the honeymoon suite, but we can always have them bring up a cot or something.”

It wasn't the sleeping arrangements that Lori was worried about, but the romanticness of the city as a whole. She

had never had a strong desire to visit Paris, but when she was younger and she did think about the possibility of international travel and seeing the greatest cities in the world, she always imagined David would be the one going with her. Her stomach twisted up into a little knot as she thought about her ex-husband. She took a sip from her glass of wine and pushed the memories of their ugly break-up out of her mind.

“Let’s keep brainstorming, okay?” Lori said. “Put Paris in the maybe pile.”

Stella rolled her eyes but got her phone out and started to make a list. “Fine,” she said. “But I still think we’re going to regret it if we don’t jump on these tickets right away. Did I mention that the flights were basically free?”

Lori laughed and leaned back into the couch. “Yes, you did mention that.”

The two of them continued to discuss and bicker about various vacation options for the rest of the evening, and when their food arrived, Stella got up and paid for it before Lori even got a chance to grab her purse.

“Hey,” Lori said. “I was going to get dinner tonight. You got it last time.”

“Yeah,” Stella said. “But I also ate all the egg rolls last time, remember?”

They shared a laugh and then sat down at the kitchen table to eat and argue some more about whether or not Paris—a city neither of them had ever been to—was really worth all the hype.

Later that night, after getting ready for bed and crawling under the covers, Lori received a call from Stella, who had gone home more than an hour ago and really should have been asleep already, considering she had her first yoga class starting at 6 a.m. the following morning.

“What’s up?” Lori said when she answered the call. “I’m about to call it a night.”

“Look,” Stella said. “I know we didn’t come to an official agreement in regards to the whole ‘are we going to Paris or not’ thing, but I’m telling you, this is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity! Not to mention, I just got off the phone with the travel agency who put the package together, and the guy said if we sign up before midnight tonight, we’ll get an extra 15% discount on everything.”

Lori sighed and reached for her laptop, which was on the floor by her bed. She still wasn’t sold on going to Paris, but Stella had made some pretty compelling points earlier that evening. She showed Lori pictures of the city all lit up at night, and talked about the amazing museums and historical landmarks they could explore. It sounded like a trip that would be busy, in a city that was very highly populated, and Lori was starting to think that might be exactly the sort of vacation she needed.

She loved her job and her quiet little life in Boston, but it did get lonely every now and then. She spent long hours in her apartment alone, and she had been buckling down that

entire year to try to save money, so she deserved to go somewhere a little more...glamorous.

Right?

Ever since Lori had unexpectedly gone from living in a two-income household to supporting herself on just a single income, she had made it a point to not purchase anything too frivolous or unnecessary. She had swapped out her nice shampoo for the cheap stuff and forgone eating out at her favorite restaurants. All for what? Why go through all the effort if she wasn't even willing to book an affordable trip to Paris with her best friend?

"All right," she said, pulling up her email. "Send me the link and I'll book myself a ticket."

"Really?" Lori could practically hear Stella grinning through the phone. "Yes! Okay, I'm sending it right now. Oh... you know what? With prices like these, you could invite Lucy to come along too. What college-age girl doesn't want to spend her Christmas vacation in Paris?"

Lori bit the inside of her lip and tried not to get emotional at the mention of her daughter, whom she hadn't spoken to in months. Stella was aware that the two of them were estranged, which is likely why she was always suggesting ways for them to possibly reconnect.

"No," Lori said after taking a few seconds to collect herself. Thinking about Lucy typically brought tears to her eyes these days, but thankfully right then she was able to keep it together. "Lucy would never agree to go on a two-week-long vacation with me. Not with the way things stand right now between us."

Lori was on the page for the vacation package, and she had put in all her contact information and had progressed to the payment section. She grabbed her wallet off the bedside table and entered her card information. “Okay,” she said, “I’m about to put it through. Are we sure we want to do this?”

“Absolutely!”

Lori laughed at herself for being so spontaneous and felt a little jolt of excitement run down her spine as she hit ‘confirm order’ and waited for the payment to be processed.

She waited. And waited. And waited some more.

Then the computer made an angry little buzzer noise, and she was prompted with an error message. “Huh.”

“What?” Stella said. “Did you book it? I’m about to hit confirm on my end.”

“No wait,” Lori said. “For some reason, my card was declined.” She put Stella on speaker and rested her phone on the bed next to her as she sat up and crossed her legs. “This whole thing better not be like a scam or something. The price *is* a little too good to be true, and I thought this website looked suspicious.”

“It’s not a scam,” Stella replied, scoffing. “This vacation service was recommended on Paris’s official travel website!”

“Well, I just tried again and it’s still not accepting my card. Let me try another one.” Lori put in the number for her debit card, and that was also declined. Now, she was starting to panic. It was one thing to have a single card declined, but multiple? That usually indicated an issue on the buyer’s side

of things, not the seller's. She clicked out of the vacation booking site and went to her bank login page.

“Is everything okay?” Stella’s voice sounded so distant all of a sudden, and Lori realized that it was because she had a ringing in her ears.

“Hold on.” She typed in her username and password and waited with bated breath as her account page began to load, the progress bar at the top of her browser moving at a snail’s pace.

Finally, the page loaded, and her account information popped up on the screen.

Lori gasped.

“What is it? What’s going on?”

Hands shaking, Lori reached for the phone as she leaned in close to make sure everything she was reading on the screen was correct. “Stella,” she said, her voice hoarse and her eyes already filling up with tears. “It’s gone. It’s all gone.”

“What’s gone?”

“All my money.”

“What?”

“I—I have no money.” Lori fell back into the bed, and for a moment, it felt like her heart had stopped beating. “My entire life savings...it’s gone.”

CHAPTER 2

Lori spent the next hour calling the gas company, power company, and any other service or product she had set up with automatic withdrawals. She told everyone to cancel any future withdrawal from her account, informing them that she was broke and that the payment wouldn't go through even if they tried. Afterward, Stella suggested she call the police, and even though it was getting late, they picked up and agreed to file a report.

“Okay, so let me make sure I have all the information,” the officer said after Lori went over the events of that evening. “The last time you checked your account, which would have been earlier this week, all your money was there, correct? Your savings and checking accounts were both where they should be?”

“Yes,” Lori confirmed.

“And now they are both empty?”

“That is correct.”

“As in, totally and completely empty. Not a single penny left.”

Lori wondered whether or not the officer was *trying* to twist the knife, and she had to take a second to let what he just said sink in before responding. “Yes,” she finally managed to croak out. “Yes, okay, all my money is gone. I don't have a single penny left to my name, as you so nicely put it.”

“Sorry,” the officer said. “I was just trying to make sure I had all the facts. Now, I’m going to file this report tonight and the investigation should get underway first thing Monday morning.”

Lori smiled. This was the first bit of good news she had heard all night. “That’s wonderful,” she replied. “Thank you so much. How long do you think it’ll be before I get my money back?”

“Well, the thing is ma’am, there is no guarantee that we’ll be able to get all of your money back in the first place,” he said. “And the process itself could take months.”

“Months?” The smile immediately fell from Lori’s face.

“Yes, I’m afraid so,” he said. “I know that’s probably not what you want to hear, but I just think it’s better to be realistic with you so that you don’t get your hopes up. These sorts of things can take a long time to get settled.”

“But—but it’s almost Christmas and I had plans to go traveling with my friend...”

Lori was aware of how frivolous this complaint must have sounded to the officer, but frivolity was all she could really deal with right then. Sure, missing out on a fun trip with Stella wasn’t *that* big of a deal, but if she really let herself think of the more significant implications of losing all her money, it would send her right over the edge.

“How—I mean—what am I going to do?” she asked, wondering if the cop on the other side of the call was able to pick up on just how scared and desperate she was.

“I’m not sure I can answer that for you,” he said. “But I promise, I will be in touch the second we find anything out, okay?”

“Okay.”

The cop verified her contact information and hung up. Lori sat there, still in bed under the covers, with her phone in one hand and her useless wallet in the other. Now that things were quiet, and she didn’t have any immediate task to take care of, there was nothing left to distract her, and the dread really started to seep in.

How was she going to pay her rent...or cover her car payment? She could end up losing the roof over her head and her main method of transportation... Then there were the more basic means of subsistence, like groceries. Her fridge was pretty bare, seeing as she was waiting until the weekend to do a big shopping trip.

And then there was Lucy’s tuition to consider.

Oh God, I’m going to have to call Lucy.

This thought sent her reeling, and she put a pillow over her face to stifle what could only be described as a pathetic cry for help. She had no idea how she was going to explain what happened to her daughter or warn her that her tuition check for next semester might not go through in time... David could help pay for tuition, of course, but asking him to do that would mean calling him as well, which Lori *really* didn’t want to do.

This was all just so embarrassing, and the last thing Lori wanted was to reach out to either of her estranged family members and admit that her life was crumbling around her.

She reached for her phone and started to call the only person she actually felt safe talking to, and Stella answered right away.

“Hey,” Lori said through tears, “what are you doing right now? I know it’s late but—”

“Lori...” Stella said, “I’m outside your door. Come let me in, and we will figure all of this out together.”

Lori sighed with relief and threw the covers off. She slipped her cold feet inside her slippers and wrapped her rope around herself as she hurried down the hall to let her best friend in the world into her apartment. Stella was also in her pajamas, and seeing her friend standing in the hallway with wet hair and zit-cream on her chin made Lori laugh so hard that her stomach started to hurt. For a second, some of the tension left her body, and she pulled Stella in for a big hug.

“Thank you so much for coming back over.”

“Of course,” Stella replied. “You know I wouldn’t leave you hanging while you’re dealing with something like this. Now c’mon, let’s finish off that bottle of wine we opened earlier and brainstorm.”

It was nearly eleven by the time Stella and Lori sat down to formulate a plan, but Lori wasn’t tired at all. She was wide awake, the stress and panic of the last couple of hours coursing through her body and making it near impossible for her to relax, nonetheless, sleep.

“Okay,” Stella said, pen in hand and torn piece of notebook paper on the table in front of her, “let’s focus on the most important thing first—where are you going to go over the holidays?”

Lori frowned. “That’s what you consider to be the most important thing? My Christmas plans?”

Stella shrugged. “Sort of, yeah. You can’t afford to stay here, running up those high electricity and heating bills for the winter, and you obviously can’t afford to go to Paris. So... where are you going to spend Christmas?”

“I—I don’t know.”

“I would invite you to spend Christmas with me, but considering I live in a 450-square-foot studio apartment, I’m thinking we should put my place at the bottom of the list. Where else could you go?”

Lori could feel the weight of Stella’s eyes on her, and she had a feeling she knew where Stella was going with this line of questioning, but she wasn’t interested in riding that particular train of thought. She looked away, avoiding eye contact, and tried to sound nonchalant when she suggested, “I suppose I could try to take out a new credit card and use it to book a hotel or something.”

Stella shook her head. “Bad idea. Taking out another credit card when you have no money in the bank is only going to lead to more trouble.”

“Maybe I could apply for a loan?”

“Lori,” Stella said, sitting back in her chair and shooting her friend a look. “Are you really going to make me say it?”

“Say what?”

She leaned her elbows onto the table. “Vermont. You could go stay with your parents in Vermont. They literally run a bed and breakfast, which means they have more rooms to spare than anyone else you know.”

Lori groaned. “But things are complicated between me and my parents, I’ve told you that.”

“Everyone has a complicated relationship with their parents,” Stella said. “But as far as I know, Nelson and Hanna Meyer are good people who wouldn’t let their daughter become destitute after she mysteriously lost all her money! Do you really think your parents wouldn’t take you in and support you through all of this?”

“Of course, they would,” Lori replied. “But...”

“But what?”

Lori didn’t have a good response to that question, so she opted to take a sip from her wine glass instead of answering and give herself a few more seconds to think of a reason she couldn’t call her parents and ask for their help. In the end, after the warm red wine crawled down her throat and she placed her glass down, she hadn’t come up with anything. She was being ridiculous, and prideful, but now wasn’t the time to let that stuff cloud her judgment.

She needed help, there was no denying that. She didn’t have any other close friends in the city besides Stella, and the thought of spending the next few weeks sleeping on the floor of Stella’s cramped apartment sounded like a really good way to put a dent in their otherwise unscathed relationship. Lori already had more riffs in her personal relationships than she

cared to think about, and she would do anything to keep her friendship with Stella strong.

“Fine,” she replied with a sigh. “I’ll call my parents.”

“Good,” Stella said with a definitive nod of her head. “Right now.”

“It’s late. Can’t I just call them in the morning?”

Stella got up and grabbed Lori’s phone off the kitchen counter where it was charging and handed it to her. “I think it’ll be better to just get it over with. Take your glass of wine with you into the other room and rip the band-aid off. You can figure out what you’re going to do tonight. That way, you’ll wake up tomorrow morning with a plan.”

Stella, like always, was making some very good points, and Lori was much too scatter-brained and sleep-deprived to argue. She took her phone and her wine and headed down the hall to call a number she should have been calling a lot more over the last few years.

CHAPTER 3

On Sunday afternoon, Stella met Lori outside of her apartment building, bags in tow, and the two of them got ready to hit the road. After talking to her parents and accepting their invitation to come stay for the rest of the month, Lori asked Stella if she would like to spend Christmas in Vermont. The idea of going back home to stay with her parents without a buffer wasn't in any way appealing to Lori, so she was thrilled when her friend agreed to go with her.

“I know it's not Paris,” Lori said as they headed North on Highway 93, “but it is very pretty up there. That much I can assure you.”

“Hey, you don't have to try and convince me,” Stella said. “I'm already in the car, aren't I?” Milo was curled up in Stella's lap, and he was snoring a little. “There's no turning back now. Besides, I'm looking forward to seeing your parents' bed and breakfast, and being in the snowy mountains.”

Lori smiled and tried to hitch a ride on Stella's good mood. She did her best to focus on the positive aspects of returning home, and thankfully that little exercise worked. By the time they arrived in the town of Waitsfield, Lori was actually starting to look forward to seeing her parents. These weren't exactly ideal circumstances for her to be returning home under, but that didn't mean the trip had to be all bad.

Driving through the heart of ‘downtown’ Waitsfield, which consisted mainly of a general store, a coffee shop, and a couple of art galleries that usually featured local artists, Lori rolled her window down an inch and breathed in the crisp, mountain air. She tried to remember how many years had gone by since she had been home, but the further back she had to stretch her memory, the more guilty she felt over her absence.

“Oh my God, this place is so cute!” Stella said, looking around at all the old-timey buildings and churches. “Why didn’t you tell me you grew up in a town straight out of a storybook?”

“Yeah, it’s charming, for sure,” Lori said. “Why do you think my parents’ inns are always filled up? This place attracts tourists like a smoggy pond attracts mosquitoes.”

Stella scrunched her nose up. “What a lovely sentiment.”

Lori turned right at the next street, and they came upon a dark wood, cabin-style building nestled right at the base of Mount Helen. There was a fresh coat of snow on the roof of the building, but somebody had thankfully already shoveled the walkways. Lori parked right at the edge of the lot in an open spot near the front doors of the Glacier Grove Lodge and saw that her parents were waiting outside already. She wondered how long they had been standing out in the cold and sighed as she got out of the car.

As if I wasn’t feeling guilty enough, now it’ll be all my fault if they get frostbite.

The wind whipped around them, kicking up a few loose snowflakes, as Lori and Stella hurried to grab their bags

from the trunk and ran toward the lodge. Milo, who was already shivering a little from the cold, scurried after them.

“Come in, come in!” Lori’s mom said as they rushed by. “It’s freezing outside.”

Her dad, Nelson, held the door open so that everyone could file in, and once they were on the other side, he shut out the cold with a definitive swing of his arm. The lodge was warm, and there was a fire roaring in the stone fireplace across the room from the check-in desk. Lori and Stella shook the snow out of their hair and stomped their boots a couple of times. Hanna, meanwhile, bent down to scoop up the hyper little dog and cuddle him in her arms.

“Oh, you need a little sweater or something,” she said. “You’re just chilled to the bone.”

“He has one,” Lori replied. “I just packed it away somewhere. I’ll find it later.”

Her mom smiled and nodded, and then for a moment, nobody said anything. There was an awkward tension in the room, and Lori stole a look at Stella, silently begging her friend to break the ice. Thankfully, she got the message.

“I’m Stella, by the way,” she said, putting her hand out for a shake. Nelson put his palm against hers and smiled kindly.

“It’s great to meet you,” he said. “Welcome to our home.”

“This place is amazing,” Stella noted as she shook Hanna’s hand next, and then walked over to the fireplace. “And the view is just... Wow! Look at that.” The back wall of

the lodge was taken up with a massive window that overlooked the property and the mountain directly in the middle of it.

“Yeah, we like it here,” Hanna agreed.

“Have you guys been getting a lot of snow already?”
Lori asked.

“More than we know what to do with,” said Nelson.
“Don’t get me wrong, it’s great for tourists, but our guys have been going out twice a day sometimes just to keep up with it.”

Lori smirked, remembering how when she was a kid, shoveling the walks was a family project. She, her sister, and their parents would get all bundled up, and they each had their favorite shovel. They would go out and tackle the project as a team, every once in a while, taking breaks to throw a few snowballs at one another or warm up with a cup of hot chocolate.

“You two must be hungry after driving all day,” Hanna said. “Why don’t we head into the dining room? I’ve got dinner all ready.”

This was just like Hanna. Lori’s mom was a fantastic cook and she never let an opportunity go by to host elaborate and delicious feasts. For Lori’s birthday, she used to go all out, making multiple desserts and trying out new recipes while also making sure to have all of Lori’s favorites. She always made enough food for the entire town, and when the small family unit inevitably couldn’t finish it all, she would go around Waitsfield and give out leftovers to anyone she knew, or anyone who just looked hungry.

Hanna led the way into the dining room, which also had a fireplace inside, although this one was much smaller than the one in the main lobby. Set-up on the table was what appeared to be everything needed for a four-course meal, and Lori laughed as she took a seat next to Stella.

“Mom, you really didn’t have to do all of this,” she said.

“I know,” Hanna replied, sitting across from her daughter. “But I wanted to. It’s been so long since I’ve had an excuse to make my famous roasted cauliflower.” She looked at Stella. “Those were always Lori’s favorite growing up.”

“They still are,” Lori said, as she scooped a helping of cauliflower onto her plate, before moving onto the salad and mashed potatoes. For a short while, everyone was consumed with the tasks of filling their plates and then filling their bellies, and the conversation was mainly taken up with comments and compliments regarding the food. Soon, however, the discussion took a turn toward less surface-level topics, and Lori sat up a little straighter, preparing for the question she knew was on her parents’ minds.

“So,” her dad said with a polite smile, “I was curious, Lori, why did you decide to come visit us at the last minute like this?”

“You’re obviously *always* welcome,” her mom added. “We’re just—we were wondering, that’s all. You called us so late the other night, and when you asked if you could come and stay for a while...well...we got the impression that something bad might have happened.”

Saturday night, when Lori placed the late-night phone

call to her parents, she hadn't been able to tell them the full story. She wanted to tell them what happened, but the wound was still a little too fresh, and she didn't want her parents to think that she was only reaching out because she needed help.

Of course, that *was* the only reason she was reaching out to them, but she felt so guilty over being an absentee daughter the last few years that she decided to put that particular conversation on the back burner for a while. She simply told her parents that she needed a place to spend the holidays, and left it at that. Stella had agreed to keep her secret, albeit begrudgingly, and as far as Hanna and Nelson knew, everything was more or less fine in their daughter's life.

They seemed to suspect *something* was going on, however, and they were staring across the table at Lori with imploring eyes, waiting for her to answer their question. She cleared her throat and fiddled around with her napkin in her lap for a few seconds, then said, "Well, you see... the thing is ___"

"I asked to come," Stella said, bringing the attention onto her instead. "Lori always talks about this place like it's a magical winter wonderland, and when I realized that my own parents weren't going to be around for the holidays, I asked her if we could spend a couple of weeks here. It just seemed so cozy and nice."

Lori gave her friend a grateful smile, then turned back to her parents. "And I was so excited when Stella suggested it. It's been such a long time since I spent Christmas here. I'm sorry I called so late the other night, I didn't mean to worry

you two. I just knew Stella needed to get her travel plans in order as soon as possible.”

Hanna grinned. “Well, that’s a relief. And we are so happy to have you, aren’t we honey?” She looked at her husband, who still seemed to be a bit suspicious. But once she placed her hand on his, his dubious frown turned into a smile and he nodded along.

“Yes, that’s right,” he said. “We’re so happy both of you could join us for the holidays.”

Stella then artfully maneuvered the conversation so that the group was then talking about Lori’s parents and their lodge, and soon enough, dinner was over and everyone retired into the living room to have some coffee and wind down.

Milo, who had slept under the table for most of the meal, got a random burst of energy and started running in circles around the living room furniture as everyone sat down with their mugs. Hanna laughed and watched him go. “Look at that! He’s so fast!”

“Yeah, he is,” Lori said. “He gets the zoomies sometimes when he’s been cooped up all day. He’ll calm down eventually, you just have to let him tire himself out.”

Hanna couldn’t stop smiling as the dog whizzed around her chair, and when she bent down to pet him, he nibbled on her fingers, and this made her laugh some more. Finally, Milo started to calm down. He settled in for another doggy nap on Hanna’s lap.

“Gosh,” Lori said once the room quieted down from the excitement stirred up by her little dog. “This place really

hasn't changed at all."

"Some things have changed," her dad said. "We updated some of the rooms since you were here last. And we put in a new jacuzzi as well."

"Oh, a jacuzzi," Stella said. "That sounds luxurious."

"It's pretty nice," Hanna agreed. "Lori, you should take your friend around the grounds and show her everything. She'll want to get to know the area so she doesn't get lost. With all this snow, it can make it pretty easy to get stuck somewhere you don't want to be if you're not careful." She smirked. "Just last week, your father got stuck in the shed."

"You did?" Lori laughed. "How?"

"I went in there to work on some projects," he explained. "And I didn't realize just how hard it was snowing outside. A few hours later, I went to leave, and the door was stuck behind two feet of fresh powder. I had to call your mom to come rescue me."

"You had mom come dig you out all on her own?" Lori balked. Her parents weren't exactly in their prime, and she didn't love the idea of her aging mother going out on the icy paths and trying to shovel two feet of heavy snow all alone.

"It was fine," Hanna said, waving her hand in the air. "No big deal."

Lori could tell her parents didn't want to dwell on that subject anymore, and since she wasn't interested in starting an argument, she decided to let it go. "Anyway," she said to Stella. "My parents are right. We should walk around the

grounds, and I'll show you where everything is, if I even remember where everything is."

"That's a big *if*," said a voice from behind her. Without Lori even having to look over her shoulder, she knew it was her sister who had just walked in the room.

Angela.

So much for not getting in an argument.

Lori sighed and pushed herself up from her chair so that she could greet her sister, whom she hadn't spoken to in years. If Lori's riff between her and her parents felt wide, it was nothing compared to the distance that existed between her and Angela.

"Hey sis," Lori said, forcing a smile. "Long time no see. This is my friend Stella. As I'm sure mom and dad already told you, we're visiting for the next couple of weeks."

"Oh Angela, perfect timing!" Hanna said. "Lori and her friend were just thinking about going out and touring the grounds. Maybe you can show them around?"

Angela arched her eyebrows high up on her forehead, and Lori could tell right away that her sister was gearing up to say something nasty. "I would give Lori a tour," she said, looking right at her sister. "But I stopped giving those to tourists."

It was nothing but a little quip, but it cut to the quick, just like Angela knew it would.

Lori's sister knew exactly what to say to hurt Lori's feelings the most. With just one little dig, she had made Lori feel like she was a stranger rather than a welcomed member of

the Meyer family, and now Lori was at a complete loss for words.

She just stood there with her breath caught in her chest, and the room fell silent.

CHAPTER 4

“Now, girls, don’t start fighting,” Nelson said with a sigh after a few seconds of quiet awkwardness, during which time Lori had been trying to come up with a good comeback but had nothing to show for it. The Meyer patriarch pushed himself up to his feet and offered his chair to Angela. “Everyone just have a seat and be civil while I go put on a fresh pot of coffee.”

Angela took a seat in the empty chair, and Lori sat back down as well, feeling all of a sudden much more nervous about being home for the next few weeks. She had known her sister was going to be here, considering Angela helped her parents run the lodge, but she clearly hadn’t done enough to prepare herself for this part of the family reunion. Angela and Lori hadn’t been on speaking terms for years, ever since Angela’s husband passed away. There were issues the two of them had never put any effort into working out, and over time, those grudges and hard feelings began to spread and fester, to the point where it just became easier to stop having any contact with one another.

Lori had tried to reach out, just once, after her divorce with David was finalized. Angela had been cold and cruel, and that was the last time the two of them spoke. Their parents were obviously heartbroken over this feud, and poor Hanna had tried on more than one occasion to force them to make amends, but to no avail. She often reminded Lori of how inseparable she and her sister were when they were kids, and

Lori would always say the same thing in response. *That was a long, long time ago.*

“So, Angela,” Stella said with a smile. “Lori tells me that you help run in the lodge, is that correct?”

“Yes,” Angela said. “Ever since my parents retired, I’ve been in charge. Although, they don’t really act like retirees, and my dad never can seem to walk away from this place for good. He’s always coming around and doing little things here and there, and I’ve caught him checking people in while I was on my lunch break *twice.*”

“We just like to keep busy,” Hanna said. “My doctor actually told me that I should try to find daily hobbies and stuff to do even after retiring. It’s good for the mind.”

“Yeah, but there’s a difference between taking up knitting,” Lori said. “And digging dad out of a snowstorm.” She gave her sister some side-eye when she said this last part, and the insult wasn’t lost on Angela.

“Don’t look at me like that,” she snapped. “I would have dug dad out myself if I had been there. But I had to run a few errands for the lodge, and nobody called me. I didn’t even find out he was stuck in the shed until later that night when it was all said and done.”

“Oh, you two,” Hanna grumbled. “Just stop it. There is no reason for you to fight. Lori, your sister has been amazingly helpful since your father and I decided to take a step back from running this place. And Angela, Lori is allowed to express her concerns.”

Angela folded her arms across her chest and mumbled something that only Lori was near enough to hear. “She lost

her right to express her concerns when she moved away.”

Lori thought about responding, but before she could call her sister out, Nelson returned to the room with a pot of coffee and refilled everyone’s mugs. He then put the empty pot on the ledge over the fireplace and took a seat on the little couch next to his wife. “Now then, what did I miss?”

“I was just talking about what a great job Angela has been doing running the lodge,” Hanna said. “She’s a natural innkeeper.”

“Oh absolutely,” Nelson agreed. “She’s got hospitality in her bones.”

Lori held back from making a snarky comment, something about how Angela hadn’t shown *her* any hospitality in years, and reminded herself that her parents weren’t trying to make her feel guilty on purpose. Hanna and Nelson were proud of their daughter—the one who stepped up when they needed someone to take over the family business. They had every right to be happy with the way things turned out, and if Lori was feeling guilty or jealous over the relationship between her sister and her parents, then she only had herself to blame.

Of course, realizing that this was all her fault didn’t make Lori feel any better, but it did provide her with the courage to say something that she probably should have said a long time ago.

“I’m sorry.”

She blurted the words out without any context or warning, and everyone in the room turned to her with equally

confused facial expressions. She drew in a deep breath and let it out slowly. “Let me try that again,” she said, and this time she looked up so that she could meet her parents’ eyes. “I’m sorry that I’ve been so distant lately. I don’t really have a good excuse, but after everything that happened with David...I don’t know, I just sort of walled myself off from everybody, and I feel terrible about cutting you guys out of my life like that. I should have called more and come to visit.”

“Honey,” Hanna said. “It’s okay. We understand. You were going through a lot.”

“I know,” Lori went on. “But I still shouldn’t have just disappeared like that, and now that I’m here, I just want to make sure you both know that I want to help. Anything you guys need, I want to be there for you...to make up for lost time.”

“Well, isn’t that sweet?” Angela said, rolling her eyes. “You’ve been here all of what, an hour, and you’re already trying to take over and control everything. Typical.”

“Who said anything about taking over?” Lori asked. “And I’m not trying to control everything! I just said I wanted to help. If you’re too stubborn to accept it, then that’s on you.”

“Girls,” Nelson said, using his dad voice, even though both Angela and Lori were in their mid-forties. “What did I just say about the two of you fighting?”

“I’m sorry dad,” Angela said. “But you have to admit, this is all a little fishy. Why is she showing up now, completely out of the blue? You can’t just bail on the family for years at a time and then waltz back in here like nothing happened!”

“Angela,” Hanna said, leaning forward in her chair.
“Let’s just take a beat. If you had let your sister explain
—”

“I’m not interested in hearing her explanation,” Angela said, getting to her feet. She stared her sister down with dagger eyes. “You’ve been gone a long time, Lori, and a lot has changed, okay? You have no idea what this family has been through, and I refuse to sit here and listen to you act as if you do.”

With that, Angela spun around on her heel and stormed out of the room.

CHAPTER 5

Later that night, as Lori got settled in her room, she went over the fight she had with her sister and tried to remember the exact words Angela had used. She had said that Lori didn't know what the family had been through, but what did she mean by that?

And how much could really have changed over the last few years? She mulled this over as she brushed her teeth and changed into pajamas, and felt a cloud of sadness following her around as she put her clothes away and climbed into bed. Milo hopped up next to her and curled up into a cinnamon roll on the opposite pillow. She reached out and ran her hand along the soft fur of his back and sighed.

“Today was a lot, huh?”

The little dog licked her fingers, and she felt like this was his effort at a display of solidarity.

“We'll get through this though,” she said. “Just have to take it one day at a time, right?”

She turned the light off and stared up at the ceiling in the dark, breathing in and out a few times and trying not to cry.

Just take it one day at a time.

The next morning, on her way to get coffee, Lori noticed some of the pictures her family had hanging up in the hall. There were photos from when she was a kid, a couple of her and Angela playing in the snow, one of them sitting in front of the fireplace. Then, there was a whole slew of photos featuring Laurent, Angela's late husband. He was a professional skier, and some of his medals and trophies hung on the wall alongside his photographs.

In every photo, Laurent had a big smile on his face, but the photo where he looked the happiest was the one from his wedding day. This photo was framed and featured at the end of the hall, and it showed him standing next to Angela, staring at his gorgeous wife in her white dress, and looking like the luckiest man in the world. Lori couldn't help but smile at this photograph, as she remembered how happy the two of them were together.

They had had the perfect marriage, and Lori was a little jealous of how great Angela and Laurent's relationship seemed to be, at least from the outside looking in. And then he died, tragically and unexpectedly, and Angela's beautiful little life was ripped away from her practically overnight. It broke Lori's heart, thinking about that time in her sister's life and how she hadn't really been there for Angela since then. That was right around the time that Lori's own marriage was beginning to rip at the seams, and she had been too busy fighting her own battles to be a soldier in her sister's. She wished that she and Angela could sit down and talk through everything. She wanted a chance to apologize and maybe clear the air so the two of them could start rebuilding their relationship again. But based on what happened the night

before, Lori wasn't exactly feeling very hopeful when it came to making amends with her sister anytime soon.

After grabbing some coffee and a cookie her mom baked fresh the day before, Lori went out into the lobby to see the hustle and bustle that was Monday morning at the Glacier Grove Lodge. There were guests checking in, housekeepers tidying up, and early-morning skiers grabbing some continental breakfast items before hitting the slopes. Lori knew the lodge had been doing well, but she had no idea things were going *this* well.

She was very impressed with everything she was seeing, and she had a big smile on her face when Stella came around a few minutes later to join her by the fire.

"Look at this!" Lori said. "It's packed! This is probably one of the most popular resorts in the state."

"For sure," Stella agreed. "Your dad mentioned last night when he was showing me to my room that the place was totally filled up for the season. He said we were lucky they even had space for us, that there were a couple of last-minute cancellations, thanks to a storm that hit a major airport in the Midwest."

"It's so exciting," Lori said. "I don't remember this place ever being this busy when I was a kid."

"Guess your sister really has been doing a good job being in charge."

Lori frowned. "Yeah, I guess so."

"Oh hey, don't let Angela bring you down," Stella quickly added. "I shouldn't have even brought her up. My

bad.”

“It’s fine,” Lori said with a sigh. “I just hate how tense everything is between us.”

“Well, the good news is, I’ve got an idea of how to cheer you up. Something that will take your mind off all your worries and troubles.”

“What’s that?”

Stella smiled mischievously. “It’s a surprise. Go up to your room and get your coat, then come meet me back here in five minutes, okay?”

“C’mon, Stel, you know I don’t like surprises.”

“This is a *good* surprise,” Stella assured her. She winked. “You’re gonna love it.”

CHAPTER 6

“I hate it.”

“No wait! Just, give me a second to explain.” Stella, who had shown up back in the lobby wearing snow pants and an oversized coat, was walking Lori across the courtyard and toward the ski rental shop. “This is going to be fun, okay? We’ll start on the bunny hill, and I swear, I won’t make you go any faster than you’re comfortable with.”

Lori planted her feet and refused to take a step further. “No way, Stella. There’s nothing you can say or do that’s going to convince me to strap on a pair of skis and get on that mountain. You know I haven’t been skiing since I was ten years old, and guess what? I haven’t missed it! Not a day has gone by since I was a kid where I’ve felt the urge to get back on that horse.”

“But you used to be so good at it,” Stella said.

Lori gave her a look. “How would you know that?”

“Your mom told me,” Stella explained. “We were in the kitchen having coffee together this morning, and she told me how skiing used to be your favorite thing in the world, and how you used to even talk about going pro.”

“That’s just something kids say!” Lori scoffed. “I was never actually good enough to pursue it professionally, nor would I have really wanted to.” Then she shook her head. “Not

that any of this matters, because it doesn't change the fact that I'm definitely not going skiing with you today. End of story."

Stella slumped her shoulders. "You can't live the rest of your life in fear, Lori! Just because you had one bad fall—"

"One bad fall?" Lori's eyes widened. "Is that how you would describe it? Because I would describe what happened when I was ten as one of the most traumatic experiences of my entire life. I ran straight into a tree, broke *my femur bone*, and was in the hospital for a week. Do you have any idea what it feels like to break your femur bone? It's worse than childbirth."

"Okay, but that was more than three decades ago!"

"I know," Lori said, starting to walk away. "Which is exactly my point. It took me *years* to get over what happened that day, and I'm not interested in doing something that might lead to me reliving that trauma all over again. I'm just too old to take risks like that, Stella."

"But I already signed us up for lessons," Stella said, running after her friend. "And I'm willing to bet if we got a really good instructor, who took things super slow and was very supportive, that you could find your passion for skiing again."

"I had an instructor back then," Lori said. "And he's the one who told me I was ready to go down a black diamond when I obviously wasn't. If it hadn't been for that guy, pressuring me to go down a run I wasn't ready for, I might never have broken my leg in the first place." She crossed her arms. "The way I see it, that instructor is the main reason why I'm never going near a ski slope ever again."

“Sounds like you just had the wrong instructor.”

It was a man who said this, and the voice came from behind both Stella and Lori. The two ladies had been standing off to the side of the ski rental shop, and they both turned when they heard this voice, to see a tall, handsome man in ski gear, smiling as he waited in line at the coffee cart.

“Sorry for eavesdropping,” he said. “But it was kind of hard not to. You two were talking pretty loudly.”

Lori furrowed her brow. “First of all, apology *not* accepted. You shouldn’t listen in on other people’s conversations, no matter how loud they’re talking. And second of all, this is none of your concern, thank you.”

She wasn’t entirely sure why she was being so short with this man, but she figured it probably had something to do with the fact that she was freezing, and that ever since she had arrived at the lodge, she had felt like she had done nothing but bicker with people. First with Angela, then Stella, and now with this overly friendly man waiting in line for coffee.

“I suppose you’re right,” the man replied. “It’s none of my business. I was just trying to give you a little advice. Most ski instructors aren’t like the guy you described, and they would never send you down a run until *you* said you felt like you were ready. So, like I said, it sounds like you just had the wrong instructor.”

“He’s right,” Stella said, grinning. “You just had a bad instructor, but you shouldn’t let that ruin the sport for you for the rest of your life! If what your mom said was true, then skiing used to make you really, *really* happy. Don’t you think it’s time you gave it a second chance?”

Lori was starting to be swayed, and she was about to respond to Stella with a request to let her think about it some more when the strange man interrupted once again.

“I think you should listen to your friend,” he said. “I hear the instructors here are really great. If there was ever a time and a place to try and get your sea legs back, it would be here and now.”

Perhaps Lori would have said yes to the ski lesson if she hadn't felt like Stella and this random guy were ganging up on her. She didn't appreciate them both staring at her so expectantly, so she took a step back from them and shook her head.

“I'm sorry, but the answer is no,” she said. “As I've already made abundantly clear, I'm not going on a ski lesson. Thank you, Stella, for trying to cheer me up and for getting all of this together, but it just isn't how I want to spend my day, okay? I'd much rather be relaxing by the fire, reading a good book, and not putting myself in mortal danger. I actually value my life, thank you very much. I guess I'm just silly like that.”

“You're going to be fine!” Stella said. She glanced in the direction of the man. “Tell her she's going to be fine.”

He opened his mouth to say something else, but Lori held up her hand to stop him. “No way,” she said. “Don't even bother. I'm not listening to either of you. I'm going to go into the rental shop, tell them to cancel the order you put in for me, and since the two of you seem to be best friends all of a sudden, you can go skiing together...without me.”

“Lori, wait,” Stella said. “You're being childish.”

“I’m just being realistic,” she corrected her friend.
“There is nothing either of you can say, and no ski instructor in the world is going to change my mind.”

The man smiled at her, and she couldn’t help but notice how his eyes lit up when he did. “We’ll just have to see about that.”

CHAPTER 7

Much to Lori's dismay, the stranger and Stella followed her into the rental shop and continued with their quest to convince her to give skiing another try. Lori stood at the back of the line, waiting to cancel her order, as the two of them saddled up to her and smiled innocently.

"So, you're telling me, you *really* don't miss skiing?" Stella asked. "You don't miss racing down the mountain and feeling like you're flying? Or carving up the snow as you twist and turn along its smooth surface?"

"You don't miss the wind in your hair," the man added. "And the rush you get when you first hop off the ski lift and start your descent."

Lori frowned at them both but lingered when she glanced in the man's direction. "Who are you anyway?" she asked. "And why are you following me around?"

"My name is Peter Klein," he said, holding his hand out. Lori took it, but only for the time it took to gingerly shake his hand once, then she let go. She didn't want to encourage this man to keep talking to her, if she could avoid it. "And you are...?"

"I'm Stella, and this is Lori."

"It's nice to meet you ladies," Peter said.

Lori grumbled a hello in response, and finally, the line started to move. She took a step forward and said a silent

prayer that the two of them would leave her alone, but naturally, it went unanswered. Both Peter and Stella stepped up alongside her and kept going with their spiel.

“Think about it,” Stella said, “you’ll have one scary day on the mountain, one day of conquering your fears, and then afterward, you’ll have a lifetime of being able to enjoy one of your favorite sports again! Isn’t that worth it to you?”

Lori looked down at her feet and kicked some snow off one of her boots with the toe of the other. “I don’t know.”

“Yes you do,” Stella said, putting her hands on Lori’s shoulders and shaking her gently a couple of times. “C’mon! You know I’m right.”

“I never said that...”

“But I can tell you’re thinking it,” Stella said with a laugh. “Here, look, Peter has so kindly grabbed you a helmet already.”

Lori glanced his way and saw he now had a purple skiing helmet in his hand, and he was grinning ear to ear. He rapped his knuckles on the plastic and said, “Safety first.”

“You’re relentless,” she said, talking mainly to Stella, but not able to pry her eyes away from this handsome newcomer. Stella poked her friend’s side playfully, and Lori gave her a warning look. She was on the verge of saying yes to this totally insane idea, but definitely wouldn’t agree if her friend kept driving her nuts like this. “Would you stop it? Just...let me think.”

Lori folded her arms and chewed on the inside of her lip as she recalled what it was like to race down a snowy

mountain. It had been decades, but she could still remember how it felt to push her skis into fresh powder and carve her way around slower skiers. Her mom was right, Lori used to be a pretty great skier, and there was a time in Lori's life when skiing had easily been the thing that brought her the most joy.

But then her happy memories were sliced in half by the recollection of the largest bone in her body snapping like a twig. She winced, and Stella must have noticed his discomfort because she quickly tossed her arm around Lori's shoulders and said, "I'm not going to let anything happen to you. You hear me?"

Lori drew in a deep breath and let it out slowly, then pursed her lips and took a step forward in line. It was her turn to speak to the clerk, which meant she had a decision to make. "Welcome to the Glacier Grove rentals. How can I help you today?"

"Well, Lori, what's it going to be?" Peter asked, holding the helmet out toward her.

She scoffed at him and his audacity, but eventually took the helmet and said to the clerk, "Hi. We're here to pick up our rentals. But talk to her. She made the reservation." She motioned with her head to Stella and then walked away from the counter and went to check out what sort of skis they had to offer. She could hear the triumph in Stella's voice as she gave the clerk their reservation info and excitedly told him how tall she was and what size shoe she wore.

"I think you made the right choice," Peter said as he followed Lori over to the boot rack. "You're going to have a

great time, and I'm sure your instructor will be top-notch. They don't hire amateurs at Glacier Grove."

"Yeah, whatever," she said. "Now that I know your full name, I just want you to know that I'll be putting you down as the person responsible for my hospital bills if I crash and break every bone in my body. Sound fair?"

He flashed her a winning smile. "Absolutely."

Twenty minutes later, Lori and Stella were all bundled up and strapped into their boots. Lori hadn't put her skis on yet, seeing as they were still waiting for their instructor to show up and she wanted to put that part off for as long as she could. Besides her and Stella, there were a handful of other newbies gathered at the bottom of the mountain, nervously fiddling with their boots and poles before the lesson began. Lori checked her phone and saw that it was a minute past 9.

"The instructor is late," she said. "That doesn't bode well for them being responsible." She reached up and undid the strap of her helmet. "If they don't show up in five minutes, I'm out of here."

"Hold your horses," said a familiar voice as a man came sliding past them and situated himself at the front of the group. "I'm here, I'm here."

Lori's jaw fell open as she saw none other than Peter Klein standing in front of her and greeting the rest of the attendees. He was going down the line shaking everyone's

hand, and when he got to Lori, she frowned and defiantly shoved her hands into her coat pocket instead of shaking his for a second time.

“And we’ve obviously already met,” he said with a laugh. “It’s nice to see you again.”

“Why didn’t you tell me you were the instructor?”

He shrugged. “It’s more fun this way. I’ve always been a fan of surprises.” He then greeted Stella with a friendly nod of his head and returned to his place in front of everyone. “All right, new skiers, let’s do a quick run-through of the basics, shall we? Then we’ll head up to the bunny hill and have some fun.”

Lori was feeling an odd cocktail of resentment and relief. She was irritated with Peter for not being upfront when they were chatting earlier, but she would be lying to herself if she didn’t admit that he did seem to be a fairly patient and attentive teacher. He was helping everyone click into their skis, and taking time to answer any and all questions that came up. Since Lori already knew how to strap in, she didn’t require his assistance getting her skis on, and in fact, she didn’t interact with him at all until later, when the group was at the top of the bunny hill.

“Okay,” he said, clapping his hands together. “I’m going to head down to the bottom, and then I want each of you to ski down to me one by one. Who wants to go first?” As he said this, he looked directly at Lori. She frowned back at him and said nothing. Nobody else volunteered either. “If nobody raises their hand, I’m going to have to choose a name at random.”

Somehow, Lori knew that he was going to choose her even before he said her name. She also knew, as he came up to her in the row of learners, he hadn't chosen her 'at random.' No, choosing her had obviously been deliberate.

"How about you, Lori?" he suggested after a few seconds of awkward silence from the group.

Stella reached out and gave her friend an encouraging little shove, and Lori begrudgingly moved away from the group and positioned herself at the top of the hill. "Fine," she said. "Whatever gets you two off my back."

Peter nodded, thanked her for volunteering, then raced to the bottom of the hill where he waited with open arms.

Lori curled her fingers tightly around the top of her ski poles and tried her best to regulate her breathing. She reminded herself that this was just the bunny hill and that there were no trees in sight. There really wasn't anything nearby that she could run into, and she only had to ski about fifty feet down a nearly-flat surface. She could do this.

I can do this.

Letting this sentiment echo in her mind a few more times, she dug her poles into the snow and pushed her arms back. Lori wasn't by any means a gym rat, but she had been attending some of Stella's yoga and Pilates classes as of late, so she had more upper body strength than she thought. The momentum from that one little motion sent her flying down the hill at whiplash speed, and panic spread through her body like venom. She couldn't feel her extremities, and her vision blurred as the memory of the last time she had been on skis clouded her mind. She felt herself losing control as she

barreled down toward the bottom of the hill, and just as one of her skis started to come out from under her, she squeezed her eyes shut and prepared for the worst. Only, the worst didn't come, and neither did the fall.

Seconds before she would have crashed to the ground, a pair of strong arms wrapped themselves around her and placed her steadily back on her feet. It took her a moment to realize what happened, and when she spun around, she saw Peter there smiling and holding his hands up to catch her again, if need be.

“You good?” he asked.

“You...you caught me.”

“Of course, I did,” he replied. “That’s what I’m here to do. Now before I send you back up to the top of the hill, let me tell you what I think happened.”

“I know what happened,” she said, still reeling from it all. She had gone from being sure she was about to crash and horribly injure herself, to standing there in front of her very attractive savor, entirely unscathed. “I realized this was a horrible idea halfway down, and my body froze up.”

“I did notice you started to freak out after you pushed off,” he said. “But I think that’s just because you got going too fast, too soon. Next time, try pushing with a slightly softer touch, and then remember to breathe as you start descending. If for some reason you start to panic again, try your best to take a deep breath, and remember, this is the bunny hill, which means you can always just sit down if you start to feel uncomfortable. That’s how flat it is.”

Lori couldn't tell if he was saying that to make her feel better or to tease her, but either way, she had a hard time keeping a straight face as he started to laugh.

"It's not *flat*," she said, making a conscious effort to force back her own chuckles. "It's called a hill for a reason. There's an incline there!"

"I know, I'm sorry," he said, covering his mouth as he tried to stop laughing. "Now, are you ready to get back up there? We'll let everyone else have a turn, then you can try again. And I promise, I'll be here to catch you if you fall."

She felt her cheeks grow warm and had to look away as she mumbled in agreement and started to work her way up and around, back to the top of the bunny hill. When she got there, Stella was waiting with a knowing smile. "Oh my god," she said as Lori joined her at the back of the line. "That was amazing. He just swooped in and caught you like Superman!"

"He was just doing his job," Lori said, looking down at her boots.

"What did he say to you at the bottom of the hill?"

"He just gave me some advice on how to not lose control this next time."

Lori couldn't see Stella's eyes very well through her tinted goggles, but she had a feeling that her friend was arching her eyebrows high up on her forehead. "Are you *sure* that's all he said, because you're blushing like crazy."

"Yeah, well," Lori said, pulling her scarf up over her mouth and the lower half of her face. "It's cold out, okay?"

Your cheeks are red too, but you don't see me making a big deal of it."

Stella laughed but thankfully didn't push the subject any further, and soon it was her turn to head down the hill. She slid down without issue, spoke to Peter for all of about five seconds, then started up the side of the hill. The whole thing happened very fast, and suddenly, it was Lori's turn again. She stationed herself in the same place as before, shook a little bit of snow off of her skis, and stared directly at Peter. This time, when she pushed off the ground, she made her movement a lot gentler and was able to keep her speed steady as she headed down the hill. She came to a perfect stop right in front of Peter, her muscle memory from when she was a kid coming back to her, and her face broke into a huge smile.

"I did it!" she exclaimed. "I didn't lose control, and I remembered how to stop!"

"That's great!" Peter said. "Congrats." He held his hand up for her to give him a high-five. She went to slap her gloved palm against his and somehow ended up hitting her leg with her ski pole, upsetting her already precarious balance. Once again, Peter swooped in like a hero and caught her before she went down, only this time, they were facing each other when he wrapped his arms around her waist. For a moment, their eyes met, and Lori's breath caught in her throat.

She stared up at him, and he held onto her for a second or two longer than necessary, and then he cleared his throat and let go.

"Nice job," he said. "And in the future, I won't try to high-five you while you're on skis."

But instead of laughing at his joke, or thanking him for saving her a second time in less than ten minutes, Lori tore her gaze away and said, “I’m sorry. I—I just remembered that I was supposed to have breakfast with my dad. He’s probably sitting around waiting for me. I have to go.”

Lori knew it was a lame excuse, but it was the best one she could come up with on the fly. Without another word, and without looking back, she raced off toward the lodge and ducked around the corner of the rental drop-off. Once she was alone and no longer in sight of Peter, she took off her helmet and goggles and sighed.

She brought the back of her hand up to her cheek, and even though it was absolutely freezing outside, her skin was red hot.

CHAPTER 8

Stella left the lesson early as well and met up with Lori fifteen minutes later in the lodge. Lori was sitting by the fire, staring up at the massive Christmas tree that her family put up every year in front of the floor-to-ceiling window when Stella ran over and took a seat next to her.

“There you are! Why did you run off? It looked like you were really getting the hang of things with that second run.”

“Yeah, well, I just decided that I needed a break.”

“Do you think you’ll go out on the mountain again? We could always sign up for another lesson with Peter. You two seem to have a good rapport going.”

Lori rolled her eyes as Stella grinned mischievously, and then she made an attempt to change the subject. “You just want to sign up for another lesson because you hope to run into that guy you were making eyes at on the bunny hill.”

“Oh, you noticed that?”

“How could I miss it? You two kept stealing glances and giggling. Who was he?”

“I didn’t catch his name,” she said. “But he has an accent. I think he might be from Germany. He was wearing these huge goggles, so I didn’t get a good look at his face, but I have a feeling he’s really cute... Speaking of cute, can we talk about how attentive Peter was with you?”

“No,” Lori said, getting to her feet. “We can’t talk about that because I have to...find my dad. We were supposed to have breakfast together.”

Stella frowned. “Since when?”

“Since...always. Don’t worry about it. I’ll catch up with you later, okay?” And just like she had done with Peter, Lori took off in the opposite direction without even waiting for Stella to respond. She headed toward the check-in desk and slipped through the door that said ‘employees only.’ She thought she might find her father in the back office, and she figured if he *was* around, she might as well invite him to breakfast so she could add some legitimacy to what had apparently become her go-to excuse.

She didn’t find her dad in the back room, but she did find her sister, and Sofia, the old groundskeeper who had been working at the lodge since Lori was a little girl. When Sofia spotted her coming through the door, her face lit up and she went to give Lori a big hug,

“Oh my goodness, is that really you, Miss Lori?”

Lori bent down so that the short, elderly woman could wrap her hands around Lori’s neck. She smelled exactly how Lori remembered, like soil and patchouli, and even though she had more wrinkles on her face and hands, she still appeared to be as sturdy and strong as ever.

“Hey, Sofia,” Lori said. “It’s so nice to see you. How long has it been?”

Sofia smiled up at her as they broke apart. “Too long.”

Angela remained seated behind the desk and offered her sister only an expressionless nod in lieu of a proper hello or good morning. “What are you guys up to?” Lori asked as Sofia lowered herself back down into the other chair.

“Your sister and I were just going over some scheduling,” Sofia replied. “She’s totally swamped with bookings and special events, so I offered to try and pick up the slack if I could.”

“And I was just telling Sofia that I had everything pretty much under control,” said Angela. “I just need her to help me string a few more Christmas lights up around the front of the lodge later tonight.”

“I can do that,” Lori said. “No need to have Sofia getting up on a ladder and putting herself at risk when I’ll be doing nothing but lounging by the fire all night.”

Angela shook her head. “No thanks,” she said. “I’ll be the one on the ladder anyway, and Sofia will just be handing me lights. It’s not rocket science, and it’s nothing we need your help with.”

“Even still,” Lori said, smiling at Sofia. “There’s no reason for you to stay late when I am perfectly capable of helping my sister string up lights. I’m sure you would rather be at home, curled up under a nice blanket, and hanging out with Whiskers. He’s still alive, isn’t he?”

Sofia beamed. “Yes, he is. He’s almost 19 years old. Can you believe that?”

“Wow,” Lori said. “That’s amazing. But you know what, I’m actually not shocked. You always did take such

good care of that cat. I wouldn't be surprised if he lived to be 30."

Sofia laughed. "Fingers crossed."

"So then," Lori said, rocking back on her heels, "is it settled? I'll help you with the lights tonight, and Sofia can knock off early?"

Angela let out a heavy sigh and stood up from the desk. "It's fine. I'll just do the lights all on my own. Sofia, feel free to leave at your regular time."

"Oh, but Angela," Sofia started to say, "it's really no trou—"

"No, no, I insist," Angela said on her way toward the door. "Lori is right. I never should have asked you to help me hang lights in the first place. I'm an awful manager who puts her employees at risk and asks too much, Lori has made that very clear. Now, if you'll excuse me, I have to get back to work."

"Wait," Lori said. "Angela, why are you getting so upset? I just want to help."

Angela opened the door and didn't even look at Lori as she mumbled, "I don't want your help now. I needed it a long time ago. Now, it's too little, too late." Then she slammed the door closed behind her, leaving Lori standing on the other side with her mouth hanging open.

CHAPTER 9

“Oh, don’t pay her any mind.”

Sofia said this about five seconds after Angela stormed off. Lori was still standing at the door, wondering how her offer to help had been turned into something so ugly and jaded. She shook her head and furrowed her brow as she turned around and came to sit in the chair her sister had left vacant.

“I just don’t understand,” she said. “I don’t know why she won’t just give me a chance. I know it’s been a while since I visited home, but ever since I got here, she’s been nothing but nasty to me. I try to be civil...or at least, I was trying just now. But it doesn’t seem to make a difference. She’s still so angry with me.”

“It’s not just you, dear,” Sofia said. “Your sister is really overwhelmed with the lodge. You know that Christmas is the busiest time of the year for us, and we’ve been totally booked with no vacancy for over a month. She’s just trying to keep her head above water.”

“Then why not let me help?” Lori asked. “If she’s truly so bogged down with work, then why did she just bite my head off when I told her I could hang the rest of the lights?”

“Because she’s stubborn,” Sofia said. “She always has been. I remember when you two were girls, sometimes your mom would ask me to watch out for you when you were playing outside. I would tell you to stay away from the

gardens or not to climb on that cement wall on the side of the shed, and you would always listen, but not Angela. That girl was so defiant, and she loved to do the exact opposite of whatever I said.”

Lori laughed. “Yeah, I remember that too. But I thought she grew out of her stubbornness a little bit as she got older.”

“She did...” Sofia sighed. “Or rather, I think Laurent just brought out another side in her. He was such a calm, patient man, and I think a lot of that rubbed off on Angela when he was still alive. Then after he died...I don’t know what happened exactly, but it seemed like your sister just sort of reverted back to her old self. She leaned into all the not-so-appealing characteristics of her personality and stopped trying to be more amiable or open-hearted.”

She shrugged. “Not that you can blame her. After everything she’s been through...it makes sense that she would go back to being a little more closed off.”

“I guess...”

“And you know, that’s another thing,” Sofia said, leaning onto the desk between them. “It’s coming up on the anniversary of his death. That’s probably what’s got her so on-edge.”

Lori leaned back in the chair and cursed herself for not remembering. She knew Laurent had died around Christmas time, but for some reason, that little piece of information had escaped her recently, and she felt like a terrible sister for not realizing just how difficult a time this was for Angela.

“Of course,” she said. “I can’t believe I forgot.”

“Well, it’s not exactly a day that people would mark on their calendars,” Sofia said. “Besides, I’m sure Angela was hoping everyone would forget. She really doesn’t like to talk about the day he died, and the few times I’ve brought him up over the years, she’s always changed the subject really quickly.”

“So, what you’re saying is that it’s basically the worst time for me to have come for a visit?” Lori said, scoffing a little. “Of course, it’s the worst time. My family is overwhelmed with all the holiday tourists, Angela is probably plagued by horrible memories of the death of her one true love, and here I am, making the whole thing that much more tense and complicated.”

“Oh, hey now,” Sofia said, reaching out and lovingly patting Lori’s arm. “Don’t do that to yourself. Your parents are thrilled you’re back in town. They told me so themselves. And your sister will come around eventually. She just needs a little more time. Besides, it’s Christmas, and even though that’s the busiest time of year, it’s also the most special time of year. I’m sure once things calm down a little here at the lodge, Angela will get into the holiday spirit. And remember what’s most important in life—family.”

“I hope you’re right, Sofia,” Lori said, forcing a smile. “Because I don’t know how much more of this animosity I can take. I’ve only been here for one night, and already I feel like I’ve overstayed my welcome.”

“Just give her some time,” Sofia repeated. “And maybe some space. Today is probably not the best day to try and

reconcile, she's got a lot on her plate. I suggest you go into town, or hit the slopes or something, and try not to let everything with Angela get you down too much. You should enjoy yourself while you're here."

Lori smiled. "I just got back from hitting the slopes," she said. "And by 'hitting the slopes,' I mean I went down the bunny hill twice, but hey, you gotta' start somewhere."

"That's the spirit," Sofia said.

"And now that you mention it, a trip into town actually does sound nice. It's been so long since I've just walked around Waitsfield."

"The town has missed you," Sofia said with a grin. "And everyone in it has missed you. Especially me."

"I've missed you too, Sofia. And I've really missed these talks. I never understood how you did it, but you always seem to know exactly what I need to hear."

She shrugged. "What can I say? It's a gift." Then she looked over her shoulder at the closed door and smirked. "Now go on and get out of here before your sister comes back. She really did seem pretty mad when she left, and I don't want to watch you two fight again. I'm too old for that crap."

They shared a laugh, and after giving her one last hug, Lori left the office and grabbed a bus schedule on the way out.

CHAPTER 10

About an hour later, Lori walked along the bustling streets of the town center and took in the beautiful views. Waitsfield was a very pretty town, and with the snow-covered mountains in the background, and the storefronts covered in colorful Christmas lights, it was truly magical. She went through the general store and graciously accepted free samples from a woman who was selling her homemade jam. Then she poked her head in next door to say hello to the older couple who ran the laundry mat. They were good friends of her parents when Lori and Angela were growing up, and they recognized her right away, even though it had been years since she had seen them.

After that, she headed back out into the cold and felt her phone buzz in her pocket. Taking it out, she stared down at the screen as she continued her stroll. Stella had texted to let her know that she ran into the German guy from their lesson and that he asked her if she would like to go get some lunch. She followed this message up with a text full of emojis, but Lori didn't even know where to begin trying to decode such an encryption.

Laughing, and starting to send a text back, she suddenly ran straight into a broad-shouldered man who was standing in front of the coffee shop on the corner.

“Oh sorry!” Lori said. Thankfully, she hadn't run into him hard enough to cause either one of them to stumble. “My

bad. I should know better than to try and text and walk at the same time. I just—”

Lori’s words got stuck in her throat as the man turned around and she saw that it was the ski instructor, Peter. He was no longer bundled up in a puffer coat and scarf. Now he was wearing a nice wool jacket, and there was nothing obstructing the view of his face. She noticed right away that he had a strong jawline and that his hair came down past his ears a little.

“Well, hello there,” he said. “You’re really starting to make a habit of running into me, aren’t you?”

“I, uh, I’m sorry, like I said.” She held her phone up. “Texting and walking. Bad combo.”

“It’s no problem,” Peter said. “I was the one standing in the middle of the sidewalk like a fool.” He put his hands into his pockets. “I was just trying to decide whether or not to pay for an overpriced coffee here or do the responsible thing and go make some at home.”

Lori laughed. “The eternal struggle. There’s this coffee shop down the street from my apartment back in Boston, and I end up going there at least three times a week, even though I have perfectly good coffee at home.”

“There’s just something about the atmosphere of a warm, cozy coffee shop,” Peter said. “You can’t beat it.” He pointed to the door on their right. “Would you care to join me? My treat.”

“Oh, um,” she said, not sure what to say. “That’s very nice of you to offer, but I was just on my way to the bus stop. I

should be getting back to the lodge. My dog probably needs to be let out.”

“The next bus won’t be coming through for another half hour,” he said. “And that’s the one that goes to the other side of town first, and then back to the lodge. You won’t be home within the hour if that’s the route you’re going to take. But if you want to grab some coffee with me, I would happily give you a ride back to the lodge when we’re done. I’m going there anyway to teach an afternoon lesson.”

“In that case,” Lori said, finding herself both nervous and excited as she accepted his invitation, “let’s do it. I could use a latte to help me warm up.”

They headed inside, and Lori gave him her order and then scoped out a table near the window so she could watch the passersby as she sipped her mocha. Five minutes later, Peter arrived with two oversized mugs of delicious-smelling coffee and took a seat across from her.

“You didn’t have to get me a large,” she said.

“You said you were cold. I wanted to make sure you had enough to truly warm you up.” He smiled. “Some people don’t realize how cold it is up here. Even if you live somewhere else on the East Coast, if you’re not *actually* in the mountains all the time, your understanding of ‘freezing’ will be totally skewed. There’s city freezing, and then there’s mountain freezing. Totally different.”

“Yeah, I know what you mean,” she said. “And I thought I was prepared, but it’s still colder than I was anticipating. Thankfully, I packed all my warmest clothes, although I did forget to grab my wool socks. Rookie mistake.”

“They sell some at the ski shop in the lodge,” he said. “If you give them my name, you can get an employee discount.”

Lori smiled but refrained from saying anything about the discount she was already eligible for. As the daughter of the couple who owned the lodge, she didn't have to pay for anything in the ski shop. She could outfit herself in an entirely new winter wardrobe there for free if she wanted to. “I just might take you up on that,” she said with a smile before bringing her mug up to her mouth and taking a sip. “Thanks.”

“So, how long are you in town for?”

“At least through New Year's,” she said.

“That's perfect. That means you'll be here for Christmas. There's nothing like Christmas at the lodge. Plus, with all the snow we've been getting already, I'm sure it's going to be a white Christmas. The Meyers really go all out too. I'm sure you've already seen that massive tree in the lobby, but that's just the beginning.”

At the mention of her parents, Lori raised a brow and contemplated whether or not she should tell Peter the truth. She thought about coming clean, letting him know she herself was a Meyers, but then worried that might make him uncomfortable. How would he feel about getting coffee with his boss's daughter? She was having a really nice time sitting and chatting with him, and she didn't want to end things on a sour note, so she decided to keep the ruse going for at least a little while longer.

“The Meyers?” she said like she didn't know who he was talking about.

“Yeah. They own the lodge, and they are just the best. I’ve been working at the resort for a while now, and they’ve been nothing but great to me. They’re just some of the kindest, most generous people I’ve ever met. I know that may sound cheesy, but it’s true. Mrs. Meyers is always giving out free food to the staff, and boy can she cook.”

Lori smiles. “That sounds nice.”

“It’s great,” he said. “And Mr. Meyers has given me two raises this year alone. He always says he likes to make sure his employees know how much he appreciates them. That was before he ‘retired’ though, so I’m not exactly sure how things are going to look now that he and Mrs. Meyers have taken a step back.”

“Why did you say ‘retired’ like that?”

“Because I see both of them around the lodge pretty much every day,” he said, laughing. “They are always there, working on some project or another. If you ask me, as much as I love having them as my employers, I do think it’s time for them to actually think about winding things down. I’d hate to see them overwork themselves. At their age, they deserve to take a break.”

Lori, who had been trying to keep her feelings for this man in check, felt her heart pound a little harder against her ribcage. The way he was talking about her parents was really enamoring, and she started to feel like she had when Peter caught her and held on to her earlier that day. Only this time, she didn’t have a getaway plan. He was the one providing her with a ride home, not to mention she had hardly even touched her coffee, which he had been kind enough to pay for.

She was trapped. And she was honestly sort of happy to be. She fought back against the urge to get up from the table and excuse herself, and instead smiled and asked Peter more about his life outside of work. They chatted pleasantly and casually for the rest of the time that it took Lori to finish her drink, then they got up and he helped her put her coat back on. He led the way to the parking lot behind the cafe and opened the car door for her. Then he jumped inside the driver's seat and cranked the heat. They drove in a comfortable silence, and Lori stared out the window as they came up to the lodge, taking in the view with a smile. Peter parked in a designated employee spot and turned the car off.

“I had a nice time,” he said, smiling at her. “Thanks for indulging me in my bad financial decisions.”

“I had a nice time too,” she said. “And I’ll pay you back for that coffee.”

“Don’t worry about it,” he said, and she was so glad he did, considering the \$40 cash in her wallet was currently all the money she had to her name. “So, am I going to see you listed on the sign-up sheet for my next lesson?”

She shook her head. “Probably not.”

“Aw, c’mon, wasn’t I a good teacher?”

“You were...fine.”

“Just fine?” He laughed.

“All right, you were good, okay?” she said. “But I just don’t know if I’m ready to do anything besides the bunny hill yet. I’ll be here all month, so I’m just going to take things slow.” She was talking about more than just her foray back

into the world of winter sports, and she wondered if Peter was picking up that or not. She opened the door and stepped out into the cold. “Thanks again for the coffee, and for the ride, but I really do have to go check on my dog.”

He nodded. “I get it. I’ve kept you too long as it is.”

She let her gaze linger on his face for a few more seconds, then shut the door and hurried back to the lodge.

CHAPTER 11

After taking Milo for a short walk around the perimeter of the lodge, Lori returned him to her room where he immediately curled up on the bed and shivered in his little sweater. She showered, turned the heat up a bit, and left her pup with a fuzzy blanket to make sure he didn't get too cold. She then headed down to the lobby to look for her parents. She checked the office first, then the kitchen, and finally found her mom sitting on the back patio with Stella, drinking hot chocolate and laughing. It was late in the afternoon, and the sun was sitting low in the sky.

Blowing into her icy hands, Lori approached them with a frown. "What are you two doing out here? It's freezing."

"It's not that cold," Hanna replied. "Especially when you've got a little Irish hot chocolate to warm you up. Here honey, take mine and I'll go inside and make myself a fresh cup." She handed her daughter the to-go mug she had been holding and headed back inside. Lori sat in the empty chair on the other side of Stella and took a sip.

"Oh, wow that's strong," she said, pulling the cup away from her mouth and smacking her lips together. "Is that just Baileys and hot chocolate?"

"And a shot of bourbon," Stella said. "It's actually my grandma's old recipe. I taught your mom how to make it."

"I see, well no wonder the two of you aren't chilly. So, how was your date?"

“Wonderful,” Stella said with a delightful little smile. “His name is Klaus, and I’m pretty sure we’re in love.”

“Already?”

“Yup,” she said. “We have so much in common, and he laughed at every one of my jokes, which means he obviously has a great sense of humor. He’s staying here for a couple of weeks, and we already made plans to meet up again this Friday.”

Lori took another sip. “Oh great, you’re going to ditch me for this Klaus guy, aren’t you? You’re going to leave me to deal with my moody, unpredictable family all by myself and spend your Christmas vacation with your new crush.”

“Of course not,” Stella said. “I would never abandon you like that! I’ll just hang out with Klaus when you’re busy. Like today, for example, when you went into town without even telling me. If anything, *you* ditched *me*.”

“Sorry,” Lori said. “I just needed to clear my head. I had another tense run-in with Angela this morning and it put me in a weird mood.”

“Oof,” she said. “I’m sorry. What happened today?”

“The same thing that happened last night,” Lori said. “Angela made it clear that she hates me and that she wishes I never came back home. I mean, she didn’t say so with her words, but she got the point across with what she *did* say. Combined with the look she gave me.”

“Sorry, I wasn’t there to play defense,” Stella said.

“It’s fine. I’m not sure there was anything you could have done to help anyway. Our old family friend Sofia, I think

I told you about—”

“The groundskeeper?”

“That’s the one,” Lori said, nodding. “She was there to witness Angela’s little outburst. She suggested that I just give my sister some time...and some space. I think she’s right; I just wish I had something to do to keep busy. Every time I’ve even suggested helping out around the lodge, Angela has thrown a total hissy fit, but honestly, it makes perfect sense that I would lend a hand while I’m here. What’s the point of me coming back home for so long if I’m not even going to help my parents run the lodge while I’m in town.”

“Technically, the reason you’re out here for the next month is because you didn’t have any money or a free place to spend the holidays.”

“Shh!” Lori said. “Don’t say that so loud. I don’t want anyone to overhear you.”

“Sorry,” Stella said, lowering her voice. “I didn’t realize how loud I was talking.” She looked down at her cup and laughed. “These drinks really are strong.”

“But that makes me feel even worse,” Lori said, now speaking in a hushed tone herself. “I’m staying here because I’m desperate and had nowhere else to go, so the least I could do to repay my parents for all they are doing to help me—regardless of whether or not they know how much they’re helping me—is to do stuff around the lodge.”

“Then talk to your mom about it,” Stella said. “She doesn’t seem nearly as difficult as your sister.”

“No, that’s a good point,” Lori said. “She’s not. And she would know if there were any specific projects or tasks that required an extra pair of hands. That’s a good idea.”

Stella grinned. “I know. I’m chock full of them. And I agree that you should try and stay busy while you’re here. Especially once I go back to Boston.”

Lori groaned. “Ugh, don’t remind me. I don’t even want to think about how I’m going to survive here without you. Hopefully, all this money stuff is settled before you leave, and we can head back home together.”

“What’s this about heading back home? Not too soon, I hope,” Hanna said as she walked up to the girls and sat back down in her chair with a fresh mug of hot chocolate.

“No, not anytime soon,” Stella assured her.

“You know, mom, since I am going to be staying here for a while,” Lori said, “I was wondering if you knew of any projects that I could help out with at the lodge? Do you need someone to help manage the schedule or keep the bookings organized?”

“Angela takes care of all that,” Hanna said. “You’d have to ask her.”

Lori slumped her shoulders. “Well, there goes that plan.”

“Hang on,” Stella said, looking at Lori’s mom. “Hanna, are you sure you can’t think of anything? You know Angela is just going to say that she’s got it all under control, but seeing as it is the busiest time of year, there’s gotta be something Lori could help with.”

Hanna frowned and tapped her finger to her chin, then her eyes lit up. “Oh, I know! The daycare.”

“The daycare?” Lori sat up straighter and smiled. “They need help over at the daycare?”

“They sure do,” said Hanna. “I was talking to Meredith, she’s the lead activity coordinator, the other day and she reminded me she’s going out of town later this week. She’ll be gone until the new year, so they’re going to need someone to come up with some activities and draw up a schedule for the kids.”

“I would love to do that!” Lori said. “I’ve already got tons of ideas. There are a couple of kids I tutor who have a really hard time staying focused, so I’ve invented all these games and puzzles to keep their minds active and give them breaks between homework assignments. I’m sure with a little tweaking, I could make the activities even more accessible to a wider range of ages.”

“Great,” Hanna said. “You should write all your ideas down and then head over to the daycare center as soon as possible. I’m sure they are floundering a little as they get ready for Meredith to leave, and they’ll take any help they can get.”

“I’ll go over there right now.” Lori finished off the last sip in her cup and got to her feet. “Thanks for the idea, Mom. This is perfect.”

Feeling a newfound sense of pride and excitement, Lori headed back through the lobby toward the daycare center.

There were a few kids still playing with toys in the middle of the room, even though it was late in the day. A young woman was on the floor with the three of them, making airplane noises with her mouth as she pretended to fly one of the plastic planes high above the children's heads.

Lori smiled at her when she came into the room, and the girl got up and headed her way. "Hi there," she said. "Are you here to pick up your kid?"

"Oh, no," she said. Then she laughed and touched her hand to her chest, flattered. "Although thank you for the compliment, I like that you think I look young enough to have a kid still in diapers."

The young woman laughed and then bent down to pick up a toddler, who had come running up to her and was now tugging at her shirt. "If you're not here for pick up, what can I help you with?"

"I'm actually here to help out," Lori said. "I'm Lori Meyers, my parents run the lodge, and my mom happened to mention that you all were in need of a temporary activities coordinator. If you haven't already found a replacement for Meredith, I would happily accept the job. I'm a certified tutor, and I've been working with children for most of my adult life. I can send over a resumé if you like. I know sometimes there are specific protocols daycares need to follow before just letting anyone waltz in and start working with the kids."

"There might be, yes," the girl said, "but that's something you would have to take up with my manager. She's around here somewhere, I think. She's actually the manager of the whole joint, so she's a pretty busy lady, but with you

helping to organize activities, that'll take one more thing off her plate.”

“Wait, did you say that your manager is in charge of the entire resort? Does that mean your manager is—”

“Lori,” Angela’s voice rang out from the other side of the room as she walked in through a side door and marched on over. “What are you doing here?”

“Mom sent me,” Lori said. “She told me the daycare needed help with planning activities. I thought I would be a great fit for the job.”

“I’ve already planned everything,” Angela said.

“You have?” the girl asked. “But this morning you told me you didn’t have a clue how we were going to entertain the kids while Meredith was gone.”

Angela gave the girl an angry look, and the poor kid cowered and hurried back to play with the children once more.

“Angela, c’mon,” Lori said. “You can’t possibly be *this* petty. You clearly need help, and this is something I actually know a lot about, so—”

“I’m not being petty,” Angela snapped. “I’m just doing my job. *This* is part of my job and I’ve got it totally under control.”

Lori folded her arms. “Oh yeah? Then why did mom say that the people in the daycare center were floundering?”

“I’m not sure,” Angela said. “But I can assure you, we’ve got it all—”

Just then, one of the kids picked up an oversized Lego and threw it as hard as he could at the wall. It left a little dent, and the sound of it crashing on the floor startled one of the babies, who immediately started screaming at the top of her lungs. Lori couldn't help but smile a little as she looked around at the chaos that was ensuing and said, "These kids need stimulation, Angela. They need ways to fill their days, otherwise, they are going to start, well, throwing stuff. So, unless you can look me in the eye and say that you have enough time to dedicate to this project, to these kids, just let me help."

Angela glared down at her shoes for a couple of seconds, then let out a huffy breath and grumbled, "Fine, whatever. You can organize the activities."

"Fantastic!" Lori said. "I think I'll start entertaining these kids right now." She went into the middle of the room and took the crying infant into her arms. She rocked her back and forth until the tears stopped, then walked over to the kid who threw the Lego and smiled with her whole face.

"You've got a good arm," she said. "You could grow up to be a baseball player, you know that?"

The kid grinned and showed off his missing front teeth. "My dad *loves* baseball," he said.

"Well then your dad and I have something in common," Lori said. "Say, do you know the words to the song 'Take Me Out to the Ball Game'?" He shook his head. "Do you want me to teach it to you? You'll have to know the words to that song if you ever want to become a professional baseball player. It's one of the requirements."

He nodded. "I wanna' learn! I wanna' learn!"

"Great," she said. "Then come sit down with me over here, and I'll teach you. But you have to promise you'll sing really quietly so that our little friend here can get back to sleep. Do you think you can do that?"

"Yes," the kid said. "I know how to be quiet. See?" He spit a little on her as he attempted to whisper without the use of his front teeth."

"I can see that. Great job!" Lori reached up to wipe some spit off her pants, then took the baby and the little boy over into the corner, and started teaching him the words to the song. As the boy sang in a soft voice, she rocked the baby some more, and the infant soon fell back asleep. When she looked up a couple of minutes later, she saw Angela watching her like a hawk. Lori smiled, feeling accomplished, but Angela just scowled and left the room without another word.

She's not going to make this easy on me, Lori thought once her sister left. Well, okay then. Bring it on.

CHAPTER 12

The next day, Lori woke up bright and early and went down to the daycare center, where she met up with Gretchen, the girl who was there the day before. The two of them sat down and brainstormed activity ideas in the half hour before the daycare was scheduled to open, and by the time the first child arrived, they had a list as long as Lori's arm.

"This is great," Gretchen said, reading some of the ideas back to herself. "I was really starting to worry about what we would do without Meredith. She leaves tomorrow, but she's not coming in today because she has to catch up on sleep before her international flight. She promised she would leave me with a guide for how to run things while she was gone, but I think she forgot."

"She just...forgot?"

Gretchen sighed and leaned in closer to Lori. "Between you and me, Meredith is getting up there in age, and lately, she's been a little... How do I put this nicely? Foggy?"

"Well, that's no good," Lori said. "You can't have someone with brain fog looking after children."

"I know," Gretchen agreed. "And I was planning on talking to Angela about it once Meredith was gone, but I didn't know how to bring it up. I know she's your sister and all, I figured that out when I heard you two talking about your mom yesterday, so I hope you don't mind me saying this, but she can be sort of...scary."

Lori laughed. “Don’t let Angela scare you. She’s all bark and no bite.”

“Yeah, well, even still, she’s got a mean bark.” Then Gretchen frowned and added, “Although Meredith said she didn’t used to be like this, that Angela has changed a lot over the last couple of years, I wish I could have known her before, then maybe I wouldn’t be so terrified of her.”

“She’s still got a soft side, I think,” Lori said. “It’s just buried really, really deep.”

“Do you honestly believe that?” Gretchen said. “Or are you just saying so to try and make me less afraid of your sister?”

Lori thought about it for a second, then shrugged. “I guess both. Angela is really only this high-strung because she cares so much about this place, and I think if I could get her to see that I’m only trying to help, she might stop being so cold.”

“You?” Gretchen said. “Since when did we start talking about you?”

Lori frowned, then forced a laugh. “Oh, did I say me?” She shook her head and tried to act like it was just a slip of the tongue. “I meant *you*. If you could show her that you’re just trying to help, then she might stop being so cold to *you*.”

Gretchen laughed and gave her a knowing look as she got up to go greet one of the parents who had arrived to drop off their baby. “Sure. Whatever you say.” Before she left, she turned back and added, “I really hope you find a way to work things out with Angela. The relationship between sisters is sacred. Take it from me, I’ve got four of ‘em.”

Once Gretchen had turned the corner, Lori let out a weighted exhale and sunk deeper into her chair. “I hope so too,” she said quietly to herself. “I really, *really* hope so.”

Lori spent the morning in the daycare, then went up to her room to check on Milo. Her dog seemed hyper, and she felt bad for keeping him cooped up all day, so she put him on his leash and brought him back down to the lobby with her. She spotted Angela standing behind the check-in counter, talking to a guest, and ducked out of sight before she looked her way. She wasn't in the mood to have another spat with her sister. She just wanted to take her dog out on a leisurely walk and try not to think about her troubles for a bit.

Outside, she saw the mailman fumbling with his bag as he tried to get a package out while holding onto a stack of envelopes. She walked over and held her hand out. “Need some help?”

“That would be great,” he replied. “Can you hold these?” He handed her the stack of mail, and she took it in her free hand while he continued to struggle with the parcel.

Lori saw the mail was addressed to her parents, so she started flipping through it.

“Hey wait,” he said. “Don't do that, it's not—”

“It's okay,” she said. “Nelson and Hanna Meyer are my parents. I'm in town visiting. In fact, I can run this mail inside to them if you want?”

He frowned. "I'm really not supposed to let anyone else deliver the mail."

"You just drop it into that little basket on the desk, don't you?" she said, pointing to the mailbox her parents left sitting out in the open. They had always been very trusting of people, and she often wondered why they weren't worried about one of the guests snooping through their personal mail.

I guess they just don't have anything to hide, she thought to herself with a smile, before turning back to the mailman. "If you want, you can watch me go in and drop it there. Will that make you feel better?"

He laughed and started to say no again when Milo jumped up on his leg and distracted him. The mailman bent down to pet the dog and then looked at his tag. "Lori Meyer," he said out loud, reading her information off the collar. "I guess you were telling the truth." He straightened up and finally managed to get the package out of his bag. "If you don't mind giving your parents the mail, and this package, I'd greatly appreciate it."

"Not a problem," she said. "Have a nice day."

"You too," he said, running back to his truck and driving off. Lori tucked the parcel under her arm and headed back inside. Angela was nowhere in sight, and Lori sighed with relief as she put the package on the counter and went to drop the mail in the basket. Before she let go of the stack, however, she noticed something odd about the envelope on top.

"Court summons?" she said, reading the words out loud as she picked up this particular piece of mail. The

envelope was bigger than the rest, and next to the words “Court Summons,” it said, “Open Immediately” in angry, bold letters. She was tempted to open it, but she respected her parents’ privacy too much. Angela came out of the back room a second later, and without thinking about it, Lori hid the piece of mail behind her back and tried to act casual.

“What’s up?” Angela asked. “Did you need something?”

“No,” Lori said. “Er...yes. I was wondering if you knew where mom and dad were.”

“Check the kitchen,” Angela said. “They usually eat lunch around this time.”

“Thanks!” Lori said. She slipped the envelope into her back pocket and then covered it with the back of her shirt. “I’m going to keep them company while they eat. You want me to bring you back something from the kitchen?”

Angela raised her brow as if she could tell there was something going on with Lori. “No...I’m not hungry.”

“All right then,” Lori said. “Suit yourself.” Then she spun on her heel and walked down the hall as quickly as she could without drawing too much attention. Bursting through the swinging door that led to the lodge’s industrial-sized kitchen, Lori found her parents sitting at the table against the back wall, eating sandwiches. They both smiled when she walked over.

“Oh, hey there, sweetie,” Hanna said. “Are you hungry? I could make you something.”

“No, I’m fine,” Lori said.

“What about some coffee?” her dad said with a smile. “I was just about to brew some more. I could put a little extra in for you.”

“No,” Lori said. “I didn’t come here for food or coffee. I came to talk to you guys. I grabbed the mail from the mailman just now and before I dropped it off in the box, I saw...I saw this.” She reached into her back pocket and retrieved the envelope. Her dad’s eyes widened when he saw what she had in her hand, and with surprising agility for a man his age, he lunged for it.

Snatching the summons out her fingers, Nelson Meyers folded it up and tucked it into the pocket of his flannel shirt and said, “That’s nothing. You don’t need to worry about it.”

Lori, who was still very stunned by what just happened, gawked at her father. “Dad, what’s going on?”

Hanna looked nervously at her husband but said nothing when her daughter turned to her for an explanation. “Why are you two acting so strange? And why are you being summoned to court?”

“I told you,” Nelson said, walking over to the coffee pot and turning his back to her. “This is nothing you need to worry about.”

“But dad, I *am* worried,” she said. “And by not telling me the truth, you’re just going to freak me out even more. Please, just tell me what this is all about.” Her voice broke a little as she pleaded with her parents.

Hanna stood up and took her daughter’s hand, then looked over at Nelson and said, “Nel, we have to tell her. She

deserves to know.”

Nelson stopped fiddling with the coffee maker and glanced over his shoulder. He looked defeated as he dropped the bag of coffee grounds and came back to join his wife and his daughter by the kitchen table. “Okay,” he said. “I’ll tell you about it... But not right now. Your mom and I have work to finish up, and I don’t want to have this conversation in a place where staff and guests are always coming and going.”

He put his hand on Lori’s shoulder and fixed her with an expression she wasn’t used to seeing on her father. His face looked worn, and his mouth was set in a straight, humorless line. “Let’s talk in the family room later tonight...after the lobby closes.”

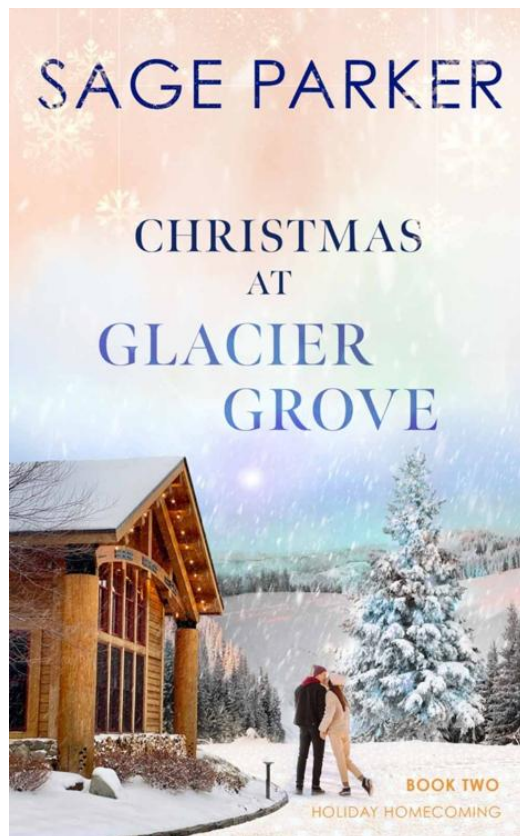
“Dad,” Lori said, her eyes beginning to water as her mind raced through all the different reasons her parents might have been summoned to court, each one more heartbreaking than the last. “I don’t understand.”

“I’ll explain everything tonight,” he said. “I promise.”

So they did have something to hide after all...

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Book 2 Teaser...

CHAPTER 1

When Lori walked into the family room, it felt like she was walking into a dungeon. The place wasn't cozy and inviting like usual. It was cold and unfamiliar. It was as if she was seeing the room, the entire lodge really, in a whole new light.

And she didn't like it.

She'd spent the entire day trying to distract herself. She tried to think about anything other than the court summons, and had to make a conscious effort not to jump on a speeding train heading towards 'worst case scenario ville'. But her efforts were often made in vain, and by late afternoon, she had a list going in her head of all the horrible things that could've happened to land her parents in legal trouble. She even thought perhaps it was somehow connected to her own troubles. Did her parents get involved with some shady people? Did her family owe somebody money, and they decided to take it out of her account for some reason?

Of course, these ideas were crazy, each one more implausible than the one that came before it, but with so little information to go on, Lori had complete mental freedom to hop from one insane explanation to another. Stella was also no help at all. About an hour before heading down to meet up with her parents, Lori told her about the court summons, and Stella just went wide-eyed and asked a bunch of questions she knew Lori didn't have the answers to.

But that's what she was here to do now. Get answers.

As terrifying as that was.

She sat down on one of the couches and folded her hands in her lap, waiting patiently for the rest of her family to

arrive. The whole thing felt so formal and stunted, like she was waiting for some sort of business conference to start. She felt underdressed in her pajama bottoms and faded t-shirt. She had Milo with her, who curled up by her feet and yawned so big, his little body shook all over. Then he settled his chin on her foot and closed his eyes.

Lori smiled. "I'm glad you can relax. At least one of us should get a good night's sleep."

"You know, we've had complaints about that dog," Angela said, as she came into the room. She was still wearing her work clothes, which consisted of pleated slacks and a button up blouse. She had, however, washed her make-up off and pulled her hair back into a braid. She looked more like the Angela that Lori was used to, the one that didn't worry so much about appearing professional, and just liked to show up as herself.

"I don't believe that for a second," Lori said. "Milo's so little and he hardly barks at all. Who's complaining about him?"

"I can't give out guest information like that." She came to have a seat across from her sister, and that's when Lori noticed she had dark circles under her eyes. She looked exhausted. Angela wasn't in the kitchen that morning when Lori first confronted her parents, so Lori had no way of knowing what information her sister did and did not have. Clearly someone had told Angela to meet in the family room that night, but did Angela know *why*? Did she already know about the court summons? And if so, why was Lori the last to find out?

Running through these questions in her head, Lori started to feel even more on edge, so she went back to squabbling about the dog, because at least that was low stakes, even if it was also childish.

“I think you’re making this whole thing up just to get a rise out of me,” Lori said, crossing her legs and smiling. “But it’s not going to work. Milo is a well-behaved dog, and this is a pet-friendly establishment, so neither of us are doing anything wrong.”

Angela rolled her eyes, and looked like she was about to say something else, when Hanna and Nelson walked into the family room looking grave. Angela stood up and gave her father the chair directly across from Lori, and instead came to sit on the couch next to her sister. Milo perked his head up at all the commotion, but once everyone was seated again, he went back to sleep.

There was a thick tension in the room, almost like a layer of humidity, that seemed to stick to Lori’s skin and make it harder for her to speak. Perhaps everyone else was feeling the same thing, because for a while, nobody said a word. Lori glanced at Angela once, twice, and on the third time, she saw that her sister was scrolling through her email on her phone.

“Angela,” she hissed. “What are you doing? How can you be so calm about this?”

“Who said I’m calm?” Angela said, putting her phone away and sighing. “I just figured if we’re all going to sit here in silence, I might as well get some work done.”

It dawned on Lori then that she was the only one in the room who didn’t know anything about the situation at hand. If

Angela had been in the dark regarding the details of this family meeting, she wouldn't be able to sit there and nonchalantly do some after-hours work. Lori sucked in a sharp breath and posed her next question to the entire room. "Can someone, *please*, just tell me what's going on? The anticipation is killing me."

"Mom and dad are being sued by Mark Snyder," Angela said with absolutely no build up. "Do you remember Mark Snyder? He owns Snow Springs Resort."

Snow Springs was the resort on the other side of the mountain. They shared one ski lift, and two ski runs with the Glacier Grove Lodge, but as far as Lori could remember, there hadn't been too many business squabbles between the resort owners when she was growing. If Mark Snyder was the man she was thinking of, then she *could* recall one instance of animosity, but that was it. She was in her twenties and back home from college for the weekend. Mark Snyder came bursting through the front doors of the lodge, yelling about how Glacier Grove guests were being inconsiderate to his guests or something. The entire complaint sounded made up, or at least over exaggerated, and Lori got the sense Mark was just the kind of man who liked to yell about things, but that he was all bark, not bite.

Guess not...

"Yes, I know who you're talking about," Lori said, then she looked at her parents with concern. "But why is he suing you?"

"There was an accident about ten years ago," Hanna said. She glanced at Nelson before going on. He nodded, as if

to indicate that he would let her tell the story. When Lori looked at her dad, she saw what could only be described as a look of defeat on his face.

“A young girl, Erin Bower, got stuck on the ski lift going up the mountain,” her mom continued. “The lift had been acting up a little that year, but nothing more than usual, and we had a repairman out to look at it the day before. He said everything was fine but...” She trailed off.

“But it wasn’t,” Angela said, picking up the story where her mom left off. “The lift shut down with the girl halfway up the mountain, and while we were working on getting the darn thing fixed, a storm rolled in.”

“A storm that had not been forecasted.” Those were the first words Nelson spoke, and the sound of her father’s voice surprised Lori. She jumped a little, disturbing Milo’s sleep, and turned to face him. He stared down at his lap and just repeated the same sentiment over again. “Nobody said anything about there being a storm that day, otherwise, we would’ve warned people, and probably even shut down skiing for the day.”

“Right,” Hanna agreed. “And we did shut down the mountain once we got news of the storm. But the people on the lift, including the girl, were still stuck. Thankfully, about fifteen minutes before the weather got really bad, we managed to get the lift running again and got everyone off safely... well, everyone except Erin.”

“I don’t understand,” Lori said, frowning. “What happened to Erin?”

“The girl had a severe anxiety disorder,” Angela explained. “Which of course, we didn’t know at the time. How could we? She was on a skiing trip with some friends, and nobody in her party told us anything about her propensity for panic attacks and fainting spells. We think what happened was that once the storm started to pick up, Erin got really freaked out, and decided she had a better chance of surviving if she... jumped.”

Lori gasped. If Erin really was halfway up the mountain, that meant she was at the highest point in the lift. A fall from that height, especially in the middle of a big storm, was never a good idea, even if the alternative was staying on the broken lift.

“She kicked her skis off and climbed under the guardrail and then, she either jumped or fell. We obviously can’t know for sure how intentional it was,” Hanna said. Then she covered her mouth and tears started to crawl down her cheeks. “But I can’t go into the details. It’s just—it’s too awful.”

“The authorities think she likely broke a lot of bones in the fall,” Angela said, speaking softly now, and with reverence. “She wouldn’t have been able to move, and nobody would’ve heard her crying out over the sound of the wind. The storm got really bad after that, and she likely got um... buried.”

Lori shook her head, her own eyes filling up with tears now. “Oh my god,” she said. “That’s terrible.”

“It was one of the worst days of my life,” her dad said. Everyone grew quiet, and waited for him to go on. He did, but

only after a few seconds of somber silence. “I was the one who spoke to the authorities after they found her... I was the one at the check-in desk when her family arrived. The look on her mom’s face was so—so—” He apparently didn’t have the right words, so he just shook his head and left the sentence there.

“Yes, it was a tragedy,” Angela agreed. “But it was no one’s fault. That’s the important thing here. Erin’s parents didn’t even threaten to sue. Everything was determined to have been an accident. A very sad, unfortunate accident. That is, until Mark Snyder started running his mouth, going around town and making up stories about how we hadn’t done our due diligence in regards to the lift maintenance.”

“But why?” Lori asked. “I mean, I know Mark isn’t the most pleasant man, but why would he try to pin something like this on us?”

“To shut down the Glacier Grove Lodge,” Angela said. “At least, that’s my theory. If he gets us shut down, then he can buy us out, and then he’ll own the entire mountain. He’ll become even richer than he already is.”

“Okay,” Lori said. “But, if what you said is true, that you guys had a repairman out to look at the lift the day before, then Mark has no case, right?”

“We don’t have the records,” Nelson said. He pushed himself up from the chair and cursed under his breath. “We were careless back then. Stupid.”

“Honey, no,” Hanna said, going to her husband and putting her arm around his shoulders. “We were just doing things the way we always had, the way it had always worked out for us in the past.”

Lori looked at Angela. “What are they talking about?”

“Mom and dad used to be a little more... old fashioned when it came to running this place. They hired local contractors to fix stuff up, and paid them under the table so that they would get the full amount instead of having to give any of it to their contracting firm or pay taxes on it.” Angela sighed and sat back on the couch. “They were just trying to help, seeing as a lot of the locals around here struggle to make ends meet. Especially in the off season.”

“You mean, you didn’t get any paperwork from the guy who came to check on the lift?” She gawked at her parents. “That’s really irresponsible.”

“We got paperwork,” her mom said. “It’s just that we’re not sure where we put it... It’s just this one little receipt, since this guy wasn’t officially on our payroll or anything. But it wasn’t like we didn’t do any record keeping.”

“There was a lot going on at that time,” Angela said. “The lodge was starting to get more and more crowded each season, and they were doing so much construction on the east wing of the property, that stuff just started to get a little... disorganized. Mom and dad did file some paperwork for the lift maintenance, but at this point, we have no idea where it is.”

“So, for now, it’s just Mark’s word against yours?”

Angela nodded. “And he’s convinced Erin’s parents of his little half baked theory too, which really complicates things. If he shows up to court with the Bowens, and Erin’s mom gets up there to talk about how her little girl died, it’s going to look really bad for us.”

“What... what happens if the lodge is found to be at fault?” Lori asked, not sure if she really wanted to know the answer.

“We could be hit with a huge fine,” Hanna said. “One that we couldn’t afford, which would put us out of business. Or... we could simply lose our license. Which would also put us out of business.”

“What you’re saying is if we don’t find the evidence to prove your innocence, then we will lose the Glacier Grove Lodge either way?” Her parents nodded. “How long do we have?”

“Until the end of the year,” Angela said. “Or in other words, about three and a half weeks.”

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NOTE FROM SAGE PARKER

Hi lovelies.

I love writing sweet and clean contemporary romance novels. I was born and raised in a small town in South Carolina, but you can almost always find me at the beach...usually reading a book. I hope my writing brings joy and inspiration to everyone that uses their precious time to read my stories.

Thanks for stopping by!

Stay safe and happy x

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