

Christmas

WITH THE

Elkin

BILLIONAIRES

BOOKS 1 -3

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

LESLIE NORTH

CHRISTMAS WITH THE ELKIN BILLIONAIRES

The Billionaire Athlete's Christmas Fling

The Billionaire's Fake Christmas Engagement

The Billionaire's Christmas Son

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

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Christmas
WITH THE
Elkin
BILLIONAIRES
BOOKS 1 -3

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR
LESLIE NORTH

BLURB

Get snowed in with these sexy billionaires...

It's the season for falling in love with three driven and sexy billionaires. Gift yourself with this swoon-worthy boxset by USA Today bestselling author Leslie North featuring secret babies, fake fiancées and second chances.

The slopes are heating up in **The Billionaire Athlete's Christmas Fling!** Bad boy billionaire Chase Elkins's life has been headed downhill. Then sexy single mother Tana Birch applies to be the head ski instructor at his family's resort. He needs to keep things professional. Even if she is impossible to resist...

In **The Billionaire's Fake Christmas Engagement**, billionaire Gabe Elkins asks the gorgeous Anna Waters to pretend to be his fiancée at his family's Christmas celebration. It was supposed to be a business deal. But there's nothing fake about the red-hot attraction between them...

A rare one-night stand with a sexy stranger left Rachel Alexander pregnant in **The Billionaire's Christmas Son**. Now she's back working at the resort where they met. But when she sees Jonas Elkin, the billionaire CEO who hired her, she instantly recognizes him as her one-time lover...and the father of her son. Too bad he wants to keep her...and their son...a secret.

MAILING LIST

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THE
BILLIONAIRE
Athlete's Christmas Fling
CHRISTMAS WITH THE ELKIN BILLIONAIRES: BOOK ONE

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

BLURB

Baby, it's cold outside but the slopes are heating up...

Billionaire bad boy Chase Elkins has been given one job — help his brother find the perfect ski director for his family's resort and keep the burden off his ailing grandmother. After an injury ended his skiing career and a messy break-up, Chase's life has been headed downhill. He can't afford to alienate his family by lusting after a intriguing single mother. No matter how tempting she may be...

Tana's been burned by men before, and she's especially cautious when it comes to famous, charming billionaires. She's not about to let Chase into her and her daughter's life, especially when it's pretty clear kids are a no-go for the champion skier. But he's so damn hot. And fun. Is it possible she could be satisfied with a casual fling? Or is she headed for the biggest wipe out of her life...

CHASE

American Alpine skier and two-time Olympic medalist, Chase (aka Ace) Elkin, was injured on the giant slalom course at the Beijing Olympics when he violently crashed one gate from the finish, fracturing his left femur vertically and fracturing both his patella and tibia. One of the youngest Alpine skiers to ever compete in the Olympics, Ace qualified for the American team at seventeen and went on to compete on the Olympic team, consistently earning medals throughout his career....

“Well, that’s enough of that,” Chase mumbled into his pillow. He wished the radio in his head had an off switch so he could silence the replay of every news report about his accident. They were always loudest in the mornings. Sighing, he rolled onto his back and stared up at the ceiling, wondering if he had time to take a shower. His phone beeped with an incoming text and he didn’t have to look at it to know it was from his brother Jonas reminding him he had a morning appointment and to get his ass out of bed.

Unable to stand the mystery, he checked when his phone beeped again. “Yep. Jonas.” Not bothering to reply, he rolled to his side and sat up, wincing at the stiffness in his leg. More than a year after his career-ending injury, he knew it would take time for the muscles to loosen up and the stiffness to subside and a hot shower would definitely help. The decision made, he headed for the bathroom.

He spent too long in the shower pretending he wasn't back at Elk Lodge, and as he was getting dressed, he heard his phone ring with Jonas's ringtone. He tapped the answer button. "Dammit! I haven't forgotten." He didn't bother to listen to anything his brother might have said before disconnecting the call and tossing the phone on his bed. He dressed quickly hoping there would be coffee in the lobby so he could grab a cup before he headed upstairs.

Pushing through the double doors into the lobby, he waved to Helen and Aimee, who were busy checking people in, and headed over to the hot drinks station that had been a staple in the lobby since his grandparents first opened the lodge more than fifty years ago. A woman was shepherding two kids as they eagerly helped themselves to what looked like more whipped cream than hot chocolate while she attempted to retrieve the can before it was emptied.

"Joanie, you shouldn't have that much sugar before your lesson. Sammy, don't fling that at your sister. We do not throw food. Wait! No-no-no." The woman's panicked voice reached him just as Sammy or Joanie whirled around and upended the contents of their cup all down the front of his sweater. Everyone seemed to gasp and the woman lifted her head to make eye contact, an apology already tumbling out of her mouth. "Oh no! I am so sorry." She grabbed a wad of napkins off the table and began to frantically press them against his sweater while continuing to spew out apologies and telling the kids to apologize as well.

It was way too early for this. Stopping the woman, he gently took the napkins from her and tossed them in the trash. She seemed downright distraught over what had happened, since she frantically continued to fuss. Chase finally had enough.

"Hey. It's fine. No harm, right? Looks like you have your hands full with your children, so why don't I just get out of your way."

"Oh. Oh! These aren't mine. They're my students. I didn't birth them or anything. Not that that's a bad thing."

Her face turned a pleasing shade of pink and under different circumstances, he would have loved to stick around to tease her and possibly see what else might happen, but as it was, his phone was beeping again. Jonas. It had to be him.

“Well, I’ll leave you to your non-birthed children.” Chase’s phone beeped and he looked at the drink station, the whole area now covered in hot chocolate and whatever else was in those cups and sighed.

He diverted his path to swing by the reception desk, pulling his sweater off over his head as he walked.

“I’m late for a meeting with Jonas, or I wouldn’t do this,” he said to Aimee. “Could you send this out to be cleaned for me?”

“No problem, Chase.” She turned and poured him a cup of coffee from the receptionists’ personal coffee maker. “Still take it light?”

“Yes, ma’am, and thank you.” Smiling, he took a long sip and smacked his lips. Aimee patted him on the arm, and he resumed his walk to the bank of elevators. When the elevator car chimed, he stepped on and pressed and held the DOOR OPEN button as he watched the woman finally manage to wrangle the kids and herd them toward the side exit that would take them to the ski rentals. She paused at the exit and turned, catching his eye, and the smile she directed his way lit up her features. His finger fumbled on the elevator button, and the doors closed before he could react fast enough to stop it.

TANA

Tana Birch jumped as the door closed right in front of her. She'd been so intent on staring at the hottie Sammy had bumped into that she hadn't realized how close to the door she was standing until it almost smacked her in the face.

He looked familiar but she couldn't place him. In the short time she'd worked here, she'd run into a few celebs, so maybe that was why.

“Give it to me! Miss Tana! Sammy took my hot chocolate!”

Whirling around, Tana reached for the cup that Sammy had stolen from Joanie but he bounced out of the way and finished off the drink with a grin. Frowning, Tana held her hand out for the cup, but the little boy merely dropped it on the ground and continued to torment his younger sister, which resulted in Joanie letting out a high-pitched scream that could easily cause an avalanche. Time to stop this right now.

She crossed her arms and tilted her hip up as she stared at both kids without saying anything. These two had been an absolute thorn in her side from the moment they arrived here, often not listening and talking while she was attempting to teach them how to ski. Their parents had dropped the kids off with her early and then vanished inside, probably to enjoy a quiet breakfast without the squabbling pair.

She couldn't blame them, but at the same time, she was a ski instructor and not a babysitter. With a huff, she sat down on the bench and began to loosen up the buckles on her boots.

Finishing the right boot, she shifted to the left but before she could finish, two sets of feet appeared in her vision.

“Miss Tana?” Sammy asked. “I thought we were getting lessons today.”

With her head down, Tana smiled before pasting on a more serious expression. Lifting her head, she frowned at them. “Well, we were, but it seems that you’d much prefer to tease your sister than ski today, so I decided to take my boots off. Was I wrong?” She stared at the older boy, who couldn’t have been more than eight, as he shuffled uncomfortably in front of her.

“Nooooo.” His answer came out more of a whine.

Joanie, who was five, crossed her arms and frowned at her brother. “Momma’s gonna be mad at you if Miss Tana doesn’t teach us. She doesn’t want us skiing without lessons. You know what happened last time.”

Well, this was info she needed. “Um, what happened last time?”

“Sammy tried to do it on his own and ended up falling down and breaking his arm before we got to go on the bunny slope. Dadda had to take him to the doctor and then we had to go home because he had a cast that covered his whole arm. He promised he’d behave this year.” She frowned at her brother who was now looking decidedly uncomfortable.

“Oh Sammy. That’s dangerous, as you found out.” Tana sat back and put on her best thoughtful expression. “How about this...” She paused, waiting to make sure she had their full attention. “How about you pick up that cup you tossed on the ground and put it in the trash over there where it belongs. Then, once the others arrive, I’ll teach all of you how to ski down the bunny slope. Deal?”

Joanie was already nodding her head and making small noises to get her brother to agree. Tana was worried that they’d end up in a standoff and he’d refuse. He surprised her when he picked up the cup and tossed it in the trashcan before agreeing to the deal.

“Good choice, Sammy.” As Tana tightened the buckles on her boots, she could hear the excited chatter of her other students headed their way. “Now, come on, let’s go meet the others and get our skis on.”



Tana stood tall on her skis at the top of the bunny slope, her students now all arrayed around her in a ragged semicircle. The clear, sunny morning made everything look like an ad in an adventure magazine. The bunny slope might not be an adventure to *her*, but it sure was for the kids in the beginner group for the five- to eight-year-olds.

“Okay,” she called, watching five pairs of eyes behind goggles in a rainbow of colors snap up to meet hers. Green. Red. Pink. Blue. Purple. It was a sight to see against the white snow. “Let’s remember to do big curves on the way down,” she said, demonstrating by moving her hips side to side. “If you want to slow down, what do you do?”

“Make a pizza!” The children shouted out the answer with a wild enthusiasm that made her heart beat faster. A few of them pointed the tips of their skis together to show her.

Giving them a thumbs up, she knew they were ready to go. “That’s right. Let’s head out.”

Tana waited for the gaggle of children to get level with her before she tipped forward and pushed off with her poles. They were catching on quick, but not *too* quick. One of the girls shot out ahead of the pack and Tana reacted without thinking. She straightened her skis and sped down the hill. It was a very long hill—the longest bunny slope she’d ever seen—but the first lesson she tried to teach the kids was to *stay in control*.

She came up alongside Sadie, who didn’t look uncomfortable in the least. Her poles were pointed straight back, and with a perfect bend in her knees, the girl continued down the hill.

“You’re doing awesome, Sadie,” Tana called. “Now show me your side-to-sides.” She took a deep breath to calm herself. “If

you ever race, you'll have to know how to do the slalom. Side to side."

It worked.

The little girl slowed her pace and made a wide loop to the left.

Tana stopped and looked back up the hill. The other four kids in the group were cautiously making their way down through the snow. Plenty of proper pizza stances. It had been, all in all, a good lesson. Joanie, as the youngest in the group, was moving the slowest, and Tana was surprised when Sammy slowed down to ski next to his sister.

She waited for them in the middle of the hill where she could also keep an eye on Sadie. Man, she'd lucked *out*. Taking the ski instructor gig at Elk Lodge had put her right where she needed to be to make a better life for her daughter. And she didn't mind the work—another bonus. She liked the kids and most of their parents, the pay was decent, and the hours were good.

But Tana wanted more. And this winter, she just might get it.

Elk Lodge was hiring a new ski program director, and Tana had put her name in for consideration. The new position was on her mind as she turned and went down the hill with the last of the group. Speculating on what might happen wouldn't do her any good, but she couldn't help it. The director job would be *a perfect fit* for her. And she would be so great for it. With the full-time salary and benefits, she'd finally be on the right track.

She came to a gentle stop with the kids on their skis chattering happily around her. "Great job, everybody. Remember—make big turns, side to side, and make a pizza. Those three things will get you down the hill when you're out on the slopes with your parents, okay? What should you remember?"

"Side to side and make a pizza!" The kids shouted the phrases in a burst of glee.

Grinning, she watched them scatter in different directions. Their parents stood in various places by the entrances, most of

them waving enthusiastically as their children approached. The job definitely had more highs than lows.

Tana pushed forward with her poles and moved smoothly toward the lodge. She'd make sure all the kids met up with their parents or nannies and then take her break. With another lesson coming up in an hour, there was just enough time to get a cup of cocoa and take her boots off for a few minutes. As much as she loved teaching ski lessons, it *was* taxing on her body. Another silver lining—she'd be in great shape when she got the program director's position. *When*, not if. That was the attitude she needed for this application.

A flash of color out of the corner of her eye brought her up short as she watched a man approach. He crunched through the snow on winter boots, the sound reminding her of her daughter Lindsey chomping on cornflakes with an open mouth.

"I'm Ace," he called out when he got closer.

CHASE

Chase's grandmother sat behind her desk, head bowed over a massive ledger. Even at work, she was the picture of elegance—silver hair swept back in a neat bun, a cream sweater that looked soft enough to fall into, and her favorite string of pearls. Thanks to his brother Gabe's insistence, everything was computerized now, of course, but there were some things Elin Elkin still liked to do by hand. One of those things was keeping track of the staff.

Chase watched the swoops and falls of her pen across the paper while he lowered himself carefully into one of the antique chairs across from her. His left leg still felt stiff this morning, and he could hear his physical therapist in his head reminding him that injuries as bad as his took time to heal. Rubbing his leg, he bit back a sigh and took a sip of his coffee instead. Being back at Elk Lodge reminded him of everything he'd lost because of his accident. Not lost, merely postponed, his PT would have told him, but that wasn't true. Even if he was healed enough to compete professionally again, his chances of returning to the US Olympic team were zero.

He waited without speaking for his grandmother to acknowledge him. This, at least, didn't hurt his feelings. She'd always been focused on keeping Elk Lodge functioning at its best. When Chase was little, he'd learned to sit quietly and wait. But now sitting quietly reminded him that he didn't quite fit here anymore, like clothes that had gotten too small. Who was he, if he wasn't a skier?

Where else was he supposed to go? When he'd returned home after he'd been released from the rehab hospital, it was to find that his then-girlfriend had dumped him and moved out, cleaning him out in the process. He was thankful that in her haste to find someone who wasn't broken, she'd neglected to find the engagement ring he'd purchased with the intent to propose to her after he returned from the Olympics. He'd at least dodged one bad decision. Then things got worse. With the bottom having fallen out of his skiing career, the brands that had contracted with him for celebrity endorsement began canceling their contracts. One by one, and without apology, they disappeared. The final straw was when his agent informed him they would no longer represent him.

It was never about the money. Thanks to his parents, he and his brothers were left with more money than they could ever spend in a dozen lifetimes. No, it was more about how the door that had always been open was now welded shut.

Ace Elkin was dead and he was just Chase.

So, when he was ordered home for Thanksgiving, he came. Jonas was already here, since he took care of the day-to-day running of the resort, but his middle brother Gabe claimed a work emergency. Chase suspected it wasn't much of an emergency, but who could say. Gabe had started a software company as part of a school project in his sophomore year and it had taken off. He'd moved to Silicon Valley as soon as he could, stating that's where he needed to be, and Chase couldn't remember the last time he'd willingly come to visit.

The holiday dinner had been a formal affair, even though it was only the three of them, and as soon as they were finished, Grandmother had ordered the servers out of the room and announced her diagnosis.

She'd always been a formidable woman when it came to running the resort, but now, at seventy-four, there was some question about how much of a toll the chemo treatments would take. Was she even going to survive them? Chase wished Gabe had been at the dinner. They were under a new set of orders not to say a *thing* to him until Gran had a chance to speak to him herself. Chase didn't like to imagine getting the news over

the phone. But she wouldn't do that. She'd probably decide to tell Gabe when he arrived for Christmas, since he'd promised he would come. It would change everything that came after for him, but Chase pushed those thoughts out of his mind.

His grandmother put down her pen, closed the ledger, and slid it to the corner of her desk. Her blue eyes met his. Chase's throat went tight with emotion. She looked so much older than he remembered. He'd been back to the lodge twice in the year before his accident and then once after it, but somehow time passed at breakneck speed, and she looked older and smaller than he remembered. Chase wanted to throw his arms out and create a barrier between her and the rest of the world. Except it wouldn't do any good now—the world had already gotten to her.

She reached across the desk, palms up.

Chase placed his hands in hers. *Some* things still fit, he supposed. His grandmother squeezed tight, not looking away. "How are you, Chase? You doing all right with the news?"

He let out a sorrowful laugh. "Is anybody?"

She gave him a rueful smile. "This is something we've got to face as a family. And we *will* be able to face it as a family, just as soon as your brother arrives for Christmas."

Cancer. And the doctors weren't sure if they could stop it or slow it.

For Chase, the thought of his grandmother not being here in her office anymore made his heart ache. "We will. We'll face it." He squeezed her hands, the words scratching at his throat and making his eyes burn.

His grandmother gave him a stern look. "Don't get all choked up on me, Chase Elkin. We've got things to talk about."

"I'm fine." His tears were reflected in his grandmother's eyes, but to her credit, she simply laughed.

For a moment, Chase sensed everything would be all right. His grandmother might be sick, but her laugh was still the same. He found himself trying to memorize the sound. No matter what was going on, it would be okay.

She took a deep breath. “Chase, it’s time to start figuring out what your next steps are in life.”

Chase choked back the instinctive response to voice some sort of platitude. What could he say? How could he communicate feeling that everything he’d ever dreamed of was now in his past? “Is that a question, Grandmother?” He tried and failed to put on his most winning smile. “We don’t really have to discuss this. I’ll be fine figuring things out for myself.”

She patted his hands and sat back. “Chase, you’ll always have a place here.” He caught a flash of tears in her eyes again, which almost killed him. He wanted to put a hand to his chest and hold his own heart in. His grandmother looked down at her ledger and pressed her hand to the paper. When she looked back up, her eyes were bright. “Which brings me to my second request. As part of that place, your first task is to help your brother wrangle a replacement for the ski program director.”

Anger made his skin flush at the mention of the previous ski director. Hal had been promptly fired when his grandmother discovered what the man had done—had *been* doing for far too long. Elk Lodge was a favorite resort of celebrities and wealthy visitors, and unfortunately, Hal thought they wouldn’t notice if he lifted a piece of jewelry here or some money there. The man had set up a whole system around it, creating pockets of time in the schedule where he could go through the guests’ belongings while they were out on the slopes.

The local news station had a field day with the story. His grandmother had gone into damage control mode to protect the reputation of the resort.

“Jonas doesn’t need my help,” he said automatically. “He’s the one who’s great at the resort stuff. I’d be in his way. Besides, I’ve got physical therapy appointments in Salt Lake City.”

“I disagree, and we have physical therapists here in Colorado.” His grandmother picked up her pen and ran it through her fingers. “We got more applications than I expected. *Many* more. Jonas needs help weeding through them, and you’re the man with all the experience.”

With being an athlete, he wanted to say. *With going through the motions*. But how could he say that? She could be dying. He pasted a smile on his face, the way he always had when he got to the bottom of the slopes and met the press. “Fine. I won’t let you down.”

“It would be nice to hire a replacement before the lawsuits wrap up,” she said dryly, a smile playing over her lips. “I’m glad you’re going to help.”

She pulled the ledger back in front of her, and Chase got to his feet knowing that he’d been dismissed.

He kept it together until he was out of sight of her office, then he stopped in front of one of the floor-to-ceiling windows that graced this floor. Guests and staff moved about below him, crisscrossing the grounds carrying skis and snowboards or holding someone close.

He didn’t for one minute think that Jonas needed help finding someone; this was his grandmother’s attempt to give him something to do. He didn’t want something to do. Not at Elk Lodge. Being here was a constant reminder of everything he’d lost.

But that same nagging question came back—*what else could he do?* As he stared out at the activity below him, he recognized the woman he’d sort of met earlier along with what looked like the youngest age group they taught here at Elk Lodge. He remembered learning to ski at that age. It was also when he’d met one of his best friends, Chris Denton. His family used to come here during the holidays and the two of them bonded instantly over a shared love of skiing and getting into trouble.

He watched as she worked with the kids, making sure they made it safely down the bunny slope. The kids appeared to be excited, and he assumed she was giving them some sort of peptalk while she demonstrated exaggerated lateral and rotational movements and they copied her. As the kids dispersed, some guy joined her and was gesturing to the slope and the kids. Even from where Chase was standing, he could

tell from her body language that the conversation wasn't going well.

Without contemplating why, Chase headed for the elevator. Maybe it was time he introduced himself.

TANA

Tana watched the guy stride toward her as if he owned the place, but she'd never seen him before. "Uh, hi, Ace. Are you looking to sign up for a class?"

The guy chuckled, and it sounded kind of creepy. "You mean, you don't recognize me? Wow. I might be a bit hurt by that. I'm a professional skier. I was on the US Olympic team? Anyway, if you have a second, I could give you a couple of pointers for your lessons."

Uh, *no*. Tana did not have a second to listen to advice on how to do her job from some random guy with sandy curls peeking out from underneath a fitted beanie. Especially one named Ace. Stunned, it took her a bit to figure out a reply without being rude.

"Kids like that girl who headed out in front of you. It's better to take her down for a few solo runs before class if you can fit it in. Kids with that kind of courage can get away from you. Don't want that. And I'd practice a few more turns with the rest of the group up top, while you still have time left on the slope. A few of them didn't look too confident when they got down to the bottom. Build their trust in themselves first."

Apparently she'd taken too long in her denial. Tana couldn't believe how ridiculous his speech had become. She lifted her goggles over her head, then pushed back her hood with her free hand, staring at him. *Glaring* at him.

"I wasn't asking, mister. If you don't mind, I need to ensure all of my students are back with their families." Her answer

served double duty. Putting him in his place and getting rid of him. She was not a fan of this man, whoever he was.

His mouth dropped open in shock, as if no one ever dared talk back. Who did he think he was anyway? Before he could respond, someone else interrupted them.

“Hey!” Tana turned to see the guy from earlier that day walking toward them. He had a limp and looked as if the pace he was walking was painful. But he had an easy smile and she couldn’t help but notice the full perfection of his lips. That, with oddly compelling blue eyes, ignited her curiosity. It felt like sitting a foot from the fire in the lodge. The heat only increased the closer he got. She also couldn’t help noticing that he was only wearing a long-sleeved shirt. Wasn’t he cold?

“I’m sorry to interrupt. I wanted to introduce myself properly after this morning’s, er, run-in.” He glanced at the other guy. “I’m Ace. I apologize if I was rude before.”

“Oh,” Tana said, looking back and forth between the two guys. “I’ve never met anyone named Ace before in my life, and today I meet two of you.”

The creepy guy’s mouth opened and closed as if he were a fish, and he began to back away while fumbling in his pocket. Pulling out his phone, he sort of waved it around. “Uh, I need to take this. Excuse me.” And then he quickly turned and practically ran away.

“What on earth?”

The other Ace chuckled and the sound made the growing heat inside her blossom. She tugged on her jacket zipper to cool off.

“Did you hear his phone ring?”

“Not even a vibration.” As she said that, one of the parents stepped up to them, giving a shy little wave, the mom’s cheeks pink. Her little boy, Gus, bounced up and down on the balls of his feet beside her.

“I’m so sorry to interrupt your conversation.” The mom’s smile got bigger, her expression not matching the words. She

looked almost *giddy*. “But my son was wondering if we could get a selfie.”

Ace’s face broke into a thousand-watt smile. “I would be happy to.” He signaled for Gus and his mom to stand closer and Gus held out his phone to Tana.

“Would you mind taking the photo for us, Miss Tana?”

She took the phone and moved back, completely bemused at the turn of events.

“Thank you so much, Mr. Elkin,” Gus’s mother gushed. She couldn’t stop smiling. Gus beamed up at Ace like the sun rose and set on the man who was presently asking what he thought of the bunny slope.

Something clicked into place. He said his name was Ace. Not Ace had said something about the Olympic team. Oh shit! The man was champion skier Chase Elkin. One of *the* Elkins, as in owners of the lodge. Sammy had spilled his hot cocoa all over a world champion athlete and was the reason he wasn’t wearing something warmer.

Chase, however, seemed completely at ease as he continued to chat with the little boy. Tucking her arm tight against her side, so her hand wouldn’t shake when she took the picture, Tana snapped a few before handing it over to her student’s mom. Putting an arm around Gus, Chase smiled patiently while the mom took several more pictures of Chase and Gus doing funny poses and laughing.

This guy was way too good to be true. Right?

“Thank you so much,” the mom said, giving Gus a gentle push toward the lodge. “We’ve got to go.”

“But mom...”

“Don’t you want to show your dad and brother your pics?”

Thankfully, the little boy agreed and ran off ahead of his mother.

“See you next week, Gus!” Tana called out. She couldn’t keep the laughter out of her voice and decided she didn’t want to. Turning back to the man standing next to her, she stuck out her

hand to officially introduce herself. “I’m Tana Birch, ski instructor.”

He stuck his hand out to shake hers. “Chase Elkin. Former skier.”

Tana flinched at how cold his hand was. “Ouch. Your hand is freezing. We should get you inside for something warm to drink.”

Chase rubbed his hands as they headed into the lobby. “Just so long as I can get it inside me and not on me.” He gave her side eye, his grin obvious as she gave an exaggerated cringe.

“I’ll be your bodyguard and block any children attempting to dump their hot cocoa on you. It’s much too cold to walk around here without your shirt on.” Her mind immediately shifted over to what he’d look like under his Henley. He was probably ripped in all the right ways, and her cheeks heated in a blush.

Turning her back to him, she busied herself with making two hot cocoas at the drink station, letting the steam from the hot water heat her face before she faced him again. Satisfied, she handed him his cup and watched as he took a sip.

“Thanks.” He wrapped both hands around the cup while she sipped from hers.

“Does that happen often?”

“What? Someone trying to impersonate me?” At her nod, he shook his head. “Nope. At least not in person. And why he thought he could get away with it at my family’s resort?” He laughed. “I’ve no idea how he thought that was a good idea.”

Tana chuckled and looked around. “Do you suppose he’s a guest here? I’d never seen him before but unless he’s one of my students or a parent, I admit that I don’t pay that much attention to the guests.”

“Me either. I’ll check with the front desk to see if they know who he is, but I suspect he won’t have stuck around.”

“Let’s hope not, because, wow. Not that he’s the only one to try to give me advice. I had another guy earlier do a similar

thing, only he was a lot pushier about it and then he tried to flirt with me. In front of his kid while his wife was inside. Who does that? And why hire me, if you're going to have such strong opinions about how I'm doing my job?"

"Sorry about the disgruntled guest." Chase finished off his drink and tossed the cup. "Want me to have him removed from the premises?"

"No, that won't be necessary, but I appreciate the offer." She smiled at him as he gave her a flirtatious look.

"Are you sure? Because rumor has it that I've got a bit of sway with the people who run this place and I'd be happy to test that theory." Chase's wide smile lit something inside of her. It made her think of adventure and laughing until her stomach hurt and the rush of pushing off the top of a black diamond hill. His eyes held sadness—no surprise, considering what had happened to him. "Is this your first teaching gig?"

"Oh no. When I was in college, I spent my winter breaks working as an instructor."

"UC in Boulder?"

"The very one. I got my bachelor's degree in dance, something my mother will never understand. And when there isn't snow on the ground, I teach dance at a local studio not too far from here, but I'd much rather be on the slopes."

"Explains your grace on skis, then."

"Aw, thanks. Wait, when did you see me on the slopes?"

She thought she detected a slight blush working its way across his cheeks. "I was upstairs speaking with my grandmother, and the windows outside her office have a great view of the different runs."

Well, that's interesting. Tana felt her watch vibrate and checked the time. "Listen, I'd love to talk more, but I need to get ready for my next class." The words started out as a courtesy exit, but once she'd said them, she realized they were true. "It was really nice to meet you."

“It was great to meet you.” His blue eyes traced over hers, and his smile softened. “I’m supposed to help my brother, Jonas, with the selection of our new ski director, so you’ll be seeing me around for the next few weeks, at least. I look forward to seeing you in action.”

“You’re helping? That’s great.” Tana’s voice went up an octave as she spoke, and she quickly excused herself. Walking away, she rubbed her cheeks. Chase Elkin was the hottest guy she’d ever met and he was going to help determine her future? She needed to get her infatuation under control, because there was no way she could keep flirting with her boss even if it was exactly what she wanted to be doing.

CHASE

Chase's heart still hadn't settled into a normal rhythm, and it had been hours since he formally met Tana. He took another sip of hot cocoa and tried to pretend he wasn't looking for her out on the hills. The lodge's canteen doubled as a lounge, and its massive windows looked out over the front ski hills of Cardinal Mountain. Other bright red coats came down the slopes with students in tow. The only person he wanted to see was Tana.

Wow. The word still rang in Chase's head. Tana was, without question, the most stunning woman he had ever seen. Her big brown eyes had warmed him from the inside out, sparking something low in his belly. And that smile? So big and genuine and *hot*. It didn't matter that she wore a set of black ski pants and a bright red coat issued to her by the resort—her eyes alone had taken him captive and refused to let go.

Which shouldn't be happening with an employee at the lodge. Not now, and not ever.

Tana's red coat appeared at the top of the bunny slope, and he knew instantly from the way she moved that it was her. It made perfect sense that she also taught dance. She seemed to dance even on skis, with grace and confidence and what he was sure was an encouraging smile even if he couldn't see it from where he sat.

The students around her followed her lead, and they started down the hill. He couldn't hear what she said, obviously, but he watched as each one vied to be next to her during the

descent. They loved her. It was clear that she had skills. She had rapport. And clearly, she made people feel supported. All good skills Elk Lodge's new ski program director would need. Not that he had any say with the internal applicants, but if she hadn't applied, he might suggest it.

Glancing at his watch, he realized this would be the last run down the hill. If he was going to get a chance to talk to her again today, this would be the time. So as much as he wanted to watch her ski down just for the sheer beauty of it, he got up from his seat and returned his mug.

Chase found her a few minutes later at the bottom of the hill. She stopped to talk to a couple of parents, then proceeded to hand in her equipment to the attendant at the ski-rental building. The employees at the lodge didn't have to haul skis and equipment back and forth like some of the other resorts Chase had been to. His grandmother believed in making people's lives better, and it showed in some of the value-added benefits she provided, which included housing for those who didn't want to make the commute up and down the mountain each work day, free meals in the canteen, and free use of the slopes in their downtime.

As it stood, he couldn't ski—and watching the people come down the mountains hurt deep inside. Burning jealousy didn't help, either. He missed the freedom that came with flying down a hill faster than he was allowed to drive on any highway in the US.

Tana turned, and their eyes met across the churned-up snow. Her dark eyes lit up at the sight of him, her eyebrows lifting. Chase had already planned out what he'd say when they met again, but now all the words flew out of his mind.

She skied over to meet him. Chase had the strange urge to ask her out on a date.

Tana lifted a hand and smoothed down the braid peeking out from under her hat, bringing it around to the front of her coat.

“Hey, Chase.” Her voice was so much warmer than it had been when they first met. “How was the timing on those last runs?”

He wanted to deny he'd been watching but lying wasn't his thing. "You looked great out there. I mean—the timing looked great. The students seem to enjoy the lessons."

She gave a shrug, her eyes sparkling. "I bring my best to the slopes. The way you always did." Tana flinched as she finished the sentence.

The dull ache in his left leg flared in recognition, knowing what she meant. The comment stung. "It was my life—I gave it everything I had."

"Sorry. I shouldn't have brought that up." Her eyes flicked down to the snow.

"It was international news. No big deal." Except the end of Chase's skiing career had been the biggest deal of his life. It still was, but looking into Tana's eyes gave him the strange sensation that the accident and his injury had faded into the distant past. Temporary relief but highly welcome. "I'm not here to offer tips, unless you want some. I came to see if you'd like to have a drink with me." It would only be once, and he wanted to know more about her. "Maybe we could talk more."

Tana frowned, and for the first time, he noticed the thin scar that cut across one of her cheeks. "A hot tea sounds great." He heard the rejection in her voice, although it was cloaked with kindness. "But I really can't. I have an errand to run, and I can't miss it."

"Another time, then." Disappointment dogged him. He pushed it away.

"Another time," she agreed, her gaze lingering on his face for a heartbeat longer than was strictly necessary. The cold, clear day didn't feel so cold after all.

Chase headed back to his private residence, intent on solitude, a beer, and dinner. In that order. He didn't live in the lodge the way his grandmother did. She and his grandfather had renovated half the top floor of the lodge into their own private apartments early on in their ownership of the resort. Both liked being around other people, and it gave them peace of mind about the building itself. Of course, Elk Lodge had grown

considerably since then. In addition to the primary lodge, they offered numerous private chalets in the forest overlooking the slopes and a neat set of winter camping cabins.

And then there were the family houses.

Three of them, to be exact. One for each brother if they chose to live there. The houses were perched off the same access road as the lodge and looked down over the property. Jonas had moved into the first one years before. The other two had sat empty most of the time, used only when he and Gabe came home for the holidays.

Chase decided to cut across the parking lot, hoping to miss seeing anyone he knew. The convenient shortcut back to his house was one he'd used a lot lately, even if it did take him past staff intent on decorating everything at the resort to within an inch of its life.

Years ago, his grandmother had issued the edict that there would be no decorating for Christmas until *after* Thanksgiving, which meant Elk Lodge quickly transitioned into something out of a Hallmark movie immediately following the turkey coma.

The trees lining the parking lot now boasted swaths of twinkling lights, all in the same classy white, along with oversized ornaments. They'd gone so far as to wrap garland and metallic ribbon around a bower at the edge of the parking lot—the same one Chase had to cross under to get to the path leading to his front door. He would prefer to skip it, but sometimes in life a man had to confront Christmas decorations where he didn't want to see them. Given everything that'd happened this year, instead of feeling nostalgic over the holidays, he was hoping to forget about it.

Three rows of cars in, he spotted Tana crouched low next to a blue Honda, muttering something under her breath. He'd put five dollars on a series of curse words, her voice rising enough for him to catch some of them. He bit back his smile, realizing she was upset and needed help, not mockery.

"Fancy meeting you here," he said, staying back a few feet so as not to scare her. "Looks like you're having a bit of trouble

running that errand, ma'am. Anything I can do?" he offered, teasing her with the ma'am thing to make her smile. *It worked.*

Tana wrinkled her nose. "Do you have a spare tire? Because this one doesn't look drivable. Want to give your opinion on this along with a bit of mansplaining?" she teased.

She got to her feet, and Chase moved closer. "Mainsplaining, huh?" He crossed his arms and pretended to scrutinize the tire. It was obvious what was wrong. "Well, since you asked, looks like it might be flat." The two of them looked down at the ruined tire. "You don't have a spare in the trunk? I can change it if you want."

She nudged him with her elbow, her playfulness sending sparks of awareness up his arm at the touch. "I can change a tire, but unfortunately, that is the spare. And I'm already running late."

"I have some wonderful news," Chase said, unable to squash his grin. "I have an entire car."

"But does it have four usable tires already attached to the car?"

"You're in luck. It does. How about a ride?"

Tana shook her head. "Sure. I'd love a ride if you've got the time to spare."

"I have nothing *but* time. This way—my car's parked at my place, which isn't far from here." Chase led the way, ignoring the way his leg protested the quick pace. He might not be a professional skier anymore, but he wasn't going to let a little pain slow him down when it came to helping Tana. Because by helping Tana, Chase was helping the resort, and by extension, his grandmother. This was about family and not because he found her attractive and wanted to spend time with her.

Nope. That definitely wasn't it.

They cut along a snow-covered path that led them through a narrow stand of trees and ended at his driveway. Chase pulled his keys from the pocket and hit the fob button to open the garage. A second button started the car.

Tana nodded approvingly. “Nice setup.”

“What? You don’t have remote start?” He winked.

She laughed as they climbed into his Audi, a car he’d bought shortly before the accident. “I *wish*. Maybe if...maybe if things go well for me this year, I’ll save up for a new car. Or I could just get a ride from you every so often. This baby still has its new-car smell.”

That’s not what he noticed. Tana’s scent reminded him of snow and sunshine and a bare hint of snowdrops, and that was better than any expensive scent Chase had ever encountered, including new-car smell. “It does,” he agreed. “I don’t come across people with flat tires very often.” He flashed her a teasing smile.

“You *only* drive this when people get a flat tire? No wonder it’s still brand-new.”

“That’s right,” he teased. “Everything I could ever want is right here.” A beat went by, the tension crackling between them. “At the resort, I mean.”

“Honestly, everything I could ever want is at the resort, too.” Tana sounded a little wistful. Chase’s mind raced ahead, out of control. Was she talking about him? No way. Couldn’t be. And even if she was, it would be a mistake for them both. His grandmother would kill him if he was caught trying to seduce an employee. “Nice slopes. A good job. Adoring fans. A guy who’s confident enough to walk up to me in the middle of my day and save me from mansplainers—”

“Ah, good. I was hoping you were into that.”

Tana laughed. “So, you *did* notice the big crowd around me today. Granted, most barely came to my waist. Oh, wait, that’s because everyone I saw today was under the age of ten. Turn here. My errand is this way.” Tana guided him through several turns.

Chase had never been more aware of someone sitting in the passenger seat. He heard every breath. His body felt every move hers made as she shifted to get comfortable. He had to get his mind off how unbearably sexy she looked in her snow

gear. It made no sense—there was nothing Chase found inherently sexy about heavy coats. But with her hair spilling out from under the cap and the tight shirt he could see with her now unzipped jacket, he couldn't stop the rush of heat. "Do you like it? Teaching."

Tana frowned. "You think I would admit to you, Mr. Owner of the Lodge, if I didn't think my job was great?"

"Of course you would. Or at least I hope you would. Just pretend I'm some random guy you recently met, trying to get to know you better."

She smiled, sparking a touch of pride in the knowledge he'd put it there. "Fine, I'll bite. I *do* like teaching. Kids have an inherent enthusiasm for things that we seem to lose once we reach adulthood. And they've got all the energy in the world. Teaching them keeps me grounded. Do you ever work with kids? It's this right, up here." She pointed out the window.

Chase steered the car around the corner, a solemn expression on his face. "Not if I can avoid it." He shrugged. "Don't get me wrong. Kids are great, but I generally relate better to adults." He expected a laugh, or for her to tease him, but Tana was looking out the window. Maybe she hadn't liked the joke. Chase swallowed down a bolt of nervousness.

"Great," Tana said. "Just stop right here."

He parked the car in a spot by the sidewalk. The road was teeming with other vehicles, making him wonder just exactly what her errand was. He quickly scanned the area and spotted a sign: Cardinal Valley Elementary School. Why were they here?

Tana pushed open the car door and stood, waving her arm over her head.

A little girl stepped away from the crowd of people and looked their way.

"Mommy!" the little girl screeched and started running their way, her face one of pure joy. She was the spitting image of Tana.

Chase's heart skipped a beat as he watched Tana open her arms wide to catch her daughter up in a big hug.

TANA

Tana led her daughter to the car, helping Lindsey into the backseat and confirming she was buckled up. She hadn't missed the shocked expression on Chase's face. It was a look that told her everything she needed to know. *The man is not a kid kind of a guy.*

Being a solo parent meant that her daughter always came first, which was why she was working at Elk Lodge. She wanted Lindsey to have the best that she could give her. At the same time, it often served as a bucket of cold water for any potential partners. This time, it hurt more than anticipated, but it was probably for the best. Maintaining her professionalism was what mattered most, especially since she wanted that director position. Tana slid into the front seat and put on her seatbelt.

Chase drove out into the end-of-school traffic, and she turned to look at Lindsey. Her daughter looked just as shocked as Chase had moments ago. Her mouth hung open, and her eyes were shining and glued on Chase as though she was seeing the biggest celebrity in the world. Because, of course, she was—at least according to her criteria.

"I hope you had a good day today," Tana said, unsure of what to expect, but there was no avoiding the situation. It was ten minutes back to the resort. "Linds, this is my friend Chase—"

"Ace Elkin," whispered Lindsey. Lindsey seemed to think about this for a few long heartbeats, and then the surprise melted off her face. "Ace, you're my favorite person."

He let out a chuckle. “Oh, I’m sure your mom is your favorite person. She only got a ride from me because she got a flat tire, and—”

“You are the best skier in the world. I’ve watched all your videos. Mom, can I see your phone? Please?” Lindsey acted as though she hadn’t even heard Chase, cutting him off to gush on like a true fan.

“For one minute,” Tana said automatically. She tried to avoid screen time with Lindsey if possible. Tana pulled out her iPhone and passed it to Lindsey. “What do you need on there, honey?”

Lindsey was already focused on the phone, her tongue sticking out between her teeth. “I need my playlist.”

Tana blushed. How could she have forgotten? Lindsey’s playlist wasn’t just a collection of random videos she liked. It was a playlist of videos that featured Chase, the ski world’s golden boy up until his accident. “Are you sure about that, hon? We can watch the playlist at home.” Tana gave Lindsey a big grin, which her daughter missed entirely. “Linds?”

Sound burst from the phone’s speakers. “Show him this one first, Mom.” Lindsey thrust the phone up toward Tana. “Watch this, Ace. It’s a video of you, and you’re doing *awesome*.”

“Honey, you need to call adults *Mr.* and *Mrs.* This is Mr. Elkin unless he gives you permission to call him Chase.”

“I prefer Chase to Mr. Elkin or Ace, if that’s okay with you.” He stopped at the stop sign and turned slightly in his seat to give Lindsey a thumbs up.

Lindsey squirmed with excitement as she quietly murmured “Chase” over and over.

Tana gave her daughter another smile that hopefully communicated *pull it back just a little* and took the phone. She held it up, the screen vaguely pointed in Chase’s direction.

“It’s not safe to watch while I’m driving.” He tried to smile, but it faded almost immediately.

“Well, I’ll tell you what happens.” Lindsey strained against her seatbelt as far as she could. “You come down the hill. You go around *all the flags*.” She waved her hand in the air, mimicking the path he took in the video. “And then, when you get to the bottom, you—” Lindsey sucked in a breath, anticipation brightening her face. “Then you go over a jump!”

“Oh, I can teach you how to do that.” Chase was busy making a turn, and Tana saw the moment when he realized what he’d done. It was a flinch, barely there, and then gone.

Lindsey squealed at a pitch capable of shattering glass and bounced up and down in her seat. “Can I do it, Mom? Can I have private lessons with Chase? Can I please, please, *please* do it?”

Tana noticed the tension in the firm set of his jaw. “I’m sorry. I should have warned you that she’s one of your biggest fans. You don’t have to do it,” Tana said quickly, trying to help him find a gentle way out of his mistake.

Chase stared ahead out the front window, as though he wanted to be anywhere else other than here.

“Honey, that’s really not something we can ask Chase to—”

“It’s fine.” Chase maneuvered the winding roads through the resort. “I’m—I’m glad to give the lesson. No charge.”

That wasn’t what she’d been worried about. Tana hadn’t been ready for this when she got in the car with Chase, but she should have been. Clearly. “We’ll talk about it at home, Lindsey.”

“You have to let me take lessons, Mom!” Lindsey’s voice had gone higher. “Chase is the best skier on the *whole planet*.”

“I know, honey.” The ride had been going *so* well. How could she not have seen this coming? “We’re in employee cottage number two off the eastern road.” Tana had never been more relieved in her life than when Chase pulled up in front of the little cottage on the edge of the resort property where she and Lindsey lived. “I’ll think about it, okay? Tell Chase thanks for the ride.”

“Thanks for the ride!” Lindsey chirped. She grabbed her backpack off the seat next to her and hopped out of the car. Tana got out too, but not in time to stop Lindsey from poking her head back in. “You want to come in, Chase? I bet my mom has enough snacks.”

“Oh, that’s all right. I’ve got some things to take care of over at the lodge. I’ll see you around, Lindsey.” Tana didn’t know if he was trying to look calm or not, but he was failing. “You too, Tana.”

“Thanks again for the ride. You really bailed me out.”

A smile flickered across his face. “I’m not done yet. I’ll see about the flat tire, okay?”

Tana wanted to argue—Chase had already done plenty—but in reality, his help was appreciated, so she agreed. She closed the car door definitively and took Lindsey’s hand. Her daughter insisted they wait on the sidewalk to wave goodbye as Chase drove off. He raised his hand and waved back in front of the rearview mirror.

Back in the little cottage, Lindsey hung up her backpack and raced to the bathroom to do the first thing on the After-School Fun List—wash her hands. It didn’t seem to matter that the activities themselves weren’t what Lindsey would call “fun”—washing hands, changing clothes, and a snack. Okay, the snack part was fun.

Lindsey was up on a step stool with the water running when Tana got to the bathroom door. “I met Chase Elkin,” she announced as if Tana hadn’t been in the car the whole time. “He is the best skier in the world. And now I get to ski with him.”

“Honey—”

“I’ve *always* wanted to ski.” Lindsey pouted, her expression pained. “I’ve always wanted to ski just like you, Mommy. And you said it was dangerous, but Chase is a good skier. He wouldn’t do something dangerous.”

Tana bit back the urge to remind Lindsey about the fact that Chase’s skiing career had been ruined by an injury. She

wanted to be able to talk to her daughter about everything in a calm and collected way.

“You know what, Lindsey? Your teacher texted me today. She told me you got all your homework done in the Kids Club.”

Lindsey nodded proudly. “I did my whole sheet.”

“Then you know what?” Tana leaned down and brushed her fingers gently over Lindsey’s ribs, causing her daughter to giggle. “You can watch *Frozen* as a special treat. Okay?”

“Yes!” Lindsey punched a fist in the air, spraying droplets of water all over the bathroom. “Oops.” She flashed Tana the most charming grimace she’d ever seen before grabbing the hand towel to dry off the floor.

“And *that* can go right in the laundry.”

Lindsey scampered off to her bedroom to change clothes, leaving a shirt and pants and underthings in her wake. Drawers opened and closed, and then she ran out again in her favorite *Frozen* PJs to turn on the movie.

Tana picked up the laundry, laughing at her daughter’s enthusiasm. When Lindsey was a baby, she had trouble falling asleep and out of desperation, Tana would play different songs, hoping to calm her daughter down enough to fall asleep. The soundtrack to *Frozen* had been a lifesaver, seeing them through countless growth spurts. The sing-along version always seemed to brighten their day.

Tana went through the kitchen to the small utility and laundry room and was very thankful that the staff residences came with their own washer and dryer. With a six-year-old, there was always laundry to do. Lindsey seemed to generate dirty clothes even when she was in school, which should have been impossible. And yet...

The opening notes of the first song from *Frozen* filled the cottage, and Tana loaded the clothes into the washer. In the privacy of the laundry room, she tipped her head back and let the emotions of the day wash over her. Irritation. Embarrassment. *More* irritation. A surprisingly lovely few minutes. And then...awkwardness. Tana closed the washer lid.

Chase was *sinfully hot*. He had the most intriguing eyes she'd ever seen on a man and she wanted to run her fingers through his hair while he left beard burns on the inside of her thighs.

Down girl!

No matter how hot Chase was—and he was *very* attractive—the way he'd reacted when he realized she had a daughter was telling. Tana reminded herself that dating men who couldn't handle the fact that she had a daughter would never work out. No matter how gorgeous they were.

That didn't mean she had to deny his hotness. She simply didn't need to act on it. *Couldn't* act on it. Not ever.

She took a deep breath and hit the button on the washer to start the load. After dinner, they'd have the talk. The one where she explained to Lindsey why she couldn't take ski lessons from Chase.

The thought of disappointing her daughter made Tana's heart ache, but it was the right thing to do. It would be best for all of them if she nipped whatever sparks there were between herself and Chase in the bud. That also meant keeping Lindsey away from him. Tana swallowed an aching lump in her throat. Lindsey hadn't been this excited about anything since they'd moved to Elk Lodge.

Tana's most deep-seated instinct was to keep her daughter safe and she worried about the toll learning to ski would take on her body. Lindsey would not be happy to hear it, but the answer would have to be no. Tana had to make the tough choices now so they could be healthy in the long run. And keep both of their hearts intact.

Because that would be worse, wouldn't it? If Lindsey and Chase developed a friendship, it wouldn't be a big leap for her to start getting ideas. Daddy ideas. And the next thing Tana knew, she'd be having to explain why Chase wasn't going to come live with them. Been there, done that, and as painful as the breakups had been for her, they were even harder for Lindsey.

It was better to have the uncomfortable conversation now instead of an agonizing one later.

The washer finished filling, and the wash cycle kicked into high gear. Tana had been standing there long enough for “Let It Go” to start playing in the living room. Lindsey sang along with it, her voice high and clear. She had a natural talent.

Maybe tonight wasn't a good night to break the news. There would be plenty of time tomorrow. For now, she wanted to listen to her daughter sing and share in the joy Lindsey brought to life.

TANA

Tana stood in the middle of Chase's driveway, looking up at the luxury chalet he called home. It was really something else. Huge picture windows dominated the front of the log home, and all of it looked like it had been lovingly maintained for as long as it had been on the property.

The front door was painted a deep forest green complimenting the natural exterior and there was a large wreath hanging there that was bigger than Lindsey. The door swung open, and Chase stepped out. *Crap*. She'd meant to knock like a normal person, and here she was, staring at his house from the driveway.

"Hey," he called out. "Did you need a ride somewhere?"

After how well yesterday's ride went? "No, I'm good." Tana smiled, trying to project warmth and gratefulness as she was about to reject his kind offer. "I actually came to talk to you."

Chase grinned, and desire heated her core. She'd already been warm from her ski lesson and the walk to Chase's house, but now she felt like she'd curled up in front of a crackling fire. No. *No*. That was not the kind of feeling she was supposed to entertain.

Chase stepped out onto the porch and held open the door. "Well, come on in then. Heat's getting out." He *winked*. The teasing gesture felt so natural Tana had to swallow a belly laugh.

She hurried onto the porch and went inside, Chase right behind her. The high-ceilinged foyer was bright with natural light

streaming down from a skylight. Tana caught a glimpse of the interior beyond—a wide-open living room with floor-to-ceiling windows and a leather couch that looked so soft it practically begged her to take a nap.

Tana spun around, knocking into Chase, her hand going to his chest. Hard and muscled. She jerked back, heat rushing to her cheeks. She hadn't realized he'd stepped closer.

He put out a hand to steady her. "Did you remember an errand you have to get to?" His teasing smile made her want to melt into the floor. "Because your car should be okay, but if you liked mine better—"

"No, no." She caught her breath, taking a step back. His teasing wasn't doing anything to ease her nerves or help her focus. "I came to talk to you about your offer to give Lindsey ski lessons. She can't. Take lessons from you, that is." Her nerves were messing with her brain and any chance at coherent thought.

Chase pushed a hand through his hair. "Oh, didn't you know?" A hint of sarcasm laced his voice. "I was a professional skier. I'm probably overqualified to teach her, so you don't have to worry that I don't have the skills."

"I also have the skills. I *am* an instructor." It sounded a little defensive, which was not how she'd meant to sound. An old fear beat behind her rib cage, somewhere near her heart. "I could teach her anything she needs to know about skiing, but she won't be learning. She can't."

"She can't? Why not?" He looked genuinely confused.

"Because she has a neural weakness in her right leg." Tana felt the same ache in her throat that she had five years before when the issue had first been diagnosed. An over-interventionist neuro-orthopedic doctor had insisted that Lindsey wear an uncomfortable brace, and her little girl had cried every time she had to force her to wear it. "Her doctors have never been able to find an explanation for it, but what it means for Lindsey is that her right leg will always be weaker than her left leg. If she pushes herself too far, it's hard to bear weight on it the next day. Skiing would be too risky."

Chase blew out a breath. “Well, first off, I didn’t even notice a weakness.” He straightened his back and met her eyes. “I can understand why you’d be nervous. I really do. I just have a different perspective on what it means for Lindsey.”

Tana’s mouth went dry. *I know my daughter better than you.* She cleared her throat and pressed on, determined to at least hear him out. “I’d love to hear it if you have the time.”

“I’ve got my own injury.” Chase shrugged, gesturing to his left leg. “The one thing I hated most after it happened was all the people who wanted to tell me what I can or can’t do. I had more than enough people telling me I’d never win a competition again, and not enough people trying to encourage me to move forward. They acted like winning was all that mattered. It seems to me that all Lindsey hears is what she can’t do.”

Guilty. “How would you know that?”

“Because of how excited she is to take ski lessons and yet, she’s never skied. She’s living at a world-class ski resort, and her mom hits the slopes every day. And she’s only allowed to watch. Tough thing to accept for a kid without an opportunity to try and see for herself.”

“That’s not what I’m doing. Skiing is my work—”

“Really? So, that smile I see on your face when you’re out there with your students is fake?” He rubbed the side of his head making his hair stand up like he had bedhead and Tana fisted her hands to keep from reaching up to straighten it out. “From my perspective, she and I have some of the same issues. I think the lessons would be good for her. Let her spread her wings a little bit and at least try to see what she can handle. You can’t keep her in a cocoon all her life, never letting her experience the thrill of victory, no matter how small.”

Chase was right—she’d limited Lindsey’s activities all her life in hopes of keeping her safe. “It’s the agony of defeat I’m worried about. I don’t want anything to happen to her. If she pushes too hard and her leg gives out on the slopes, she could get hurt. I’d never forgive myself.”

“But you want her to be independent, right?” There was no sting behind Chase’s words. “One day, she’ll have to leave home and try new things and fend for herself. The ski lessons might help her with that. In fact, they *will* help her with that. It’s my personal guarantee.”

She’d come here to say no—to turn down the offer and disconnect from Chase. But now, Tana found herself battling the urge to lean against him, wanting to press her forehead to his chest and breathe.

“—few runs.” She’d been caught up thinking about what she wanted to do with Chase, that she’d missed what he said.

“What?”

“What about a trial run?” The corner of Chase’s mouth turned up in a smile. “You let her take a few lessons with me, and if it doesn’t work out, we can stop. I’ll keep a close eye on her and watch for any issues, I promise. But if it *does* work out, then she’s learning from the very best. Aside from you, obviously. You’re great with the kids.”

“Nice try. I must say, you’re very convincing,” Tana said, as she mulled over his words. She was seriously considering taking him up on the offer.

“Hey, I meant what I said. But I do think it’s easier for someone to take lessons from a person they don’t know. That’s just my experience.” Chase looked down at his watch, then back up at Tana. “How about we meet up on Sunday, or whatever your next day off is. You can stick around and watch to make sure Lindsey’s doing okay. Deal?” Chase stuck out his hand.

To her utter astonishment, she took his hand and shook it. “Deal.” Her own reservations clamored for attention, but for once, she wanted to give Lindsey a chance to do something she’d always wanted to do. *Ski*. “Thank you.” Tana squared her shoulders and brushed past Chase, heading for the door. “I’ve got to get back for my next lesson. But I’ll see you tomorrow. *We’ll* see you tomorrow.”

“Let me get the door for you.” Chase reached around her for the handle, bringing their bodies close together. “And I want you to know that I meant what I said. If you come to the conclusion that it’s too dangerous for Lindsey, or she starts having problems, you can stop the lessons any time.”

Chase was so close that Tana couldn’t help but tip her face up toward him. God, he smelled good. Like cedar and expensive cologne. She could appreciate the blue of his eyes streaked with silver. Eyes that were currently fastened on her lips. A shiver of pleasure moved through her.

His gaze drifted back to hers. Tana forgot how to breathe, the hunger in his eyes the only thing that existed at that moment. She took a tiny step forward, and all the sound reasoning not to do what she was thinking, disappeared.

Chase leaned in, closing the distance between them. “I want to kiss you. Do you trust me?”

She was so close, but at the last moment, she panicked. “I don’t know,” she whispered and took a big step back. “I’d need to think about that, too.” Tana whirled away and fled, leaving him standing there. She didn’t dare turn around, or her resolve to leave might vanish.

TANA

The lost and found at Elk Lodge was a fantastic place for Tana to score the much-needed ski jacket for Lindsey on such short notice. Company policy allowed employees to sort through the after-sixty-day box before the items were donated to a local charity, and she intended to take advantage of the rule.

The actual container was a massive chest carved from birch. Tana liked to run her fingers over the decorations on the front of it, something she'd discovered during her first week working for the Elkin family. Lots of well-to-do families vacationed at Elk Lodge, and inevitably they left some of their clothes behind.

Linda, the secretary, poked her head into the room. "Hey, Tana. Hope you find something good because that box is overrun with stuff. I've got to run upstairs. Just don't grab anything with the name *Emily* on it. She loses things so often that we try to set them aside for the next visit, and her mother hasn't been in to check yet."

"I'll make sure. Talk to you later." Tana started to dig through the chest, piece by piece, searching for the perfect coat.

Bingo. She pulled out a purple jacket that looked brand new and would fit Lindsey.

"Did one of your students lose something?" Chase's voice sent a shockwave of embarrassment through her.

Tana's cheeks blazed, and she yanked the jacket guiltily to her chest. She'd walked away from him when their lips were

inches apart, as if she didn't really want to kiss Chase. Except she *did*. She wanted desperately to know how it felt to have his lips brush against hers and for his tongue to—

Oh, *stop*. She hadn't done anything wrong. Tana lifted her chin and turned to face him, who stood in the doorway watching her. "No, they didn't. I was looking through the lost and found for a ski jacket for Lindsey. I don't have the time or the money to go shopping before her lesson with you."

"Well, if you find one, make sure it doesn't have the name *Emily* on it." He grinned.

Tana's mouth twitched as she fought back a laugh. "Oh, so you heard?" In the past two days alone, Emily had reported to her she'd lost a set of ski gloves, a pair of snow pants—*how?* — and a change purse. Tana hadn't known girls still carried change purses—they seemed like an artifact from her own childhood.

"I heard." Chase smiled, too, and suddenly it felt illicit to be having a conversation with him about a guest at the resort.

She shouldn't be gossiping about guests with Chase—a bad idea on so many levels. Especially when she was picking through the lost and found. Tana took another look at the jacket, arranging her face into what she hoped was a serious expression.

Chase's eyes followed hers, then strayed to the chest behind her. "Let me buy her a new one in the ski shop."

Tana tensed. "No, you don't need to do that."

"Why not? I don't mind. And if there's nothing here, I could run into town and find her something while you take care of your lessons."

Tana clutched at the jacket. "Seriously, this is fine." The fancy ski shops would cost a fortune, not that it would make any difference to Chase. This was precisely why she couldn't get involved with him. They were from two different worlds. "She's growing so quickly. We'll make do with what we have."

Chase pressed his lips together, and an awkwardness crept in around the beat of silence. “Are you...satisfied with your pay rate working here? Because if it’s not good enough, I’ll speak with the family about upping salaries across the board. It wouldn’t be out of line. We want to make sure we hire and maintain the best and that means paying people what they’re worth.” He caught Tana’s eyes again, and she had to catch her breath.

She made herself meet Chase’s eyes. “The income and benefits you offer here are fantastic. I just learned the hard way that if you can scrimp and save for a rainy day, you should do it.” Tana sighed. “You know, I’d really rather be hitting the slopes and refreshing my skills. I haven’t done any work on the moguls or hills in quite a while, and I’m getting rusty. Not the best look for a ski instructor.”

“I could help you out with that. Want a free lesson?”

Chase’s words cut into Tana’s skin, followed by a burst of irritation. When Tana had found out she was pregnant, her sperm donor, also known as her ex, had immediately offered to make an appointment for an abortion. From that moment on, Tana was determined to provide for her daughter, and she had. She wore that success like a badge of honor.

Chase didn’t know any of this but that didn’t stop her defensive feelings or her angry response that Chase, a hot former ski champion wearing shoes that cost more than her whole outfit, was helping her dig for a used ski jacket and offering her *free* skiing lessons. Tana hadn’t asked for any help—not from Chase, and not from anybody here. She was fine on her own. She had to be.

“I didn’t ask for a lesson, but if I wanted one, I’d pay for it,” she said, her voice verging on a snap, as she became defensive. “Just like I *could* afford new clothes if I wanted them. I’m just saving every penny I can for Lindsey. Emergencies happen all the time, and if we make it through okay, that money will go toward her college.” Tana’s face heated. This shouldn’t be such a big deal.

Except it was. Because depending on someone else never worked out. Something always happened.

Chase straightened, tipping a handful of clothes back into the chest. “You know,” he said gently, “I wasn’t offering you lessons as charity. My work for the afternoon can wait a while, that’s all I meant. Besides, it’s not like I *can* ski with you—just dole out advice.”

Tana swallowed a tight lump in her throat. She’d been fighting for a long time to make a good life for herself and for Lindsey. It hadn’t always been easy. What *was* it about Chase that made her feel so defensive about not having a lot of money? She worked with rich people every day. She didn’t have time to figure it out now, especially not with him looking so attractive as he stared intently at her waiting for an answer.

Something unlocked in her chest, way down deep. One run down the hills while Lindsey was in school. What was the harm? And if it helped Chase reconnect with the sport he loved so much, all the better. Just because he didn’t ski, didn’t mean he couldn’t help others. “Okay.” She nodded, pleased to see Chase’s eyes light up, which made her agreement that much better. “Let’s go.”



Forty-five minutes later, Tana came to a stop at the bottom of Elk Lodge’s most challenging run, where Chase waited for her wearing a sturdy pair of snow boots. He might have an injured leg, but he still looked incredible in his snow gear, like a model who had stepped off the pages of *Ski Magazine*. That made sense—Chase *had* been a model in *Ski Magazine*. A face like his made every woman in the world want to buy magazines with him on the cover.

“You’re cutting it a little too close on the moguls, but your balance is killer.” Chase ran through a couple of other pointers—*real* pointers—and Tana lifted her goggles away from her eyes to look at him. It felt so *sexy*, having him assess her like this. Tana couldn’t quite catch her breath, and it wasn’t from

the trip down the mountain. “Keep an eye on the straightaways, and you could be a champion.”

“I’m not going to be a champion, but thanks for the kind words,” she said, and she meant it. Disappointment needled at her. She hadn’t wanted a free lesson in the first place, and now she didn’t want it to end. “Thank you, we should do this again sometime,” she said, stepping closer to give him a kiss on the cheek by way of thanks.

Chase turned his head, and her lips landed on his mouth instead. “I agree, but I also think we should do something else now.” He grinned, his eyes twinkling. “How about a drink?”

The man was incorrigible, but it made her heart dance a merry tune. Twenty minutes later, they slipped into a booth at the back of the Alpine-themed bar, where the menus were held in a holder shaped like the main lodge. The vintage Christmas decorations complemented the theme making her feel as if they were in some sort of Christmas movie. The Elkin family pulled out all the stops at Christmas. All the artwork on the wall had been wrapped like gifts with silver and gold paper, and a tree in the corner glowed with multicolored lights and gold ribbon. All of it went together seamlessly, but then it should. Linda had told her they always hired a decorator.

Tana took a sip of her beer, trying to decide what to talk about.

“Has Lindsey always wanted to ski, or is this a relatively new thing?” Chase made the decision easy. He wanted to talk about her daughter. One of Tana’s favorite subjects.

“Definitely not new. She’s wanted to ski ever since she learned to walk.” Tana cradled her glass in her palms and leaned in closer. “Not just an average skier, a great skier. Like you, in case you couldn’t tell.”

“I *can* tell.”

They both laughed.

Tana felt comfortable enough to ask the question on her mind. “Is it hard? Not being able to ski anymore, I mean.”

Chase’s gaze grew distant. “Yes. This past year has been rough and then coming back here...” His voice trailed off and he

stared into his ale. “It’s been a struggle, but at the same time, it’s made me slow down and take stock of my life.” He took a deep breath and exhaled slowly as if the weight of the world were on his shoulders. “I have thought about leaving Elk Lodge. Moving away and going somewhere that doesn’t remind me of what I’ve lost.”

“Oh, wow.”

“Yeah.” Chase took a long drink of his beer. “It’s tough having to adjust your expectations after something happens. You know what I mean?”

“I do.” Of course Tana did. Life had dealt her plenty of adjusted expectations that started long before she ever found out she was pregnant.

“But at the same time, I know I can’t stay here forever.” Chase’s blue eyes lingered on hers, and Tana looked down at her beer to hide her blush. “I want to spend the holidays with my family, but then I need something else.”

Chase was only beginning to come out of what seemed like a depression over his ski accident. Another good reason this wasn’t the best time for them to explore their attraction. He didn’t even know what he wanted in life. And yet—his determination to move forward with his life drew Tana to him.

“It’s difficult,” she said after a minute. “Things happen. All you can do is roll with it.”

“I could have been better.” Chase winked, his grin a good sign.

“You? I don’t believe it,” Tana scoffed, playing along with him.

He shrugged. “I guess we’ll never know.” Chase laughed, and Tana felt herself falling into his laughter headfirst. Heart-first. Enjoying his company was a risk.

She wiped the smile off her face and straightened. “Listen, I don’t think we should...continue this...umm, this,” she waved her hand back and forth between them, “whatever it is that’s going on between us.”

Chase leaned back in the booth. “Why not?” he asked, one eyebrow cocked. “It was just a simple kiss.”

There was nothing simple about it—not to Tana. “It wasn’t a *full* kiss,” she pointed out.

“Right. And why not?” Chase raised his eyebrows. “I wouldn’t have minded a real, honest-to-god kiss instead of a three-quarters kiss.”

“We can’t.” Tana couldn’t keep the laugh out of her voice. “A three-quarters kiss?” Ridiculous.

“I’d say we can.”

“It’s inappropriate. I have a second-round interview coming up soon with your brother Jonas for the ski director position.”

Chase looked pleased and maybe even a little smug, which Tana had to admit was a good look on him. Everything was a good look on him, which was what made everything so hard. It was hard not to talk to him. It was hard *to* talk to him.

“I’ve got something to admit also. I was put in charge of sorting through the external applicants. We got way more than anticipated. People are *really* interested in this job. But Jonas and I split up the work. I have nothing to do with internal applications. Honestly, Tana, if it was up to me, you’d already have the job. From what I’ve seen, you’d be great at it. But the final decision is up to Jonas and my grandmother.”

“Right, of course it is. But wouldn’t people wonder if I got the job after we’d been talking?”

Chase shrugged. “If I must choose between talking to you or vetting applicants, I choose talking to you. Jonas can handle it on his own.”

Tana looked at him, the backdrop of snow-covered hills and gorgeous pine trees perfect for him. Chase was not making things easy. Flirting with him could only be a temporary thing, especially since he was talking about leaving. But flirting with him could also be a permanent mistake. If things ended badly, she’d be the one left behind looking bad to her coworkers and her bosses long after he left.

“That’s good to know.” Tana smiled and took one last drink of beer. She stood, their time together at an end. “I’ve got to run. See you around, Chase. And thanks for the beer.”

CHASE

Thursday afternoon, Chase stood at the bottom of the hill next to the lodge. Lindsey came down the bunny slope with a confidence he usually saw in older skiers, and not someone who'd only had a handful of lessons. He went forward to meet her at the bottom of the slope. One of the other employees—a junior instructor—accompanied her to the bottom of the hill.

“You look great out there.” He and Lindsey high-fived. “Next time make your turns bigger and wider. It’ll give you more control coming down the hill.”

Lindsey screwed up her lips. “But I want to go *fast* down the hill.”

“Speed comes later.” He patted the top of her helmet. “When you get on the harder slopes, you’ll need to be in control more than you’ll need to go fast. So do two more runs *slow*, and then we’ll talk about going a little faster.” He remembered what Tana had said. “Not too much faster, though. You still need to be able to stop.”

“Okay!” Lindsey skied off toward the chairlift, the back of her new fluorescent pink jacket bright in the sun. Unable to resist, he’d bought one at the resort ski shop and delivered it in person. Tana had reluctantly allowed her daughter to accept the gift, but it wasn’t like he’d given her the heads-up so she could say no.

Best of all, Lindsey’s lessons were going quite well. She’d taken to the skis easily. He only wished he could go with her.

Frustration flashed across his chest, watching Lindsey head up the hill with the junior teacher.

Memories tormented him, knowing as he watched the skiers face the challenges of the slopes that they were moments of sheer joy he'd never get back. The exhilaration of the wind rushing his face.

Chase didn't belong at Elk Lodge the way he had as a kid. That part of his life was over. And the other truth, lurking in the back of his mind, was that dreams like the one he'd had inevitably led to heartbreak. They always did, even simple dreams. Like the one of his parents around to see him grow up. That hadn't worked out either; the crushing pain of their deaths still haunted him.

As Lindsey went back to the top, Tana came down the front of the slope with a little girl at her side, the two of them matching movements. An old familiar excitement coursed through him, watching Tana ski. The two of them slowed down at the end of the slope and raised their arms into the air. The girl beamed, so proud of herself.

He'd been right to recommend private lessons with Tana to the girl's family. While the little girl was doing okay with the group lessons, she was easily distracted and from what he could see, she was flourishing with one-on-one instruction. Definitely a win-win for all of them—Tana would be the beneficiary of their generous tips, and their daughter would get the attention she needed with private ski lessons. Chase had to wonder if the only reason the Cadwells came to Elk Lodge was to flaunt all their new possessions, like the diamond tennis bracelet the father had bought the girl. Chase could buy expensive things, too, but sticking them in people's faces like it was nothing was an arrogance he couldn't stand. Real wealth didn't need to show itself off.

Chase hadn't seen the jacket as an over-the-top gift, but perhaps to Tana, it had been. He'd do well to keep that in mind going forward.

Lindsey came down the hill making smooth wide turns as Tana headed up the hill for one last run. Coming to a stop next

to Chase, she too turned to watch her mother as she began her descent down with the little girl.

“There’s my mom,” Lindsey said, pointing in Tana’s direction. “She’s a really good skier.”

“I agree. And clearly, you take after her.”

Lindsey beamed at the praise. “Thanks. Someday, I’m going to be just like her. *And you,*” Lindsey added, before rushing to meet her mother.

“Hey, hon!” Tana stepped out of her skis and threw her arms around Lindsey. “How did it go?” she asked, glancing up at him.

“She nailed it.” Lindsey had a fearlessness that reminded him of himself at her age.

“Megan!” Lindsey thrust a hand in the air and waved to a friend nearby. The young girl ran to meet up with Lindsey like they hadn’t seen each other in forever. Before long, two other friends joined them, followed by their parents. Within a minute, the parents had all agreed to take the girls to the bonfire ring, where a fire was perpetually lit during the winter season. Staff members were stationed there all day with hot chocolate and marshmallows to roast, and it was a favorite activity of the families at the resort.

Chase nodded his head in Lindsey’s direction. “Want to put the skis away?”

Tana took in the scene, eyes bright. “Looks like I’ve got a few minutes.”

She started toward the ski-rental building, but Chase stopped her. “We’ll go around back and put up your skis in the employee section ourselves. Looks like they are busy with the after-lunch rush.”

The section in the back, known as the shed, housed rows of equipment belonging to the family and the ski instructors. They could all stash their gear here, rather than hauling it back and forth from home every day. Chase reached the double doors first and pulled one open, allowing Tana to enter.

Her arm brushed across the front of his chest. “Oh, excuse me,” Tana said, as he stepped in behind her.

“No problem. There’s not a ton of room back here.” The narrow hallway was lined with racks for skis and poles, the boots stowed beneath.

Tana found an empty spot on the wall just as he spotted one on the opposite side where he could put Lindsey’s equipment. They maneuvered around each other in a careful dance, trying to put up the equipment without knocking into each other.

When he was finished, he found Tana standing in his path. They hadn’t spent much time together the past few days, and he had a suspicion she was avoiding him. He missed her and wanted to spend time with her. And here she was.

“Need something?”

“I just wanted to say, while we had a minute—” Tana pulled her hat off, flicking her dark hair away from her face. Chase’s heart stuttered. *Gorgeous*. “Thanks for working with Lindsey. Her teacher called yesterday to tell me how she’s been telling stories about her time with you. Evidently, she has all the kids enthralled with stories about how great you are.” She laughed a little, and he wanted to capture the sound in a bottle and keep it forever.

He thought of the almost-kiss and the thank-you kiss, her lips a breath away from his. This time he wanted more.

Chase took a step closer to Tana. She was irresistible, and the hallway was narrow. He wanted the distance between them to get smaller and smaller until it was nothing at all. “You’re welcome. You both looked so *happy* out there, and that’s all the reward I need. It’s clear you and Lindsey love skiing.”

“We do. *I* do,” she said softly.

“Honestly, Tana, that’s what I find so amazing about you. You’re all in on everything. Your love for your daughter is like...it’s like nothing I’ve ever seen. You tackle everything head-on.” His voice had gone gruff, and there was nothing he could do to stop it. Out in front, the employees’ voices rose and fell, but all Chase cared about was Tana.

Inches apart, the tension between them was thick, their heated gaze making him forget how hot it was in the cramped space in their winter jackets.

Tana's breath came light and fast. "Chase." The whisper of her words landed against his lips. "Are you going to kiss me, or not?"

Chase felt like she'd opened the gate at the top of a mountain run and set him free to soar over the hills. He went in for the kiss the way he'd attacked a thousand ski runs in his life—hard, fast, and focused.

Tana's lips were cold, but her tongue was hot where it battled his. He kissed her deeply, exploring her like he might not get another chance. He put an arm around her waist and backed her into the ski racks. The only thing that mattered was kissing her. Tana tasted sweet, her mouth holding a hint of caramel. His whole body leaned into the sensation, heart pounding, tongue searching, lips desperate for hers.

"Chase." His grandmother's voice called out his name like a reprimand.

Tana jerked away from him. He caught a glimpse of her red face and then her back as she ran faster than he could have imagined toward the front of the building, leaving him standing there. *But not alone.*

He didn't want to turn around, but he did. His grandmother stood in the narrow hallway, her eyebrows raised in question at what she'd witnessed.

"Hello, Gran." Chase's brain was racing as he tried to think of a way to explain, but it was hard to focus. His skin still hummed from the kiss, goosebumps tugging at his skin. "I was —" There *was* no explaining it. He looked her straight in the eye. "Well. You saw."

His grandmother surveyed him with the hint of a smile in her eyes but a serious set to her face. "I saw you entering the building and came to ask about something. Was that fleeing woman Tana? Aren't you working with her daughter on ski lessons?"

“What? No, that wasn’t Tana.” he said with a straight face. Chase knew how important this job was to her and didn’t want to risk her position, even though he wanted more. Much more. “And I’ve taken her daughter out for a couple of sessions. Not a big deal. It’s actually been fun.”

His grandmother frowned at him, then reached out and smacked his arm. “Don’t you go making trouble for people, Chase.”

He raised his hands in the air, ready to say that he *wasn’t*, but his grandmother sighed. A wistfulness came into her eyes, and when she looked back at Chase, he thought he caught a few tears gathered there. She blinked them away. Maybe he’d imagined them after all.

“I’m not going to.” The last thing he wanted was to upset her, given everything she was dealing with. He did *not* want her to worry about the resort. But he also couldn’t pretend it wasn’t Tana. “I like her, but that won’t happen again.”

“Life is short. Just be smart and maintain appropriate boundaries.” He’d wanted to reassure her, but somehow he hadn’t found the right words.

Instead, his grandmother had taken the lead, just like when he was a young boy and being called out for some wrongdoing. All his emotions twisted up with one another, becoming indistinguishable. The only thing he *could* focus on fully was how good it felt to kiss Tana.

She put a hand on Chase’s elbow. “I’m happy you’re back. Do you know that? It’s obvious you’re feeling more at home *and* that you’re falling for someone special.” Her eyes were shining again. “You’ve seemed so lively the last few days. I hope you’ll consider...staying here permanently.”

Buzzkill. He couldn’t stay; the memories were just too painful. The noises of the resort fell away, leaving him in a roaring silence. “I’ll think about it.” It was the only answer he could give without hurting her.

“Good.” His grandmother headed out, but Chase stayed behind in the quiet.

For a fleeting instant, he imagined bringing Tana to his home permanently, and Lindsey. He imagined how it would feel to hear their voices echoing through all the rooms that were normally silent. He imagined Christmases and birthdays, singing carols, opening gifts. He imagined a quick run to the lodge in the winters and climbing the lush green hills in the summers.

And then he blinked it all away, the images replaced by others. Like the moment he crashed into the gate during the giant slalom. The agonizing pain that pierced his leg and knee and the realization that not only was his career over, but he'd never ski professionally again. He'd known it was bad then, and he knew it now, too.

Elk Lodge held too many memories, and living here was not an option.

TANA

Tana couldn't get the kiss out of her head.

She hadn't been kissed like that in a long time, if ever. And as she went through her lessons the next day, it had crept into all the quiet moments. Her skis cut against the snow and wind *whooshed* over her ears, setting her at ease. The familiar motions freed her mind to think of other, more exciting things. Like Chase's lips on hers, firm and wanting. Like how close their bodies had been, separated only by a few bulky layers of snow gear. The hard ridge of the skis against her back when he pressed her up against the rack.

Tana had worked in a lot of places that involved equipment racks over the course of her life, but nothing so sexy had ever happened near one. Nothing that sexy had ever happened, period, and it was because Chase himself was over-the-top attractive. The breeze seemed hot against her cheeks when she thought of him. If she kept this up, she'd have to press her face into a snowbank to cool down. That wouldn't look great to her employers.

One thing already didn't look great to them—getting caught kissing Chase in the shed in the first place. And by his grandmother. Her face went hotter, and Tana moved to the side of the hill and took a side path along one of the bigger, longer slopes where there was more open hillside. She couldn't decide if she'd done the right thing. Running away probably hadn't been the best course of action, but the options had been sparse. Talking to Elin Elkin didn't seem possible in the

moment, but if she'd really wanted to prove herself worthy of a promotion, she should have...

What? Shaken her hand? Put on a bright smile and pretended the kiss had never happened? But she'd *liked* that kiss. She'd liked it a lot, even though she was up for a promotion and Chase was the last man she should be kissing.

She didn't regret the kiss. Tana made a quick turn and held her arms out, letting the wind stream around her clothes. She *wouldn't* regret the kiss. The main embarrassment was obviously not greeting Elin like any other employee would. Somehow, she'd need to fix that.

But for now, Tana was more concerned about her aching muscles. Perhaps it was her lack of concentration, or just a careless skier, but either way, the fall she'd taken today during a lesson left her sore. One of the kids had cut her off from a strange angle, and her body hadn't reacted the way she wanted. She'd gone off the edge of a gentle jump and landed on her side, one ski underneath her. Her back was probably going to be bruised. A hot bath sounded heavenly.

Tana headed toward the parking lot. She spotted Chase just ahead, headed toward the path that led to his house. More like limping his way along. Something was wrong.

"Hey," she called out, her body lighting up at the memory of the kiss, as she tried to catch up to him, a move hindered by her aching back. "You okay?" she asked, joining him.

Chase grimaced. "I spent all morning working through applications, and afterward I had physical therapy. It makes things worse before it gets better." He shrugged as if it were no big deal. But Tana knew it was.

"We have something in common then. Except instead of physical therapy, I fell on the slopes. It's going to get worse before it gets better." She forced a smile on her face.

Chase laughed, but the firm set of his mouth told her he was worried. "How bad is it? What hurts?" His eyes traced over her body, and Tana looked away.

“I’ll be fine. Other than a big bruise more than likely. And a bruised ego to match. I’m going home to soak my pain away in a hot bath.”

Chase stopped short and looked around. “Where’s Lindsey?”

“Lindsey?” Tana took a deep breath. “She’s staying with a friend tonight, and working on a school project, so I’m free.” *Free*. That sounded like she was asking him for a date. Chase stopped walking. “I mean—”

“Don’t go home then. Come to my place. I’ve got a hot tub—it’ll be way better for your back.” His easy grin made her want to say yes.

“Are you sure that’s a good idea? After... what happened in the shed?”

“Sure it is.” Chase held his hands up. “Look, I’m sorry that my grandmother walked in on us. I wish she hadn’t. But I don’t feel bad about kissing you. We didn’t do anything wrong.”

“Are you sure about that?”

Chase gave her a look. “Of course I’m sure. I wanted to kiss you, Tana. I’ve been wanting to kiss you ever since the three-quarters kiss.” The corner of his mouth lifted, and she was taken yet again by how good he looked when he was happy—or at least when he was smiling. “And from the way you kissed back, you wanted it, too.”

“I did,” she admitted. “But I’m still not convinced that we didn’t break some...some long-standing rule. You’re a part of the Elkin family.”

“I am.” Chase put on a serious tone. “And in the Elkin family, we only kiss princesses and duchesses, women of the highest royal standing—”

“Don’t tease.” *Even though I like it when you tease*. “We can’t keep up all the kissing.”

Chase met her gaze, keeping his serious expression in place. It only made Tana want to laugh more. “We don’t have to kiss in the hot tub if that’s what you’re saying.”

“We’re *not* going to kiss in the hot tub.”

“Right. But you have to admit—it would feel great on those muscles.”

“Which? The kissing or the hot tub?” She grinned at him and then caught her breath when he leaned in close to her.

“I’ve been told that my kissing is downright magical, but I’ve never cured anyone of injuries. I’m willing to try, though. You know, for science.”

Tana blushed as her thoughts took a naughtier turn. *No*. Given her working situation and the attraction between them, it would be too dangerous. It was one thing to make out with Chase in the ski shed. Quite another to casually accept an invitation to strip down and get relaxed in his private hot tub, away from prying eyes. “Sure,” Tana choked out, surprising herself with her response. “But I do need to go home first to get my bathing suit. I can’t very well go naked, now can I?”

“You could. I wouldn’t mind.” His devilish grin reinforced that this was a bad decision, but she wouldn’t chicken out now.

The truth was, her back did ache, and her leg muscles were tight. She had a full roster of classes tomorrow and needed to be at her best. A hot tub sounded perfect.

Back at her cottage Tana rifled through a box at the back of her closet. She’d thrown the summer things inside when it was time to move. *Do not get attached to him*. She pulled out a cute red bikini and threw it back into the box. *No way*. A polka-dotted number from three summers ago was another reject. *Not now, not ever*. Tana yanked out her oldest suit—a boring black one-piece.

Perfect.

On the way to his house, she tried to convince herself she could do this. It would be okay. Couldn’t she just appreciate his good looks and charming personality without having *feelings*? Note to self: no feelings. Her promise to herself didn’t do anything to quell the sense of impending doom.

Well, not doom. More a vague worry that she was about to make a huge mistake.

Chase opened the door before she could knock only wearing a pair of blue swim trunks. Tana's heart did a smooth flip. He looked *good*. His body was all taut muscles and creamy swaths of skin that she so didn't want to taste.

"Hey there. Glad you came back and didn't chicken out," Chase said, his teasing grin making her heart race. "Hot tub's ready."

"Well, I'm not. I still have to get into my suit." Tana followed him inside. She ducked into his guest bathroom to change and found her hands were shaking. This was *just* a friendly visit to his hot tub, and nothing else. *Nothing*. When she came out, she found Chase in the kitchen, leaning against the island. His face lit up when he saw her.

"It's out on the back deck," he said, gesturing toward the back door. "Ladies first."

"No way." Tana dropped her clothes on a low bench by the back door. "Owners first."

"Suit yourself." Chase laughed. She couldn't take her eyes off him as he padded across the deck and stepped into the hot tub. He let out a groan of pleasure. "Water's perfect. Come on in." He held out a hand to her.

Tana felt drawn to him by the force of gravity. She crossed the deck, the icy cold against her feet making her move faster. Taking his hand like it wasn't a big deal, she let him help her down the steps into the welcoming warmth of the water. The heat scalded the bottoms of her cold feet.

Within thirty seconds, the stinging stopped, and she tipped her head back, letting out a little moan. "Okay, you were right. This is good."

"You're only in up to your calves," Chase prompted. "Imagine how it'll feel when the water's up to your shoulders."

He was right a second time—when she sank down into the water it began to dull the lingering aches and pains from her day on the slopes. Tana leaned her head against the headrest, letting the tension go out of her muscles. Something at the core of her unlocked.

“What’s on your mind, Tana?”

She lifted her head and peered at Chase. He was stretched out on the opposite side of the hot tub, muscular arms on full display. The bubbling water obscured his abs, which was a shame. But she could be an arms woman. In fact, she was all in on them now.

Your incredible body. That’s what was on Tana’s mind, not that she’d tell him that. “I’ve been thinking about Lindsey’s ski lessons.” It was a safe topic. “I don’t know if she’s ready for more lessons at the level you’re trying to take her. Maybe you’re moving too fast.”

“We’re still on the bunny slope!” Chase laughed. “She’s improving so much every day. By the end of the season, she’ll be ready for a couple of the easier blue trails.”

Worry twisted through Tana’s gut, kept slightly at bay by the roll and tug of the water.

“That’s the thing. I’m worried Lindsey’s pushing too hard. What if her leg buckles while she’s skiing?”

Chase pushed off from his side of the hot tub and sat next to her. Tana’s skin pulled tight—goosebumps all over even in the hot water. If her hand floated up just so, just now, she’d be touching him, and—

“You know I can watch for that, right?” His eyes met hers, willing her to trust him. “I won’t push her too hard. That’s not the way I teach. You know that. You don’t teach that way either.”

“True.” she agreed. It was hard not to look at Chase’s lips when he was talking. He had full, gorgeous lips, and the memory of how they felt pressed against hers sent a shock of desire down her spine. “But she’s my daughter. I want her to be safe.”

“I want you *both* to be safe.” Chase’s eyes flicked down over Tana’s face and toward the neckline of her swimsuit. “And I want you to feel good. About everything.”

Tana moved toward Chase at the same time he moved toward her, the jets rocking them off balance and forcing them closer

together. He swept her into his lap in a single effortless move, and Tana straddled him right there in the hot tub. Giving in to the urge, she kissed him.

Hard.

Hot.

Deep.

Chase's hands slipped up around her waist. She had never been so aware of how thin bathing suits were. Almost nothing separated them except the water and a couple of flimsy layers of fabric.

Tana felt unleashed, wild—she nipped at Chase's bottom lip and traced his abs with her fingernails. Her hips opened around his, inches of water between the two of them, and then less. His tongue coaxed her mouth open and explored her. Tana's nipples peaked, hard under the hot water, and desire sped through her, pushed along with every beat of her heart. Oh, it felt good, good, so very *good*.

And too much. She could feel herself slipping, falling, sinking into him.

Tana broke the kiss with a gasp and pushed off, floating over to the other side of the hot tub and draping herself over it. A winter breeze soothed her forehead. Was she ever going to catch her breath again? Not likely. Not when Chase was like this. He was trying to help her, quietly, in his own way, without humiliating her. He'd offered ski lessons, his hot tub, and his body.

The water shifted and swirled around her. Chase came up behind her and put a hand on her shoulder, his touch lighter than the breeze.

"You okay?"

Tana put her knuckles to her teeth. *No. I'm not.* "I'm...torn. I—I'm attracted to you."

"That's a relief."

She laughed, but it did nothing to release the pressure in her heart. "Of course I'm attracted to you. You're hot." Chase got

closer, and she could feel the heat of him against her back along with the water. “But I don’t have time for a relationship. And there’s the issue that I’ve applied for a promotion in your family’s resort. It wouldn’t look good.”

Chase leaned his chin on her shoulder. “No?”

“No,” Tana said firmly. “And I’ve heard you mention more than once that you’re only going to be here temporarily. You—you have other plans for your life. You don’t know which direction you’re going to go.”

His firm body, pressed against her back, was enough to make Tana want to stay the night.

“Hmm.” The rumble of Chase’s voice vibrating across her skin and all her muscles was as familiar as it was scintillating. “I know I’m not lonely when I’m with you.” He said it so casually, like he was commenting on the weather or the pine trees surrounding his house. “We could just have a fling. It doesn’t have to be serious. Nobody would need to know about it, so it doesn’t affect anything here at the lodge. And I’m not going to leave before the holidays anyway.” His lips brushed against her neck, and Tana shivered. “Friends with benefits.”

Oh, it was so tempting. Tana’s heart ached for it. Her *body* ached for it. She turned around in Chase’s arms and put her fingertips gently to his chest, regret coursing through her. The hot tub’s jets suddenly felt strong, like they were pushing her away. “I can’t,” she whispered. “I just—I can’t. I have to go.”

Towels were stacked on a bench built into the deck, and Tana grabbed one, wrapping it around herself, and feeling like a fool.

“Tana.”

She stopped, halfway back to the sliding doors that led into the house, and turned to face him.

Chase stood in the center of the hot tub.

Don’t look at his abs. She forced herself to keep her gaze on his face.

He sat down on the far side of the tub, his arms stretched out, completely at ease. “If you change your mind, you know where to find me. Okay?”

Tana nodded. *Okay. Cool.* That’s what she should have said, but no words came. She turned and left, unsure of what to say. This had not gone at all like she’d planned or hoped.

But then honestly, it was her own fault.

She could have said yes.

CHASE

Three days later, Chase watched Lindsey fly down the hill, wishing he was out there. His body still remembered what it was like to speed down black diamonds and carve his skis into the snow to stop at the last possible second. His physical therapist said he could try, but if he did, he wasn't going to start on the bunny slope. He hadn't done one of those since he was Lindsey's age.

He was surprised that Tana had okayed all the additional lessons, and frankly, watching how quickly the little girl progressed felt damn good. Not that he could take the credit. It was all her. Her happy squeals made him smile as she whizzed by going faster than she'd ever gone before. *Man*, did she have natural talent. Her cuts were sharp and precise, and Chase marveled at how much more confident she looked on her skis.

"I'm going on the jump!" she shouted, then turned her focus back down the hill. The jump was a very mild one at the bottom of the bunny hill. *Wait*. But it was too late. Lindsey was already on the approach. She caught a little bit of air and came down with her face screwed up in concentration. And landed. She *landed*. She'd done it.

"Yes!" He was surprised at how loud he was cheering, but that was fine—Lindsey was whooping too. Joy suffused him, making everything seem like it was in new and vivid color. "You got it! You got it."

Lindsey skied over to him, hands held high, and they clashed their ski poles together.

“Mom!” she shouted. “Mom, look what I can do!” Lindsey went past Chase in a blur.

Tana had come out of the lodge in her ski boots and was waving at Lindsey. “What did you do?”

“I went over the jump!”

Seeing Tana sent Chase mentally right back to the hot tub and the roll of her hips in his hands. The slide of her bathing suit against his chest, the way her mouth yielded to his. He shook himself out of memory lane. Lessons were *not* for fantasizing about Tana. Period. He came to a stop beside the mother and daughter pair in mid-conversation.

Tana frowned.

“—do it again? I have to show you. Can I, Chase?”

“That’s up to your mom.” He’d seen the worry in Tana’s eyes in the hot tub when she’d talked to him about Lindsey’s leg. So far, it hadn’t made a difference. “Really, Tana, she handled the little bump beautifully. All on her own.” *Maybe it’s time for her to test her limits.*

“I don’t know, Linds.” Tana’s eyes flashed in irritation as she glanced at him before turning her focus back to her daughter. “How’s your leg feeling?”

Lindsey made a face. “It’s *fine*, Mom.”

“One run,” Tana said. “One *slow* run, and then we’re going home.”

“Okay,” Chase and Lindsey said at the same time, laughing.

Chase cleared his throat and pushed off as Lindsey headed for the chairlift. Tana followed, coming to stand beside him at the bottom of the hill. “That’s the bump she went over.” He waved toward the hill.

“What bump?” Tana ground out, worry in her voice.

“*That* one.” Chase jabbed a finger at it, but she was looking in the wrong direction. He raised a hand to her cheek and gently turned her head another inch or two. “It’s barely a bump. Easy to miss.”

“Whatever. It may be small, but it’s a jump,” Tana said. “I couldn’t have pictured her skiing days ago, much less doing jumps. *Ever.*”

Chase nudged her with an elbow. “You can’t encase a kid in bubble wrap and expect her to enjoy the lesson.”

“It was only one layer of bubble wrap,” Tana joked, and a tension Chase hadn’t known he was feeling eased off. “Can you blame me?”

The two of them watched Lindsey get off the chairlift at the top of the bunny hill. She waved, the motion big and free, then started down the hill.

“Did you tell her to go on the jump?” Tana’s eyes were trained on her daughter, who was picking up speed toward the top of the hill. Still in control. Still confident.

“No. Lindsey did it all by herself.”

Tana glanced at him out of the corner of her eye. “Seems risky.”

“Well, I brought extra bubble wrap.”

Lindsey barreled down the bunny hill at top speed, heading down the side where fewer skiers were in her way. With her helmet and goggles on, Chase couldn’t see her face from this distance. But he *did* see the way she wobbled about halfway down, then again three-quarters of the way. Anxiety clutched at his throat. He wanted to run and stop her, but he’d never get to her in time.

Chase held his breath and waited. Seconds later, she approached the jump and he noticed instantly her skis weren’t straight. The angle of the tiny jump fought against Lindsey’s skis and she went down hard in a spray of snow, skis, and legs all tangled up.

He took off running, ignoring the pulling pain in his leg, his heart in his throat. He was dimly aware of Tana running next to him. All the sounds from the ski hill faded into an ominous silence. *Get up, get up.*

Lindsey hadn’t moved by the time they got there.

“Are you okay? Talk to me, Lindsey,” he said, fear gripping every inch of his body.

Tana was near tears as she held her daughter’s hand. “Lindsey, honey. Talk to mommy.”

Her eyes fluttered open. “That was *awesome*,” she whispered.

“No, it wasn’t.” Tana’s voice shook. “You took a big spill. Come on, can you get up—”

They needed to move quickly—out of the way of the other skiers. “Is everything okay? Can you wiggle your toes?” He gave her a quick assessment, making sure nothing was broken before scooping Lindsey up in his arms. The path was clear. Tana’s footsteps closed in on them a minute later.

“Let’s get her to the car.” A shake in Tana’s voice told him that she felt just as scared as he did. “Are you sure you’re okay?”

Lindsey rolled her eyes. “Mom, I’m okay. Everybody falls sometimes. Can you put me down, Chase? I want to go for another run.”

“*No*.” The forceful denial came from them both.

“I don’t think that’s a good idea. We need to get you somewhere stationary, so we can be sure you’re all right,” Chase added. It was also for his own peace of mind.

“*I am* all right,” Lindsey complained. “I don’t have a broken leg. See? My knees are fine.” She swung her heavy ski boots in Chase’s arms, putting more pressure on his bad leg. “Put me down.”

“Relax, Linds.” Tana stuck close to Chase’s side, one hand on Lindsey’s arm. “We’re going home.”

“I don’t *want* to go home. I want to stay here! Put me *down*.” Lindsey swung her legs harder, with all her might. “Chase, I’m not done skiing.”

“For today, you are,” he answered. He’d have to call someone to go out and pick up Lindsey’s skis and poles and have them returned to the rental shed.

Tana and Lindsey argued back and forth all the way to Tana's car. Chase focused on putting one foot in front of the other, while she kicked and pushed against him.

The farther they got from the ski hill, the redder Lindsey's face got. "Come *on*. I don't want to go." Clearly, she was overtired, although her alertness was more reassuring than anything. They weren't dealing with a concussion.

Chase bent and put Lindsey in the backseat of the car while Tana hopped in the front and started the ignition. He reached for the seatbelt, but Lindsey batted him away.

"I can do it myself." Her eyes met Chase's with a ferocity he recognized from Tana. "Don't touch it." The girl's face flushed, and she looked pointedly down at the belt buckle and slammed it home with a pout. Lindsey turned away from him, staring at the other window. She lifted her ski boots and kicked the back of her mom's seat.

"Knock it off, Linds." Tana's voice stayed even, but he could tell she wasn't happy. "And you need to apologize."

"Sorry," Lindsey said sullenly.

"All right," he answered her evenly. Was this what it felt like to be a dad? To do the right thing, even when the other person involved put up a fuss? To put someone else's safety ahead of everything else? It was a strange feeling, for sure. For as long as he could remember, he'd only worried about himself. And more recently, his grandmother. And now, Lindsey and Tana. The list was growing, and for once, he didn't seem to mind.

Chase hopped into the passenger seat without a word. Her leg might not be okay, after all. Tana had warned him.

Tana drove with military precision, eyes locked on the road.

He couldn't gauge her emotions, and her silence was tearing him to pieces. She had every right to be mad at him. "I'm sorry, Tana."

"Thank you." He wasn't used to this terse, clipped voice from her.

“If it helps, I can make sure she doesn’t attempt any more jumps. Maybe—”

“Not now.” She turned off the main road and into the parking area in front of her cottage.

“If you want to do fewer lessons for a while, I—” He was trying to find a win-win solution for Lindsey and Tana because one thing he knew for sure, Lindsey wouldn’t want to quit.

“We’ll talk about this later.” Finality rang in her tone. There would be no shrinking from the fact that Lindsey could have been injured because of him. And there was no way to rush this conversation—he’d have to wait.

Lindsey got out of the car and headed inside, not bothering to wait for help.

“I’m going to my room.” She crossed her arms over her chest, one hip jutting out. If Chase wasn’t so worried about her, it might have been funny—her small six-year-old frame, with such attitude. Lindsey stalked away, stopping only once to look back at them. Her eyes dared them to follow. She shut the door hard, not enough to call it a slam, but loud enough to let them know how she felt.

Chase didn’t want her out of sight, not exactly, but he desperately needed to hash this out with Tana. He took a deep breath. Never, not once in his life, had he ever felt stakes as high as these. It was a heavy weight to carry, being someone’s parent. He’d experienced a single, powerful jolt of fear out there on the ski slopes, but Tana had to deal with that kind of feeling every day. Chase struggled for the words to describe it to her—this shred of understanding he had now. Not a full understanding, of course, but—something.

“Tana...”

“Wait just a second, okay?” Tana slipped by him, kicking off her boots as she went down the hall to check on her daughter anyway.

If Tana wanted to stop ski lessons altogether, he wouldn’t blame her. He stepped out of his boots and wandered across the living room, waiting. He would do whatever it took to

make Tana feel better about this, even if it meant ending the lessons. Anything.

TANA

*Y*our safety is the most important thing to both of us. We needed to make sure you were all right. It's important to be careful when you're skiing. Tana tried out fifty different things to say to her daughter, but none of them seemed right. She'd been telling Lindsey to be careful all her life, and maybe that was the problem. Still, the instinct to shield her daughter from all possible pain was a powerful one. It didn't want to be ignored.

Tana closed Lindsey's door behind her and stepped on the jacket her daughter had thrown on the floor. "Lindsey..." She bent to pick up the carelessly discarded coat, and her eyes followed a trail of snow clothes—pants, helmet, thick socks—all the way to her daughter's twin-sized bed. She expected to find Lindsey glaring at her from the corner, but instead her daughter was curled up under her pink-and-purple comforter.

Tana crossed the room and leaned over Lindsey. Sure enough, she was fast asleep, her breathing deep with exhaustion. Lindsey's leg hadn't seemed to bother her when she walked into the house and to her room. And there were no other signs that Lindsey had been injured. Tomorrow her daughter might have to deal with extreme weakness in her bad leg, but only time would tell. It wasn't anything they hadn't dealt with before. Tana's pulse slowed, relaxing. The grip of anxiety released her.

In the quiet of Lindsey's room, she recalled Chase, strong and sexy, carrying the most important person in her life. He'd been so gentle with her. So unfazed by Lindsey's arguments. And

he hadn't even hesitated for an instant when it was time to get into the car. He'd been by her side through it all. She took a deep breath, gathered up the rest of Lindsey's snow things, and backed quietly out of the room.

Chase stood in the living area, the light from the picture window making him a manly silhouette. The line of his jaw became sharper as he watched her cross to the front closet. Her heart thudded, but it wasn't out of fear.

When Lindsey's clothes were put away, Tana joined Chase at the window. From here, the barely contained sorrow on his face was evident. He'd taken off his coat and hat, and his hair was mussed in a way that made her want to run her hands through it.

"I'm sorry, Tana. I know I said it before, but—" Chase met her eyes. "I shouldn't have encouraged her skiing. I get it." He put a hand to his heart, and Tana saw that he *did* get it—he really did. "I get why you are so protective of Lindsey. Seeing her fall..." Chase let out a breath. "My heart stopped. I've never been so scared, and it's because of me that—"

"Stop." Tana put her own hand over Chase's, there on his chest. She had to set him straight. "*I'm* the one who was wrong. I've been too overprotective. There's a difference between keeping a child safe and keeping them from living. I was trying to keep Lindsey from living on the off-chance that she'd get a few bruises and bangs."

"You sure about that? Because I'm to blame, too."

For so long, she'd tried to avoid getting hurt again. The stakes were even higher now that she had Lindsey. It was one thing to get your heart broken when you were young and single, but with her daughter in the mix...

"Some things are good enough to take risks for," she said softly, recognizing the truth.

His eyebrows shot up, the blue of his eyes stunning her all over again. Fierce, sweet anticipation flashed over her skin. Tana had a deep sense that he understood what she was trying

to tell him. It was like the last day of winter cold before spring warmth breaks, and Tana wanted to savor it.

“Some risks you *have* to take,” Chase murmured.

They both reached for each other at the same time.

Chase’s hands went to Tana’s waist, and she threw her arms around his neck, pulling him down so fast that their lips met in a sultry crash. A rush of oxytocin barreled over Tana like an avalanche. All her years of single-mom worry disappeared. They’d come back, but at this moment, she was a woman in a man’s arms. With his mouth on hers.

Kissing him back, she parted her lips to let him explore deeper, and Chase took the invitation. His hands slid down to her hips and she wanted to know what it would feel like to have his body close to hers. She couldn’t stop kissing him. *Wouldn’t*. Not this time.

“My room,” she murmured against his mouth. “Please, Chase.”

He surfaced to take one breath and pulled her down the hallway, their feet soundless on the carpet. All she could hear was the pounding of her heart and thought it might explode. She pointed to her room, eager for more.

In her bedroom, he backed against the door to close it. The *click* of the latch sounded louder than a firework, and both froze, breathing hard. Listening.

Then Tana was back kissing him. She kissed the side of his neck. The line of his shirt against bare skin. She nipped at his earlobe, which made him groan. She stifled that groan with another kiss.

They started stripping off their clothes, not wanting to waste another minute. Flannel shirt. Jeans. He was the most gorgeous man she had ever seen in her life, all lean, muscular, and *cut*.

She hadn’t paid attention when they were in the hot tub and the power in his stance covered it, but she’d worked in jobs like dance and skiing long enough to see the slight size difference in his legs. The scar on his left leg, which she

hadn't noticed before, gave her a slight pause and she worried about hurting him. It stretched from almost to his hip down to his knee and looked like a train track. He caught her looking. "It's okay. It looks worse than it feels. Promise."

When his T-shirt came off, it was her undoing and nothing else mattered. *Talk about abs.* Tana realized she was gaping at him, and especially at the thick, hard length of him. He hid nothing from her and she was there for it. For him.

Chase stepped closer, the heat of his body coming off him in waves as he took her chin in his hand. He tipped her face up to look at him. Those full lips—she wanted them back on hers. Every nerve buzzed with wanting him. It was enough electricity to start a house fire.

"Are you sure?" His deep, quiet voice stoked something low in her belly. *Desire.*

"Yes." Because the choice was obvious. Stark. Black and white. She could either risk the heartbreak of falling for someone who seemed perfect or risk living the rest of her life filled with regrets. She was *done* with regrets. Tana took Chase's hand and pulled him onto the bed.

They fell into the blankets, tugging them out of their neat arrangement. The moment her back hit the bed, Chase was on top of her. He balanced himself on his elbows and kissed her hotly. Her mouth. Her neck. Her collarbone. *Hurry, hurry,* she thought. *And slow down.*

Chase teased one of her nipples with his teeth, and she arched off the bed, her desire combusting into something superheated and pure. He moved to her other nipple and she scrabbled for him, finding purchase wherever she could on his skin. Tana spread her legs open for him, as wide as she could. She ached for him.

"I want more of you." He pulled out of her grip and slid down on the bed, his big hands holding her thighs in place. "I need to taste you."

"Chase, no, no—we don't have time, we don't—"

“I said *taste*. I’ll devour you later.” He bent his head to her most sensitive flesh and licked, one long, lingering stroke that ended on her clit. She’d been so foolish to think he was skilled at skiing more than anything else. Her thighs trembled. “So sweet,” he said, and it took all her restraint not to thread her hands through his hair, like she’d fantasized, and keep him where she wanted him.

Tana couldn’t catch her breath. She felt empty without him, needy, and she opened her mouth to tell him so. What came out instead was a whimpering moan. She fumbled in her bedside table and pulled out a box. Flipping it open, she spilled out the contents, her fingers scrambling before finally finding a condom. Tana put her hand over her mouth to stop herself from making any more noises and pushed the foil packet into Chase’s hand.

He ripped it open and rolled it on, then crawled up over her, bent his head to her neck, and pushed himself inside of her inch by inch, his breath hot on her skin. They had to hurry, but he was still finding ways to take it slow, at least for now. It was unbearably sexy. Tana rocked her hips toward him, urging him in, urging him deeper, and when their hips met, she hissed her approval.

“Hard,” she managed. “Now.”

Chase gripped the headboard, eased himself out of her, and entered again in a hard stroke. *Yes*. It was everything. He picked up the rhythm with her bucking against him.

Tana couldn’t keep her hands to herself, didn’t want to. She raked her fingernails over his chest, tested his hips with her hands, pulled him tight. Tighter. Pleasure sparked between her legs, running in a current up her spine and out to her fingertips, down to her toes. She curled her toes against the blanket and used the bed as leverage. More. Deeper. He sucked in a breath, and Tana realized she was clenching around him, knowing the white-hot force of release was almost on her. There was no stopping it—all she could do was inhale deeply and let the pleasure wash over her.

Chase cursed, the words coming out as a low, guttural noise that was all man, all pleasure. He pinned her to the bed as he came. Hard. Relentless. Her hips still tried to meet his, but there was nowhere to go. She pulsed around him.

He let his head fall to her shoulder, and Tana lay there panting against him. Slow, deep breaths. Chase stirred inside of her and raised his head to look her in the eye. “Amazing,” he breathed. He brushed his lips across her forehead and rolled to her side. He paused just long enough to send her a heated look that clearly said getting out of bed was the last thing he wanted to do.

Hazy with desire now, the space inside her bedroom was imbued with heat and courage. Tana hadn’t brought much when they moved in, hadn’t put her laundry away last week, but even the basket of clean clothes struck her as meaningful.

“Bathroom?” Chase asked, a gleam in his eye.

“Next door on the left.” As soon as she heard the bathroom door close, Tana fell against her pillow and covered her face with a clean T-shirt. That was the most incredible sex of her life. Chase was in her bathroom, freshening up, and probably putting his clothes back on. Covering up that beautiful body of his.

She needed to do the same thing—Lindsey could wake up any second. But just for a moment, Tana let herself bask in total satisfaction. It felt *so* good.

CHASE

Chase walked into Jonas's office on the main floor of the lodge with bleary eyes and an emotional hangover. Or was it a physical hangover? Whatever it was, it made his whole body pulse with the need to be back with Tana.

Jonas sat behind his desk in the office. He'd renovated the place a few years back to be a modern oasis in the middle of the Elkin Alpine-themed ski resort. He'd carried the theme straight through to Christmas—meaning that there were zero Christmas decorations in the office. No lights. No nutcrackers. Not even a miniature tree at the corner of his desk.

Jonas had his own issues with the holiday, but now wasn't the time to bring them up. After the riot of colors in the rest of the resort, Chase's eyes didn't mind the break. It just seemed a little... empty, compared to the lobby with its towering tree, tabletop decorations on every available flat surface, and garland draped everywhere else.

Jonas had been working on something, pen hovering over a stack of papers in the middle of his desk while he peered at his computer. He blinked, squinted up at Chase, and flicked off his screen. "You're up early." Jonas frowned. "Plenty of time to shave if you cared to do so."

Chase ignored the comment. The guests wanted to talk to him no matter what state his facial hair was in, and more importantly, Tana hadn't seemed to mind it last night. Chase had *far* more important things to worry about right now. Namely, the conversation he was about to have with Jonas.

“I’m growing it out for the holidays. You know, the whole sexy Santa vibe.” He smirked when his brother scowled at him before sitting down in an oversized chair in front of the desk, and ignoring the ache in his knee from overdoing it the day before. Chase tossed a folder in front of Jonas. “I can’t help you with the hiring process anymore. Here are the best ten outside applicants for the ski director position.”

Jonas glowered at the manila folder like Chase had just dropped a sack of spoiled food onto his desk. He made no move to touch it. “What’s your excuse for not finishing the job this time?”

From the set of his brother’s shoulders, Chase could tell Jonas was stressed. They were *all* stressed. It was the holiday season, and their grandmother was ill. Guilt flared in Chase’s chest. Maybe he should have put the job first, but he hadn’t, and now there was no way to undo what had been done. Not that he wanted to.

“I can’t help with the hiring because I’m involved with someone who applied. I’m here to ask for your discretion.”

Jonas leaned back in his chair and slid both hands into his hair. “God, Chase. I shouldn’t have to warn you about putting your libido ahead of the family, but here we are.”

“There’s no need for you to *warn* me about anything,” Chase shot back. “I’ll probably leave soon after the holidays anyway, and you won’t have to see or think about me.”

His brother looked incredulous. “Really? That’s just like you. Show up and leave when someone asks you to pitch in.”

“At least I came, unlike Gabe.” Chase took a deep breath and steadied himself by gazing deeply into the stark white walls of Jonas’s minimalist office. He wasn’t going to throw their other brother under the bus when he wasn’t here to explain himself. “Do you want me to go through the candidates with you or not?”

“What’s the point?” Jonas made a dismissive gesture at the folder. “You probably chose these resumes at random. I’m going to have to start at the beginning.” Jonas was in rare

form. This felt like old jealousies between the brothers. Jonas had always envied him, and maybe it was a bit justified. While their grandparents said they didn't play favorites when it came to the brothers, maybe that was only partly true. Their grandfather had competed professionally as an Alpine skier. In fact, that was how they'd met. Their grandmother was vacationing with her parents when gramps ran into her. He'd told her at the time that he was so overwhelmed by her beauty, he'd lost control of his skis. Chase had always suspected that was the reason why they were always a bit lenient with him, but at the same time, it was Jonas who would be taking over the resort.

Chase wasn't about to try to play therapist with his brother. "Fine by me." The sooner he could get out of here, the better. "Good luck with that."

"I saw you, you know." Jonas's voice stopped him halfway to the door. "Coaching that instructor's little girl." Jonas scowled at him, eyes narrowed. "And what makes me the most furious is that you're a great teacher."

"Seriously? *That's* what has you so pissed off at me?"

Jonas sat up straight and pulled the folder across the desk to him. "You're right, Chase. You should go. A candidate will be here to interview shortly, and someone needs to do this work so that *our grandmother* isn't more stressed than she needs to be."

Chase had no argument with that. And technically, he'd fulfilled his part of the bargain—he'd found the best outside candidates for Jonas to choose from. The only thing he wasn't going to do was sit in on the final interviews. Besides, he wasn't going to hang around after the holidays, so it made no sense for him to weigh in on who should get the job.

He turned on his heel and went out, leaving Jonas flipping pointedly through the slim stack of resumes. He greeted staff members and waved to Helen and Aimee at the front desk, but his mind was elsewhere. Jonas was at a maximum stress level, and Chase wondered what was eating at him, but he knew better than to ask him. His brother would either blow him off

or dredge up some old slight from when they were teens and Chase had been excused from chores so he could spend more time training in order to qualify for his first Winter Olympics.

Chase headed outside into the crisp morning. He took a minute to soak it in, the cold air welcome on his face. Maybe Jonas was having girl problems of his own. That would be enough to make anyone stressed. But no—that was unlikely. Jonas worked so much that he was probably suffering from the inverse problem. A total lack of companionship. He'd renovated himself into his ideal life, but maybe discovered something was still missing.

He took the trail back to his house. Chase wanted to go see Tana on the slopes but knew it was a bad idea. He couldn't be the kind of boyfriend who stood at the bottom of the ski hill, watching her. *Boyfriend*. He snorted at the thought. He was *not* Tana's boyfriend.

His phone buzzed, and he stopped at the edge of his driveway to check the message. An apology from Jonas? *Ha*. That would never happen.

Gabe: *You busy?*

Chase swiped through his phone and dialed his brother's number.

"When a person texts," Gabe said by way of greeting, "you should text them back."

"I'm walking up my driveway. Not looking to text and trip. I think I've done enough damage to my leg."

"What's up, Chase?"

"You texted me, remember?"

"I can hear it in your voice. What's going on?" Gabe asked.

Chase let out a breath. "I can't stay here. There's just too much —" Chase waved his hand knowing full well his brother couldn't see what he was doing but unsure how to say it.

"You're doing that hand thing Mom used to do when she was trying to explain something, aren't you?"

Chase laughed. “How do you do that?” He told Gabe how he felt about being back at Elk Lodge and how much it hurt being surrounded by snow and not able to ski. His brother remained silent. “What do you think?”

“I think it’d be great if you came out to California. We’d be closer to each other. You could find a place to live that isn’t surrounded by snow. But, wait—why are you still there, anyway? Did you miss your flight?”

“Miss what flight?”

“Your flight away from Elk Lodge, to wherever you’re going next. I thought you wanted to get out of there.” Gabe’s tone shifted. “Anything wrong? Grandmother made a big deal about everybody coming back for Thanksgiving, but I thought ___”

“It’s been a long time since she saw us all together and she was feeling nostalgic,” Chase mumbled. It didn’t feel great to lie to his brother, but they’d all sworn not to say a word to Gabe until he was home for the holidays. “And anyway, I’m helping Jonas out with some things around the resort. That’s why I’m still here.”

Gabe snorted. “Why would Jonas ever ask anybody for help?”

“He didn’t. Gran wanted me to step in. I guess he seemed stressed and busy.”

“Sounds like Jonas on a normal day.”

“We’re hiring a new ski program director after that fiasco with the last one.” Chase wanted to be back on a regular footing in this conversation instead of feeling like he was dodging the elephant in the room. “So I’m going over the external applications. But you know what? I’ve been going on so long, you haven’t said why you called.”

“You called me.”

“Why you *texted*, then. Something up?”

A pause. “Oh, it’s nothing.” His brother’s voice changed ever so slightly, but Chase caught it. Whatever he wanted to talk

about wouldn't happen now, leaving him to wonder what was going on.

Chase stopped short at the steps to his porch, blinking against the bright light. Maybe moving to California was an option. He would definitely be closer to his brother, and without all the pressure of Elk Lodge, he and Gabe might get to know each other again. He hadn't seen his brother much over the years. Their lives had diverged when Chase's career took off and Gabe started his company.

"Chase? You still there?" He could hear the click of a keyboard in the background. "The cell service over there is still terrible, I guess."

"I'm still here," he said quickly. "You're right. It would be good if we were closer."

"Aw, Chase, I didn't know you missed me so much. Don't worry, I'll come back someday. Just not now. Got things to do."

Chase went inside the house. "Did I say I missed you? If I did, it was a mistake."

"Love you, bro," Gabe said, ignoring the teasing.

"Love you, too." Funnily enough, he meant it. "Oh, hey, Gabe?"

"Yeah?"

"You will be here for Christmas, right?"

"Uh, like I said, I've been—"

"Busy. You've said." Chase blew out a breath. "Just get here for Christmas."

Chase didn't wait for his brother's answer. After hanging up, he wondered if he should have had a heart-to-heart about their grandmother's health, considering he didn't think it was right Gabe hadn't been told. Jonas had been all out of sorts lately, and not having been around much, Chase could only attribute it to their grandmother's health. All the more reason not to keep Gabe in the dark. If only he hadn't promised his grandmother not to say a word.

He tossed the phone onto the kitchen counter. Things had gone south with Jonas, fast. He was clearly pissed about Chase's decision not to sit in on the interviews but he also guessed it was more than that. He wouldn't mind putting some distance between him and Jonas for a few months. Maybe a few years.

There was Tana to think about. He didn't want to be away from her for even a few *minutes*. The quickie in her bedroom had been so good, he'd dreamed about it last night in the few hours he slept after making the final list of potential candidates. But with a daughter and a job, did she really want him to stick around?

Chase couldn't be sure. It felt like a sure thing, somewhere deep in his gut.

He'd thought the same thing about his last girlfriend. He'd been wrong.

A fresh start someplace that didn't remind him of everything he'd lost called to him. He'd be able to make friends and connections through Gabe. It could be the beginning of his life after skiing. There would be the time before his accident, this strange in-between time, and an exciting new afterward. Whatever that might be.

Oh, he could almost see it. Strolling in the bright west-coast sunshine. Passing by a park with a playground. Lindsey sprinting off toward the swing set. Tana laughing by his side.

Yikes.

Chase pulled himself out of *that* vision and scrambled for something to do. Anything. Food was always a good answer. He pulled a box of pizza from the freezer. Ice particles clung to it and fell to the counter as he tossed the box down.

Tana wanted a career at Elk Lodge. She didn't want to uproot her daughter to be with a man she'd slept with exactly once. From the pink in her cheeks and the electric way she'd moved afterward, it had been as good for her as it had been for him. But that wasn't the same as a commitment to each other.

So much for not thinking about her. He stabbed at the buttons on his stove, setting it to 375 degrees. After sliding the pizza

onto a pan, he dropped into a seat at his kitchen table to wait for the oven to preheat.

Focus on anything but a crazy dream of a life with Tana. Except the dream, like weeds in a garden, wouldn't go away.

Chase stared out the window at the snowy backdrop. Several minutes later, a beep alerted him it was time to put the pizza in the oven. He returned to his chair, letting his thoughts drift to life. More specifically, what he wanted from it.

Gabe knew all kinds of people out there—people who didn't care about skiing or Chase's past abilities. He didn't have to worry about working. Hell, he could travel the world, not bothering to put down roots, but that didn't sit well with him. Instead, he imagined a sprawling house with a balcony, and the sun on his face. In his daydream, his grandmother was still healthy, and Elk Lodge was going strong—it just didn't need *him*. In the dream, he knew he was exactly where he was supposed to be. Even more reason to get away from Cardinal Mountain.

The smell of smoke grabbed his attention. He'd forgotten to set the timer on the stove, and now the edges of the pizza were burned. Chase hustled over, cursing lightly under his breath, and wrapped his hand around a dish towel. When he dropped the pan on the top of the stove, the pizza didn't look all that appetizing. Different than expected, but still edible—the burned pizza was like a metaphor for his life.

Chase shook his head, not wanting to dwell on something so utterly ridiculous.

CHASE

After the burned-pizza incident, Chase needed to get out. To *do* something that didn't involve meeting Tana on the ski slopes for her lessons. There was plenty to do in the nearby town.

Stores bustled with shoppers, their boots leaving footprints in the dusting of snow on the sidewalk, their breath freezing in the air against a background of Christmas wreaths with red bows and bright bulbs. The tree in the town square and the decorations in the windows reminded Chase of all the things he used to be excited about when it came to Christmas.

He hadn't been looking forward to Christmas until it came time to do something special for Tana and Lindsey. If they were together—if they had a future—this would be the norm every year. *Don't imagine that now. Focus on the gifts.* Shopping for Tana and Lindsey was better than imagining their life out west together, right?

Sure it was.

Lindsey had told him her birthday was coming up, so he made sure to buy her a separate present. In a couple of hours, he'd exhausted his leg and his desire to shop. Chase headed back to the lodge, skipping the main road. He spotted Tana's car in front of her cottage. He hadn't *planned* on stopping by—not really. But one quick stop to drop off Lindsey's birthday present and their Christmas gifts shouldn't be a problem.

He gathered up the packages, already wrapped care of several kind store clerks, and sprinted up the front steps. *Play it like a*

delivery guy. In and out. Chase knocked on the door, balancing the gifts in his arms.

“Coming,” Tana called from inside. She opened the door a moment later with a little plastic tray in her hand—one of those microwavable meals. Her face flushed deeply. “Hey, Chase. How’s it going? Wait—what’s that?”

I want to be in your bed again. “Good. Listen, I wanted to talk to you about something.” Following her gaze, he glanced down at the bundle in his arms. “I bought some skis for Lindsey—they’re a birthday present.”

Tana frowned. “Oh, Chase, you don’t have to do that kind of thing.” She looked wary.

“I’m glad to do it. I wanted to. Lindsey’s going to be a great skier, and why not do it on some cool skis that are a better fit for her?”

She hesitated, and he remembered the way she’d held back at the lost and found. But then her eyes slid over the skis, and Tana’s face brightened. “You’re impossible to stop. Did you know that?”

“I can be pretty persistent, yeah. But this delivery won’t take that long.” He felt slightly ridiculous, standing on her porch and holding an armful of presents. “I wanted you to know that I talked to my brother today. Jonas. He’s the one who—”

“You should come in. It’s cold out.” Tana stepped back to let him into the narrow front hall. “I’ve got a few minutes before I have to head out.”

“Where to?”

“To get Lindsey from school. I got lucky today—a lesson ended early and I had some spare time to stop at home and eat. Makes the evening lessons better when you’re not hungry.” The fridge opened and closed, and water ran in the sink.

Chase shut the door with an elbow. She didn’t have much time, so he couldn’t linger here, watching the way her dark hair spilled over her shoulders.

“What was it you wanted to talk about?” Tana came back out of the kitchen and put her hands in her pockets.

“I finished the job today. With the applicants. I turned in the list and told Jonas I won’t be helping with the final interviews. I just wanted you to know that I’m not part of the process anymore. You don’t have to worry about things between us affecting anything to do with your application.”

Oh, *great*. “Things between us” sounded awfully official—like he’d just asked her to be his girlfriend. He hadn’t, not exactly. The pressure seemed to fill the room.

She looked away, then back at him, concern shining in her eyes. “I’m...glad you’re doing things by the book, I guess, but Chase—you can’t tell *anybody* about us. It still doesn’t look good. You’ve got to swear.”

Chase knew Tana’s biggest concern was being thought of as someone who’d slept her way to the top. She had integrity. But a smaller, more insidious voice whispered in the back of his mind that it could also be that she was embarrassed to be seen with him. He wasn’t good enough for anything more than a fling.

His ex-girlfriend drove that point home when she left after the accident. She didn’t even pretend to care by visiting him in the hospital. She’d simply moved out, taking everything they’d ever purchased as a couple, which was pretty much everything except his personal belongings and his trophies.

“I won’t. I promise.” Now he felt like a massive fool. He’d come here with gifts as if he had a right, and what Tana really wanted was for him to back off. *Way* off.

Tana worried at her bottom lip with her teeth, cheeks still pink. She didn’t *look* like a woman who wanted nothing to do with him. His body responded despite himself, warring with his mind. “Thank you,” she said softly.

“While you’re thanking me...” Could he *be* any more awkward in this situation? “Like I said, I brought some gifts for Lindsey. I wanted to get her something.” He stepped forward and handed her the gifts.

“Oh—thank you, Chase. I’m sure she’ll love anything you’ve picked out. I just wish you hadn’t gone overboard with the skis.”

They stood close together now, the presents the only barrier, and Chase was transfixed. Tana’s dark eyes were the most complicated shade of chocolate and gold he’d ever seen. Her lips were full, perfect...and begging to be kissed. She took shallow breaths.

Chase’s heart pounded. Could he handle another crushing disappointment after his accident? Was Tana worth the risk? It would be the end of him, just like it had been the end of his skiing career. But he couldn’t resist the hot pull between them.

“Here,” he said, his voice thick. “Let me just—” Chase took the packages out of her arms and set them on the kitchen counter, propping the skis in the corner. One step back, and he took Tana in his arms.

She melted into him, tiny moans of pleasure coaxing him toward more. Tana kissed him back, hard. It wasn’t right, he knew it wasn’t right—or at least it was dangerous. But this wasn’t a relationship, was it? This was two adult people who needed each other. Physically.

Tana undid the zipper of his coat and pushed it off his shoulders, and after that it was a race between them to see who could get naked first. Tana won, stripping down to nothing seconds before he stepped out of his pants. Their bodies came together again, and Chase felt like an electric light—burning up everything around them. *Bedroom*, he thought through the haze of touching her.

Somehow, they made it, though Tana bumped into the wall halfway down. This time, she pushed him back onto the bed and crawled over him, pressing heated kisses onto the ridges of his abs and all way up to the line of his jaw. She kissed him while she reached for her nightstand.

Her arms didn’t quite make it, and he rolled her closer, holding her tight around the waist.

Tana ripped the foil packet open and deftly slid it on for him.

“You don’t have to do that.” He pulled her on top of him and kissed the hollow between her breasts. “I can handle it.”

“It’s done. Don’t think, just—” Tana eased herself down on his length and tipped her head back with a groan. “Move,” she urged. “I have to go soon.”

Chase stopped thinking and started doing, loving the feel of her. The hot slide of her up and down. Their hips meeting. The softness of her skin beneath his hands. The way her nipples peaked when he brushed the pad of his thumb over them. How sweet her voice sounded, saying his name. Her weight kept him grounded in the moment. There was no move to California, no decision to make about what they were or weren’t, nothing but her body and his.

He let her ride him until a pulsing need rose in him. It was his old, physical call—the one that made him go into professional skiing, the one that spurred him on to push off at the top of the hill. Chase sat up, and Tana clung to him as they kissed. Then kissed again. He was so close. It was like he’d been thinking of her nonstop since last night, which in fact, he had.

With her legs wrapped around his waist, he slid off the bed. Holding her like this was worth the pain in his leg. He’d deal with that in the morning. Right now, it was all about Tana.

“Oh, Chase—what are you—what—” Tana could hardly speak. She let out a sigh when her back made contact with the door, and he wanted to hear that sigh every day for the rest of his life. He wanted to feel how she clenched around him. He wanted the sexy pain of her nails biting into his shoulders and the deep, aching pleasure of her orgasm when they were joined. Oh, it was good. It was the best thing he’d ever experienced in his life.

He lost himself to the pleasure, and his release barreled into him at the speed of light. He pushed Tana harder against the door, bracing them both, and rode the wave all the way down to the bitter end. When it was done, he eased her down onto her feet.

Tana let her head fall forward so that her forehead rested on Chase’s collarbone. “I wish I didn’t have to leave,” she

mumbled against his chest. “My legs are going to be jelly.”

“There are worse things.”

She laughed, her shoulders shaking against him. The mood had lifted, lightened, and even though Chase hadn’t come here to have sex with Tana, he was glad he had. They needed it. At least, *he* needed it. Tana? He wasn’t so sure. But he felt too satisfied to debate all of that again now.

His legs were jelly, too—and he needed to be able to drive his car. Chase stretched his arms above his head and felt her watching him. “Better than coffee. In fact, better than everything.”

“Better than *everything*?” Tana arched an eyebrow at him.

“Look.” He bent down to kiss her again, trying to memorize the heated softness of her lips. “If I had a few hours with you...a whole night, even...”

“Don’t tease me,” she breathed into his mouth.

“That would be the best.”

Tana put her hands on his neck and let herself lean into him while they kissed, tongues coming together, exploring, dancing. Then she broke it off and put her fingertips to her lips. “I’ve gotta go,” she said, and he could tell she didn’t want to. “Help me get dressed?”

“Absolutely.” He turned on the charm he used for fans and ushered her out of the bedroom, making a small detour into the bathroom. Then he knelt in front of Tana in the hall and tugged her panties back into place, kissing her hipbones for good measure while she pulled on her bra. He helped her back into her base layers, which made him inexplicably jealous—why should that fabric get to touch her when he couldn’t? He pulled on his own clothes and came back to guide the snow pants back up her legs. Sticking his feet into his boots made him feel like he was stepping out of a hot shower into a cold room. But it had to be done.

“Come on. You can walk me to my car,” said Tana, laughing.

“Happy to, ma’am.”

“Ouch. Ma’am? Was the sex that bad?”

“No, it was perfect. Like you,” he said, going to the door and opening it wide. “After you, my lady.”

TANA

Lindsey's birthday party was a hit. Tana stood in the back room of a small local restaurant called Pizza Mike's, surrounded by twelve screeching, gleeful six- and seven-year-olds from Lindsey's class. Pin the Tail on the Donkey had turned out to be a pretty good party game, though she'd worried about it the night before. All the girls were having a great time spinning each other around and stumbling dizzily toward the wall. Tana took a deep breath and reminded herself not to get stressed over the noise and the rush of the party. It was *almost* over.

There was a party later at Elk Lodge for all the employees, and she couldn't have been more thrilled. Every time she thought about it, her heart pounded. An adult happy hour, with actual adults. *Chase* was going to be there. Lindsey would be staying with her parents tonight, so Tana would have the evening to herself.

Tana's parents came into the restaurant, talking to each other, and Lindsey waved to them through the glass that separated the party room from the restaurant. They picked their way through the tables—on Friday afternoon, the crowd wasn't at peak yet, but plenty of people were dining in.

"Where's the birthday girl?" Tana's mom asked, drawing her in for a hug.

"Yeah. I need to wish Lindsey a happy birthday. Seven years old!" Tana's dad looked all around, a smile crinkling his eyes.

Tana laughed. “She’s right here, Dad. I think she was—” The sentence died before it ended. Because Lindsey wasn’t about to take her turn at Pin the Tail on the Donkey. She was off to the side of the room, Tana’s phone pressed to her ear. Not something she’d authorized.

She made a beeline for her daughter, who moved the phone out in front of her. On *speakerphone*, no less. Who had she called?

“I had to tell you I love my gift. It’s the best. It’s *awesome*.”

“Every girl needs a good pair of skis,” Chase answered.

Tana blushed. The skis were good. Too good. At this very moment, Chase probably looked sexy as sin already dressed in a dark suit in anticipation of the cocktail party later. Mouthwateringly sexy. And he was on the phone with her daughter talking about the customized Frozen-themed skis he’d bought for her. She’d known they were skis, but custom ones? Lindsey had been doing just fine on the skis she borrowed from the resort, and Tana figured they would do until she got the promotion.

“Well, thank you,” Lindsey said. “It’s my birthday party today.”

One of Lindsey’s friends had noticed she was on the phone and came over to see who she was talking to, and then another, and the three of them were huddled around, giggling.

Tana reached in and plucked the phone from her daughter’s hand, then swiped madly at the screen to get it off speakerphone. She didn’t love Lindsey making calls without at least *asking* first. “Hi, Chase.”

“Hi.” The warm familiarity in his voice made her knees feel as weak as they had in bed with him the other day. “How’s the party?”

“Getting a little out of hand, clearly.” Her face felt hotter than it ever had in her life. Tana turned toward the wall, waving the girls back to the party game. “Sorry about that. Lindsey grabbed my phone, and I’m really sorry she put you on the spot like that.”

“It’s all right. I’m touched.” He wasn’t joking—his sincerity traveled all the way through the phone and squeezed her heart. “Was there anything else the two of you needed?”

“No,” she said. “We’re good. And thank you, uh, again, for the skis. Lindsey loves them. She can’t wait to use them on the slopes.”

“I can’t wait to see her on them.” Another squeeze to her heart. Chase, looking forward to Lindsey’s first run on her new skis. “Am I going to see you at the employee cocktail hour? Need to be honest with you, Tana. You’d brighten it right up.”

“Oh, please.” She laughed, even more embarrassed. “I’ll be there once all the kids are picked up. And my parents are taking Lindsey for the weekend.” A beat passed, and Tana wished she could see Chase’s face.

“She must be really excited,” Chase said, his voice brimming with anticipation. “Birthday weekend fun?”

“So much fun.” And she was still doing the birthday thing. “I’ll see you at the lodge, okay? Soon.” She hung up before he could say anything else to make her blush.

The game of Pin the Tail on the Donkey was ramping up, and Tana let them play a few more rounds before it was time to start settling down. They’d already had pizza and cake. The first parents to pick up kids filtered in a few minutes later. She’d made it through another birthday party.

“Hey, Mom.” Lindsey tugged at Tana’s sleeve. “I forgot my suitcase at home.”

Tana and Lindsey waved goodbye to the last party guest, and Tana looked down at her daughter. She looked exhausted—hanging on by a thread. Tana stroked Lindsey’s hair. “That’s okay. It was really me who forgot it. I was concentrating on all the party stuff. We’ll go back and pick it up, okay?”

“Go get your things, birthday girl,” Tana’s dad said from behind them. “We’ll take over the party cleanup.”

“Oh, dad, you don’t have to do that. I can—”

“Go,” he said with a smile. “We’ve got things under control here.”

Tana drove home. If she was going to make the cocktail party, she had to change fast. She hadn’t wanted to wear something too sexy to the birthday party, obviously, and now she was pressed for time. While Lindsey grabbed her suitcase from her bedroom, Tana rushed to the back of the house and pulled her best little black dress from the closet. Her only little black dress.

She swept into the bathroom and reached for her makeup bag, Lindsey close on her heels with her suitcase. A little lipstick, a little blush, and she’d be good to go. Oh, and mascara. Lindsey picked up a makeup brush and dipped it into some blush powder while Tana put mascara on.

“I think Chase would be a cool dad.” Lindsey kept her eyes away from Tana’s in the reflection. “That would be a good birthday wish, don’t you think?”

Tana’s hand froze midway to her eyelashes. Clearly, she’d been hanging around Chase too much. She was setting Lindsey up to have unrealistic expectations. Eventually, Chase would zoom off to some new high-flying destination and leave them both.

“Chase isn’t my boyfriend,” she said flatly. *Focus on the mascara. Don’t stick it in your eye.* “We’re work friends, honey.”

Lindsey pouted and pointed the brush at Tana. “You like him, though. Right?”

“I do. As a friend. Nothing more.”

Lindsey had too much cake, too much soda, and too much fun with her friends. Her face crumpled, and she got off the stepstool in front of the sink, stalking out of the room. “I want to go to *Grandma’s*,” she yelled back. “I want to go now.”

Tana put her mascara away, her own heart aching. It had only been a few days ago that Lindsey had taken her first steps. Hadn’t it? She’d gone from a chubby baby to a top-speed toddler to an almost-seven-year-old in no time at all. And Tana

hadn't learned anything, apparently. Her first mistake was bringing the gift from Chase to the party. It was sure to raise questions.

Her second mistake was hurting her daughter's feelings. She'd been dishonest with her, and that didn't feel good...but being honest didn't feel right, either.

Suddenly, Tana didn't feel like going to the cocktail party. She felt like cuddling up with Lindsey on the couch and watching *Frozen*. They could try to stop time for a little bit.

"Mom, we have to go," Lindsey whined.

Tana was pushing her luck. She went into the living room where Lindsey stood with her rolling suitcase, a picture of Elsa and Anna from *Frozen* on the front.

"Hey." She knelt in front of her daughter and pulled her in for a hug. "I'm sorry I was short with you." *I wish Chase was your dad, too.* "I shouldn't have been. Did you have a good birthday?"

"Yeah." Lindsey rested her head on Tana's shoulder. "But I really want to go to Grandma and Grandpa's." She yawned. "I'm tired."

"Then let's go meet them. Okay? Couple more car rides, then you can go to bed."

Tana drove Lindsey back downtown to the pizza place. The timing couldn't be more perfect—her parents were coming out the front door as they pulled up to the curb. She got Lindsey's suitcase out of the car and loaded it into the back of her parents' Honda.

"Grandma! Grandpa!" Lindsey ran to them with a squeal, even though she'd just seen them at her party. It warmed Tana's heart. They were going to have a great weekend. Lindsey wheeled around on the sidewalk and came back for one more hug. "I'll see you on Sunday, Mom. Don't be too lonely without me. I'll call you, okay?"

"Okay." She breathed in the scent of her daughter's shampoo and hugged her tight. Whatever came next, they'd get through

it together. That was the one thing Tana could count on in life.
“I love you, Linds.”

“I love you too, Mom.”

Her parents came up and took Lindsey by the hand. “Time to get going, birthday girl,” her dad said. “It’s a bit of a drive. But we can listen to *Frozen* on the way there, if you want.”

“I do, I *do!*”

Lindsey dragged her grandparents toward the car, and Tana was left waving on the sidewalk in her little black dress. Tana’s mother leaned out of the car and gave her one last wave, a broad smile on her face. “You have fun too, my darling. *Love* the dress.”

“I will. Tomorrow maybe I’ll take a nap after my lessons, get some reading in...” Why? Why was she saying this? What she really wanted to do was spend all weekend in bed with Chase. “Have a good time. Call me if you need anything.”

“We won’t need anything,” sang Tana’s mom. “Now get out of here. Have the time of your life.”

CHASE

Chase glanced around the room, noting all the smiling faces. The employee happy hour—really, a cocktail party hosted by Elin Elkin—was a big event for the staff at the Lodge. She'd been hosting them for decades, and they'd settled into a familiar pattern. They always started with a staff meeting but then ended with lots of food and drinks. Employees loved it.

They especially loved the cocktail hours hosted at Christmas, and this one—so close to the holiday—was one of the best. A tall Christmas tree took up most of the space in one corner, soaring toward the ceiling with a rainbow of glass globes decorating the branches. A champagne fountain *and* a chocolate fountain graced the center of the room. Chandeliers glittered overhead, bathing everything in a warm light that probably made most people think of glamorous fireside Christmases.

It just wasn't Chase's favorite. For one thing, he preferred casual attire. For another, inevitably spending the evening making small talk about his injury held zero appeal. Surrounded by all the people in the room, an odd feeling of loneliness settled over him.

Lonely.

After his skiing career ended, Chase welcomed the solitude. Now, he missed Tana. He was lonely, even in the middle of the crowd, without her. He didn't like it. It made his suit seem itchy, the lights too bright, and everyone's voices too loud. She'd said she'd be there, though.

Chase crossed the room and picked up a plate, helping himself to the appetizers, before circling the ballroom again. There was no sign of Tana.

His phone buzzed in his pocket, and his heart leaped, hoping it was her. But the name on the text wasn't Tana's.

Chef Chris: Dude! It's been ages. I'll be headed out your way for my show. We need to get together. I have an idea I want to run past you.

...

Tell me I'm still not in your contact list as Chef Chris.

Chase grinned at that and took a screenshot of his friend's contact info and texted it to him and the response was immediate.

Chef Chris: Asshole!

He slid the phone back into his pocket. Chris Denton's family owned Denton Hotels, and much like Chase, rather than go into the family business, Chris had carved his own path by becoming a celebrity chef. He looked forward to getting together with his old friend to commiserate over family drama.

Chase continued his laps around the room hoping Tana would arrive soon. Two ski instructors stood in the corner, both describing routes down the slopes based on their hand motions. His grandmother held court at one of the center tables, a smile on her face. Even Jonas had come to the cocktail hour. However, he alternated between listening to his grandmother and studying his phone intently. If he knew Jonas, he'd rather be working.

All of this, Chase reminded himself, was supposed to be temporary. He'd been itching to leave. Elk Lodge had been the place where his old career had taken form. While Gabe's suggestion to come out to California was a good one, what exactly would he do with his life? He wasn't exactly someone who enjoyed a life of leisure. In theory, it sounded great. Not that he'd ever tell Jonas this, but he actually *liked* working.

Chase popped a baked brie bite into his mouth, one of his favorite appetizers from the lodge's kitchens. He felt more

enthusiastic about the puff pastry—it was, after all, a really good cheesy bite—than he did about leaving Elk Lodge. And that shouldn't be the case. He should want this fresh start more than anything, but in reality, he wanted Tana.

At the party and by his side. And leading her around the room on his arm, as his guest. Chase wanted to take her home and make love to her in his big bed, and he wanted to curl himself around her and sleep all night. And in the morning, he'd show her the sunrise across the mountain when the snow was fresh and unmarked. And then later, he'd help Lindsey with her school lessons, cook them both dinner, and—

Horror seized him.

This wasn't some imaginary exercise and it wasn't infatuation. He was falling in love.

The future he wanted was there in his mind, in clear, terrifying detail. He didn't want to be out west. He could be perfectly happy here, maybe coaching kids like he'd done with Lindsey. It would put all his skiing experience to use and keep him sharp. They might not be professional skiers, but he could teach them to love the wind in their faces and the glide of snow beneath their skis. And at the end of the day, he would go home to Tana and Lindsey.

“Having regrets over quitting the one job Grandmother asked you to do?” Jonas's voice cut into his thoughts. “You're staring at your plate like it offended you.”

Chase blinked at his brother. “No. No regrets.”

He could tell Jonas didn't want to care, but they were brothers—on some level, no matter how much they fought, they did care about each other. “What is it, then?”

“Just thinking about my options.” Chase was struck by the urge to tell Jonas about Tana—it would relieve some of the pressure in his chest—but he'd promised her he wouldn't say a word.

Jonas narrowed his eyes. “What options?”

“What's next for me.”

“Oh.” Jonas gave him one last look. “Don’t stare at your food that way. It makes people think something’s up. Besides your injury.”

“Thanks, Jonas. That’s very helpful of you.”

His brother brushed past him to get to the bar. In a way, he *had* been honest with Jonas. There weren’t options with Tana. She seemed focused on her daughter and her career. Would she really want to devote all her spare time to a relationship with him? Especially now that he wasn’t a ski champion—that he wasn’t much of anything, really, except a man from a wealthy family?

The real question wasn’t what Tana would have done if he were still a ski champion. The real question was what he should do *now*. No matter how sparkling and wonderful his vision of their potential family appeared to him, he had to deal in reality. He was moving on from this place, and Tana was putting down roots. They wanted two different things.

“You’re doing it again,” Jonas said, heading back to his table.

“Doing what?”

“Staring off into space.”

“Just thinking.”

“About?” Jonas took a sip from his drink.

“I talked to Gabe. I don’t think he’s coming for Christmas.”

“He has to.”

“Maybe someone should give him a reason.”

Jonas gripped Chase’s shoulder briefly before walking away, not bothering to respond.

“Good talk, bro,” Chase mumbled under his breath.

Chase put his half-empty plate down on one of the tables to the side of the ballroom meant for collecting dishes. He needed to be at home, in the quiet. Besides, it didn’t look like she was going to show up anyway.

He was still in the middle of the room when he saw her.

All the things he'd been debating furiously in his head, while smiling and nodding at the people around him, fell away. Tana stood framed in the double doors leading into the lodge's ballroom in a pair of low heels and a black dress that hit just above her knees. Her hair fell in loose waves around her shoulders. And she was looking for him. He knew from the way her eyes danced over the room, searching.

She caught sight of him, and a smile spread over her face. The smile went straight to his core. In the black dress, she looked...transformed. He thought Tana was breathtaking, but in this dress, it was like watching a sunrise as she moved. Graceful, elegant, and inspiring.

Tana raised her hand and gave him a wave.

Chase moved toward her, anxious to be close enough to touch her. Tana cocked her head to the side, for a friendly peck on the cheek. He'd forgotten almost too late they couldn't kiss in the middle of the ballroom, but she'd remembered.

His nerves were singing at the sight of her. "Hey, beautiful," he said, dropping his voice to a low whisper so no one would hear.

Tana blushed. "You look pretty good yourself."

They were clearly both thinking of yesterday and the hot passion they shared. It wasn't exactly forgettable. Chase glanced around and caught his grandmother watching him. She didn't miss anything, did she? He tried not to look lovestruck. His grandmother already suspected it was Tana that day in the shed.

"Hey, you two." Pete, one of the chair lift operators, approached, clapping him on the back. Saved by the bell from making a mistake in front of his grandmother and brother. "How have things been with you lately, Chase?"

"Hey, Pete. Good to see you here. I see someone I need to talk to, but I'll catch up with you later, Chase." Tana strolled away, not bothering to wait for an answer. It was hard not to watch the sway of her hips with every step like a hungry man.

Chase forced his attention back to Pete. “Good. Thinking about getting back on the slopes again someday.”

“That would be awesome.” Pete grinned. “It would be good for you to get your snow legs back.”

“It would definitely cause a stir with the guests if I announced a comeback.” He’d lost sight of Tana. No—there she was, talking with a group of women. He and Pete got into a discussion about new skis, which led them to clothes, which led them to jobs. Opportunities.

Chase sensed Tana behind him in the crowd, and he glanced over his shoulder to find her. She was standing next to his grandmother, and the two of them were deep in conversation. He watched as they embraced, then Tana crossed the room toward him. He needed to get her out of here. Chase wanted nothing more than to peel the dress off her body and have her all to himself.

Lindsey was gone for the weekend.

His heart raced. “Honestly, Pete, I might not be around the lodge much longer.”

“Really? Why?” Genuine concern filled Pete’s expression.

“I’ve been talking to my brother, Gabe, about heading out to California.”

“That’s great news!” Pete nodded a little. “Isn’t it? Except for the lack of snow.”

“Well, it does snow in California, but I admit I like the idea of year-round sunshine. Maybe I’ll take up surfing.”

“Telling everybody about your West Coast plans?” Tana spoke from directly behind him and a chill of regret went down his spine. She patted him on the shoulder and came to stand between the two men.

“A fresh start? You should take it.”

“You really should,” Tana seconded Pete’s opinion.

Chase gaped at her, not liking the sound of her support of getting rid of him. Especially not after he’d been fantasizing

about the two of them together and waiting all night for her to arrive.

Tana smiled brightly. “What reason is there to stay here?”

You. “You’re right,” Chase’s heart broke a little at how confident she sounded. “Tana, can I steal you for a minute? I wanted to run something by you.”

He shook Pete’s hand, and he and Tana slipped out one of the side doors from the ballroom.

“What is it, Chase? Is something wrong?”

He stopped at a door halfway down the hall and opened it, then put an arm around her waist and pulled her into a windowed alcove. It looked out over the ski hills, lit up for the night by the big floodlights, snow machines on, tossing man-made snow into the air in a glittering fall.

“This,” he said. “This is what I wanted to run by you.” He kissed her, hard, like he might never get another chance. Any kiss could be the last kiss, Chase knew. There was no denying it—he wanted more of the same. He wanted to stay close to her and he wanted her to *know it*.

But with her mouth on his and her body in that tight little dress, there was no dwelling on it. There was only action. He coaxed her lips open with his tongue and explored her. She tasted new all over again. Fresh. He could do this forever and never get tired of it. A stiff breeze hit the windows.

“Let’s go.” Chase took her face in his hands and looked down into her eyes. Her gorgeous, searching eyes. “My place or yours?”

“My place. It’s closer,” Tana said, her voice dropping a notch into a sexy purr.

They walked as quickly as they dared out to the parking lot, snagging their coats on the way. Chase paused to draw Tana’s over her shoulders, stealing a kiss as he did.

Tana groaned against his mouth. “Don’t do that,” she scolded. “Or I’m not going to make it home.”

“What would you do if you couldn’t make it home?” Chase felt desperate to know and desperate for more, but he shoved that feeling down.

“I’d get cold.” Her eyes shone. “But it would be worth it.”

Inside fifteen minutes, they were in Tana’s cottage. Chase finally got to peel off her dress, the way he’d been fantasizing. It was one thing to see a person shed a bunch of snow clothes. It was another to lift the smooth fabric of a dress up over her hips and slowly expose the lacy underthings she wore beneath it, then pull it over her head and watch her hair tumble back down over her shoulders. Inside twenty minutes, they were both naked, the covers of Tana’s bed a mess on the floor. And then Chase didn’t care what time it was. He was all over her, he was inside her, and nothing else mattered.

TANA

“Come to my place,” Chase whispered early on Saturday morning. Tana had turned over to find him in her bed, taking up most of the mattress. “I want you there.”

“Really?” Tana stretched her arms above her head and yawned. “You don’t want to stay here?”

He laughed. “I thought you’d like the hot tub.”

“I like being in the hot tub *with you*.” The one problem with Chase was that being around him excited her too much. Sleeping in wasn’t an option with his hard chest against her back. She just wanted to be closer to him. To talk to him. To do other things with him. “I like being in bed, too.”

“Then let’s not get out just yet.”

Tana rolled over, climbing on top of him for the kind of unhurried sex that was so rare she wanted to cry. Chase worked himself in and out of her like they had all the time in the world. She felt every movement, every ridge. She put her hands down onto his chest and braced herself there, rolling her hips in slow circles. His blue eyes never left hers. She wanted to close her eyes, but it was so much more intimate watching him like this. Watching the way his body tensed with his impending orgasm, feeling the way his hands tightened on her hips.

Afterward, they climbed into the shower, laughing and making too many soap suds. Tana felt deliciously tired. “I have an idea.” She tipped her head back to rinse the conditioner out of

her hair, and even with her eyes closed, she could feel Chase watching her. “Want to hear it?”

“I can’t wait to hear it.” Chase lifted his hands and smoothed the water over her hair, running his hands down the soft skin of her neck. He traced her collarbone.

“I want to...” She took a deep breath. “This is going to sound pretty ridiculous. But...I want to watch TV at your house. You have a big TV. There are other...big things there.”

He burst out laughing. “That’s not ridiculous. I do have the bigger TV. By several feet.”

Tana opened her eyes. Chase was so gorgeous, with his smile breaking through his stubble, water glistening on his skin. She had never been with a man so muscled and perfect. “I never get to watch TV. I mean, I do, sometimes. But most nights, after Lindsey goes to sleep, I’m too tired to pay attention to anything.”

Chase’s face lit up. “Wear your best TV clothes. We’re not leaving the couch.”

An hour later, Tana was sprawled out on the sofa in Chase’s living room. A fire crackled in the fireplace, and snowflakes drifted down in the sunlight outside the huge windows that took up most of one wall. Tana closed her eyes and soaked all of it in. The perfect temperature of the room. The sound of Chase fiddling in the kitchen. And the prospect of a full day ahead of them with nothing to do but relax.

“You sleeping?” he asked, his voice close, startling her.

Tana had been drifting off into a dream about trees against the moon and a soft blanket. “No,” she answered, opening her eyes. “Ooh—I wouldn’t want to miss coffee.”

“I’ve got doughnuts, too.” Chase handed her the coffee and went to get the plate, which held four flawless glazed doughnuts. He settled in next to her. It was so easy—maybe too easy—for Tana’s body to meld to his. Chase put his feet up on the ottoman, and she leaned against him, his arm over her, and a contentedness laced with sadness suffused her. This couldn’t last. It just couldn’t.

Tana put her coffee down. “I can’t remember the last time someone just...held me like this.” The words fell like the snowflakes outside, delicate and soft. “Can you?” Tana held her breath, wondering if he’d answer. She wasn’t bothered by his pause. They had all the time in the world.

“I can remember. It was high school.” He laughed a little. “Isn’t that pathetic? The last time I felt this close to a woman was in high school. We were both seventeen. She went away to college, and I became a professional skier before I graduated, and that was the end of it. Who was yours?”

Tana felt safe enough in Chase’s arms to tell him the truth. “Lindsey’s dad. We were married.”

“Wow,” Chase said softly.

“It wasn’t a long relationship. We kind of...crashed together and thought getting married was the best idea either of us had ever had. I got pregnant not long after that. And he—” Tana had never, not once, admitted this part of the truth to anyone. “He didn’t want to be a dad. He kept referring to the baby as ‘it’ and suggested I get rid of it like she was something to be thrown out.” Chase stiffened, his arms pulling her in tight. “He left in the middle of the night. He just left. I woke up one morning, and he was gone.”

“Oh, Tana. I can’t even imagine.”

“It wasn’t great,” she admitted. “After that, I divorced him and changed my name back, and never looked back.”

“And you just went on with your life?”

“I didn’t have another choice. I couldn’t go after my original goals. At least, I didn’t think I could.”

Chase stroked a hand over hers. “What were you going to do...you know, before?”

Tana laughed at the naive dreams she’d had just after college and just before she met her ex-husband. “I don’t know if you remember me telling you that I got my BA in fine arts? Well, teaching was supposed to be my backup plan. I’d planned to get my MBA. I was going to open my own business.”

“What kind of business?”

“I don’t know.” She laughed again, and this time, Chase laughed with her. “I thought of a lot of different things. A dance studio. A dancewear boutique. Lots of different kinds of boutiques. But once Lindsey was born, she came first. I didn’t have time to go back to school or to start a business.”

Chase was quiet for a long time. “What’s your long-term plan now?”

The hairs on the back of her arms stood up. Chase’s voice had a low, gravelly quality and she knew he was talking about *them*. *Be brave*, she thought. *Tell him you want him*. “Maybe one day, I’ll open a business, but for now, I’m focusing on getting a promotion here.”

“You like it here, then?”

The image of his face when she’d encouraged him to follow his own dreams out to California flashed before her eyes. Chase had been stunned and maybe a little hurt. “I *really* like it here,” she admitted. “This is the first place I’ve worked where I’m not worried about keeping my job from day to day. It’s the kind of place I could see settling in for the long haul. What about you? Is there any part of you that wants to stay here?”

Tana held her breath. Could he sense that she was also talking about him? Feeling him out? The way he kissed her didn’t seem superficial or shallow or like a fling. But there was only one way to make sure. She watched the snowflakes filter down and pretended to be absorbed in their twirling path to the ground. She was fully attuned to the way Chase was breathing, the way his heart beat hard against her back, and the catch in his breath.

“I’m not sure if it *is* the place for me.” She’d never been happier to be facing away from him than she was right now.

Tana drew a finger over his wrist and tried mightily not to take this revelation personally.

“I’ve felt...out of place here since the accident. This is the place where...” He paused, snorting out a sharp breath. “We

don't have to get into this if you don't want."

"We do. I told you my plans—you should tell me yours." She kept her voice light, as though this wasn't one of the most serious conversations of her life.

"Okay." Chase shifted, twining his fingers through hers. "This is the place where I fell in love with skiing. But I also fell in love with the idea of moving on. Moving *out*. I didn't ever think I'd come back here. It's like wearing clothes in the wrong size. It just doesn't fit right."

"Could it, though? Your brother could probably use more help."

"I don't know if he does," he admitted. "Most of my life, I've been here. I learned to ski, I got good at skiing, and it became my career. Now I'm looking for a new one. New direction. Maybe a new career." Chase hesitated, and Tana wondered what else he was about to reveal. "My other brother, Gabe. He's the one who suggested I head out to California. When he got accepted at UCLA, he packed up all his stuff and drove away. He still comes back to visit, but getting him out here takes a tremendous amount of arm twisting. He needed that fresh start and he gets why I need one too. But picking up and going isn't ideal either."

Hope sprang up deep inside of her. She'd thought this was his dream. "What's wrong with California?"

He sighed. "It's far from all my family except for Gabe. I'm not thrilled about leaving my grandmother. There's plenty here to miss, too. I'm worried I'd get out there and realize it wasn't for me and it would be too hard to come back."

Tana hadn't had much time for regrets after Lindsey was born. She took the jobs she could find. Any job that would let her take care of her daughter would do. But she knew she'd regret not being honest with Chase. It was only a matter of saying the words.

I want you to stay with me. No. Too much.

I'm falling for you. Way too much.

I think you could be a good father figure for my daughter. This was only getting worse.

“I can see how that would happen,” Tana said. “I’m sure you’ll make the right choice, though.” She settled for not saying anything.

Didn’t he feel this too? How well they fit together? Chase had his gruff, grumpy moments sometimes, but that was nothing Tana couldn’t handle. She *wanted* to handle it. Maybe that was a ridiculous thing to want, but she did anyway.

Let’s give this a chance. Yes. That was it. That was the perfect thing to say without scaring him off or making him think she wanted to go directly to the courthouse for a marriage license.

Tana opened her mouth to say it, but Chase reached across her. For a moment, Tana thought he might roll them right off the couch and onto the carpet. Chase pulled his hand back and waved the remote in front of her face. “Here’s the choice we need to make now. What to watch?”

“Anything,” she said. “Anything, as long as you don’t make me leave.”

“I wouldn’t,” Chase answered. “You’re not going anywhere until you have watched too much TV.” He rocked her back and pressed his lips to hers. “Until you’re finished with me.”

TANA

It was only midweek and if Tana could be granted one wish, anything in the world, she would have wished for a nap. “Lindsey,” she called. “Are you ready? It’s time to go, honey.”

“I’m almost ready,” her daughter called back, voice tremulous with excitement and nerves. Lindsey had been hyped up for days about this moment, and it was finally here—her turn to have her birthday celebrated in school. So many birthday events, but they’d reached the main one—Lindsey’s actual birthday.

Tana shoved her hair into a low ponytail and swiped on some neutral lipstick. It might look weird to be wearing makeup on the slopes, but it would give her the illusion of being more put-together. She hoped. Stepping out of the bathroom, she found Lindsey perched at the kitchen counter, rearranging the tiny party flags on top of her cupcakes. *Don’t overreact. You’re tired.* “Linds, leave the cupcakes alone. Where’s your coat?”

“I don’t know.” Lindsey’s eyes were locked on the baked goods.

Tana went back into her daughter’s bedroom and got her backpack and coat. They were going to be late if they didn’t hurry, and she had an early private lesson on the hills.

“Hey, you found it,” Lindsey said, looking up from where she hadn’t moved, more concerned about which flag should go on which cupcake.

“Hon, we have to go *right now.*” Using too urgent a tone with her daughter almost always backfired, so Tana kept her voice

as calm as she could. “Come get your coat on.”

Lindsey hopped down and put her arms out for her coat. So far, so good. Tana had been up until the early hours of the morning. She’d started the evening off baking cupcakes for Lindsey’s celebration at school, then settled in to finalize her presentation for today’s final interview.

Why did school parties and job interviews always coincide like this? Okay, maybe not always, but why was it happening *this time*? Tana tried not to dwell on it. The bottom line was that she was prepared for the meeting. More than prepared. She’d do great. If only she could stay awake.

“I’m going to carry the cupcakes,” Lindsay insisted. It wasn’t the best idea, but Tana didn’t have the heart—or the energy—to argue. Plus, they were out of time. She held the door open for Lindsey, and the two of them went out into a crisp, cold morning.

“Oh, crap.” Tana turned back—she’d forgotten her keys. A quick dash through the cottage, and she had them in hand. She burst out the front door just in time to see Lindsay trying to open the back door of the car. “Wait, honey, I’ll—”

It was too late. The cupcakes fell, the pan flashing, and Tana’s heart sank. Thirty-four frosted and sprinkled cupcakes hit the side of her car, dragging smears of frosting over the paint. “Nooo!” Lindsey shrieked, trying to grab for them. But it was too late. Her daughter tipped her head back and burst into tears.

“It’s all right.” Tana sprang into action mode, throwing her purse into the front seat and taking her daughter by the hand. “Let’s get cleaned up, and then—”

And then what? They didn’t have *time*. She hustled Lindsey into the bathroom to wash the crushed remnants of cupcakes off her hands, then led her back out to the car to strap her daughter in. Tana then hopped in the driver’s seat and tried not to crumple in the face of Lindsey’s sobs.

“We’ll stop at the store.” Tana locked eyes with Lindsey in the rearview mirror. She couldn’t send her to school in tears for

her big day. No way. “We just have to hurry, okay?”

Tana drove at the very outer edge of the speed limit all the way into town. The store was set back a few blocks from the main drag, which took up extra time, but she was on a mission. Tana’s heart was in overdrive. The two of them leaped out and rushed into the store.

“Hurry, hurry, hurry,” chanted Tana under her breath. The bakery was all the way in back—of course it was. They had a big table laden with desserts but there wasn’t much to choose from, considering almost everything was Christmas themed. Tana grabbed three twelve-packs of cupcakes. “Okay. Let’s buy these and go.”

The machine at the self-checkout threw an error for the baked goods. Lindsey rocked up onto the balls of her feet. “Mom, we have to go—I’m going to be late for school.”

“I know that, hun.” Tana jabbed her card back in the reader. It finally took. She abandoned the receipt, and they went back out, Lindsey’s lap now full of cupcakes. Two extras, even. Go nuts, teachers.

Tana made it to the school in record time. Luckily, the buses had already pulled away for the morning and only the stragglers were arriving. Lindsey got out of the car, and—crap. Putting the cupcakes in her lap had been one thing, but now they looked like too much, and they didn’t need a repeat of the disaster at home. Tana pulled out of the drop-off lane and into a parking spot. *What else, universe? Please don’t let there be anything else today.* Not on the day of her interview. There was nothing else Tana could do except carry the cupcakes in herself.

Lindsey and cupcakes safely ensconced at school, Tana got back in her car and sped toward the lodge. Get through a lesson. Get through the interview. She could do this.

At the lodge she changed into her snow gear at lightning speed and headed for the ski shed, coming out the double doors practically at a run. Only three minutes late and after the morning she had? The world had smiled upon her.

Her client, however, was not smiling. The moment Tana saw his foreboding expression, her triumph faded away.

“Mr. Jenkins,” she called out to him. Best to start apologizing now. If she could head this off, they could go on with the lesson and everything would be all right. “I’m so sorry. There was a delay dropping my daughter off at school, and—”

“Save it,” he hissed.

That brought her up short. “Excuse me?”

“I said, save it. My time is extremely valuable, and you’ve kept me waiting out here long enough. The only reason I’m standing here now is because I demand a refund. Immediately.”

“Sir, I—” He’d come out to the bottom of the hill without his skis. He would have had to take the time to put them on. “I’m so sorry. As I said, there was a special circumstance this morning. I’d be happy to—”

“I want a *refund*. That’s all. Don’t waste my time or money again. Now, if you can’t help me with it, then I’ll find someone who can.” He stepped close to Tana and jabbed a finger close to her face. “And if you think I’m not going to report you to the management, think again.”

Tana’s mouth dropped open, and for the life of her, she couldn’t get it to close. The client stalked away. He hadn’t been particularly warm at the last lesson, but this?

After he left, she went back into the lodge and tried to calm down. Today’s interview was the final round for the program director position. Jonas Elkin had emailed her the guidelines last week. She’d done a good job preparing her presentation, but now she needed to exude confidence in her abilities and convince Mr. Elkin she was the best person for the job. It would be all about the delivery.

Tana arrived at the meeting room in the office wing of the lodge a couple of minutes early. Long enough to catch her breath, make sure her hair was smoothed out from her ski runs, and walk in with her head held high.

Jonas sat at the back of the room at a long table, writing something down on a notepad. *Notes about the other applicants*, Tana thought. What if he'd already chosen someone? No, he wouldn't write that down while she was about to interview. She put a big smile on her face and headed in his direction.

"Morning, Mr. Elkin." Tana reached to shake his hand, and her presentation folder spilled onto the floor. She hadn't stapled it and the pages scattered everywhere.

Tana wanted to sink into the carpet—to disappear. But it was too late for that. "Sorry about that." She shook Jonas's hand anyway. "Thank you for giving me this opportunity." Then, because there was nothing else to do except put herself back together, she knelt and gathered up the loose sheets.

"Everything all right, Tana?" She could feel his assessing eyes on her. Jonas, unlike Chase, was all about the family business. He'd take it over someday; she was sure of that. So now was the time to make a great final impression.

Only her papers for the presentation had all fallen out of order and she'd be forced to wing it.

"Yes. How are you?" Oh, Lord. What was she *doing*? This wasn't a casual chat.

"I'm doing very well, thank you." Jonas's stern gaze made her feel like a kid in the principal's office, and when he jotted something down on the legal pad in front of him, her confidence slipped further. "Have a seat. I'm looking forward to hearing why you're the best candidate for this position and some of your ideas."

Tana stumbled over the name of the resort, calling it the Elkin Resort. From there, it went straight uphill. Or so she hoped. By the end, when Jonas shook her hand again, she wasn't sure if she was ready to laugh or cry. She made it back to the thankfully empty break room before she lost control of her emotions and cry it was.

She was exhausted. The night had been too short, the day too hectic, and she was tired. One thing after another, and now she

was crying in the break room. Sobbing. It racked her body, shaking her shoulders and making her stomach hurt.

“Tana? What’s wrong?”

She whirled around to find Chase standing in the break room doorway. “Nothing’s wrong,” she said, denying everything. Until she couldn’t. And then she let it all come out. The lack of sleep. The cupcakes. The stop at the grocery store. And the asshole client.

Chase’s eyes flashed angrily. He came into the room and put his hands on her shoulders, rubbing gently. “You don’t have to worry about that. You won’t face any consequences from that jerk. You’ll be okay.”

The soothing tone of his voice set her off. “Just *stop*.” Tana yanked herself away from his hands. “I’ll be fine. I was fine before you came here, and I’ll be fine once you leave.”

Tana had to prepare herself for the worst, and she had to start now. That was just how things worked out in her life. And she certainly didn’t need him fighting her battles at work or she’d never gain the respect of the other employees.

Surprise flitted across his face. A look that was quickly followed by hurt, and then by an expression that broke her heart. She could tell he was trying to figure out what to say.

Say anything, she thought wildly. Tell me I’m wrong. Call me out on how foolish all of this is.

Chase stepped forward and kissed her, so lightly and gently it brought tears to her eyes. “Give Lindsey a big birthday hug from me, okay?” Chase straightened up and put his hands in his pockets. Then he walked out, leaving her alone in the break room.

Tana pressed both hands to her chest, her face burning. She’d been awful to him, but it had all been too much. Taking one deep breath after another, she held each breath for the count of four and let it out on the count of four. It was an old technique she’d used when Lindsey was a baby. Too bad she hadn’t remembered it before she went off on him. Her reasons might

be justified, but not her actions. Chase hadn't deserved the brunt of her emotional breakdown.

When she had a solid handle on herself—and fresh makeup—there was an apology in order. But for now, the rest of life pressed in. Lessons and her daughter demanded she pull it together. There was no time to wallow in self-pity.

I need help with all of it, Chase, and I wish I knew how to tell you.

CHASE

Chase flipped through a catalog of rental equipment, noting items for Jonas. His brother had called him in for a final opinion on that, and why not? He could do a few more things to help before he left.

“Almost done?” Jonas asked.

“Sure am.”

Almost done with this, and almost done with Elk Lodge. Except he wasn't, not really. Things were still unresolved with Tana.

He'd been up most of the night thinking about the way Tana shut down on him. She'd thrown his plans to leave in his face like he'd already decided to go. He hadn't, but now he was thinking about it constantly, just by virtue of the fight. “Okay. What do you want me to do?”

The office door burst open.

“You have a *thief* on your staff.” The thundering voice struck like an earthquake.

Chase jumped, and Jonas looked up sharply. Who would barge into their office like that? He turned to find a familiar parent waiting at the door. Oh, crap! Norm Cadwell, one of the wealthiest guests at the lodge. He stormed across the room and loomed over Jonas. “Your ski instructor stole my daughter's tennis bracelet. She's inconsolable.”

Chase had heard all about the tennis bracelet in question when he overheard the man discussing it with someone else in the

lobby. More like bragging. According to the father, it was worth five thousand dollars. What kind of guy bought a six-year-old a five-thousand-dollar bracelet? The type of guy who'd go ballistic if it went missing, apparently.

"Sir, I—which ski instructor?" Jonas, who had looked tense before, now appeared ready to explode. "I can assure you, we —"

"Tana Birch. She must have known how much the bracelet was worth." The man puffed up, looking torn between bragging about how much he'd spent on the jewelry and furious on his daughter's behalf. "There's no one else who would have taken it—it was on my daughter's wrist the morning before her lesson, and now it's not. She never takes it off. Ever. She says she took one minor fall out on the slopes. It happened then. Your instructor took it."

"Absolutely not," Chase cut in. "She wouldn't do that." Take a bracelet off a child who'd fallen during a ski lesson? No. It was an outrageous proposition. The last thing Tana would have been paying attention to was a bracelet, especially one hidden under snow clothes and mittens.

"Oh, she would." The man dug something out of his pocket and slammed it down on Jonas's desk. "I have proof. Right there. Go ahead. Read it."

Chase and Jonas exchanged a look, and Jonas nodded at him. Chase picked up the paper like it was radioactive. The man had printed out a newspaper article. An article about Tana. Chase felt like he was falling through the floor to the center of the earth. An *arrest*?

"It names her as a person of interest," Cadwell spat. "For *theft*. I expected better from you. I really did. Hiring criminals to work at your resort with no concern for the safety of your guests? Unbelievable."

The angry dad was right about one thing—the newspaper did mention Tana. It even went so far as to mention her married name and her maiden name. Why hadn't she told him the ex hadn't just left her, but that he'd dragged her into something illegal?

What if she hadn't been dragged?

Think, Chase. Think.

Chase had his share of stalkers in the past and knew from working with private investigators that a “person of interest” was just someone connected in some way with the criminal. It usually meant they'd interviewed the person, not that they'd committed a crime.

His brain was filled with a riot of conflicting thoughts. He trusted Tana—she would never steal, not from a client or anyone else. He had to keep his grandmother insulated from stresses like this. They needed to calm Cadwell down—and they had to protect his family's reputation.

But above all, he had to protect Tana. Wait, no. Not above all. He couldn't throw his family under the bus for Tana. His only option was to stick with the truth. But he didn't have the full truth.

“Sir, I assure you, we will look into this. But Tana is trustworthy,” Chase tried to reassure the man. How had he gotten the newspaper clipping? It was strange, wasn't it? If the tennis bracelet had been stolen during a morning lesson, that didn't leave a lot of time for this guy to do research in the hotel's business center. Chase didn't ask any of those questions. “Please, let us handle this.”

“I'll be back in an hour. And if it's not resolved, then I'm going to the police...and the press. Given the trouble this resort has already had with employee theft, you won't like the added scrutiny.” The man delivered this last threat with deadly confidence, and Chase's heart sank. That was the last thing any of them needed.

“Sir—”

“Don't bother.” Cadwell headed for the door. “*One hour.*”

Chase turned slowly back to Jonas, expecting to find him staring after the man in utter disbelief. Instead, he found Jonas with the handset of his phone already to his ear, dialing a number.

“What are you doing?” Chase gripped the printout. “We need to talk about this.”

“I’m calling security.”

Chase reached over and pushed the button to disconnect the call.

Jonas glared at him.

“Don’t do that,” Chase said. “We need to sort this out before we jump to conclusions.”

Jonas moved the handset out of Chase’s reach and dialed again.

“Will you at least tell me who you’re calling now?” Outside, a group of kids ran by the window, cheering and screaming. “Jonas, tell me.”

“I’m calling our lawyer. I need him down here right now to deal with this.” Jonas murmured something into the phone, then hung up and dialed again. Another muffled conversation.

“That’s two phone numbers,” Chase pointed out. “What’s your plan?”

“I’m calling security, too. I want to see Tana Birch in my office; right now.”

Chase paced to the window, at loose ends. He held up the article and squinted at the grainy picture. It was small, maybe two inches across, and it showed a married couple. At first, it didn’t look anything like her—but her eyes and the curve of her mouth were unmistakable.

How could she not have told him about this? About getting arrested, about all the theft... Was it possible she didn’t know? He didn’t see how it could be, since she’d changed everything about her life in response to the past. But maybe...

He cursed silently. It would be best if the guy had *no* incriminating evidence. *Oh, stop—this isn’t evidence*, Chase told himself. *This is a newspaper clipping*. And if he was going to do anything about it, he had to do it now. They needed to take a beat before they took actions they’d come to regret—especially Chase.

“Jonas,” he said urgently, and his brother looked up at him. “There has to be a mistake.”

Jonas looked past him, toward the door. There was no one there—he was just looking into the distance. “It’s really too bad,” Jonas said, stress evident in his voice. “I was going to offer her the job today.”

Chase couldn’t catch his breath. Of course Jonas was going to offer Tana the job. She was a perfect fit. Kind, smart, and a top-notch skier—they couldn’t ask for anyone better to lead the ski program. And now this?

“Wait a minute.” He stepped in front of his brother’s desk. “We don’t have the full story here. Shouldn’t you start with Tana? Get her side of the story before we get everybody in here? Jonas, listen to me.”

Jonas was furiously texting on his phone. He didn’t appear to have heard a single thing Chase said. Chase paced the room, running through potential options, his brother still ignoring him. At the very least, they needed to keep this away from Gran. She would be devastated to find out there’s a problem with another employee. She’d always stressed that the employees at Elk Lodge were part of her extended family.

Before he could mention that to his brother, Ron Winthrop walked into the room, out of breath and adjusting his tie. “Jonas. Chase.” The company attorney shook both their hands, looking from one brother to the next. “What’s going on? It sounded urgent over the phone. I’m glad I happened to be driving out this way.”

“One of our ski instructors has been accused of stealing an expensive piece of jewelry from one of our guests.”

Ron blinked, his mouth dropping open.

“*Accused* is the main point, I think,” Chase put in. “Nobody has any proof.”

Jonas’s eyes flicked down to the newspaper printout in Chase’s hand. “We’re going to need that article.”

No. Chase wanted to rip it into tiny pieces and light it on fire. But if he did that, Jonas would just research it for himself.

“Fine.” Chase put the paper down on Jonas’s desk, fury rising in him in a fiery wave. “Ron, I want you to know that this is something out of this person’s past. It’s not a conviction.”

Ron stared at him. “Got it.” He looked at Jonas again. “What is it you want me to do?”

“I want you to sit in on the discussions we’re about to have and make sure the lodge is protected, as much as we can be. We don’t want to upset Elin with this.” Jonas shook his head. “I don’t know what’s going to happen. But we only have an hour to deal with this before Cadwell acts against us. I’d like to avoid that.”

“This is *way* overboard,” Chase tried to get his brother’s attention again. “Jonas, take a breath.” How much did Jonas know about Tana? For that matter, how much did he know about Tana?

His brother’s set jaw told Chase he wasn’t going to back down. “Chase, you need to leave. You’re too involved to be impartial in the matter.” Apparently, his brother knew more than he thought.

Fear crept across Chase’s gut with icy fingers. What if Tana wasn’t who she seemed? He didn’t want to go there. Not without all the facts. Not without talking to her. But it would have to be later. Right now, he needed to get outside. Find a place where he could breathe. And think.

Chase left Jonas’s office and headed for the lobby. Unfortunately, he ran smack dab into Tana, flanked by two staff security guards. She looked terrified and kept shaking her head. Their gazes locked for one brief second, and then she was out of view. And Chase couldn’t follow her.

TANA

“I ’m sorry, I don’t understand what this is about,” Tana said, fear gripping her, a sense of déjà vu rocketing through her body. Why had Chase been practically running out of the lobby while security was bringing her in? She was due for a lesson, and Tana worried no one would tell them she couldn’t make it. “Can one of you at least let me know why you’re bringing me in like this?”

“Mr. Elkin requested to see you right away,” said one of the security guards, his face going red. “He’s right in here.” They ushered her through the doors of Jonas’s office, and Tana realized it wasn’t just him—another man was there, professionally dressed in a suit and tie.

Tana’s heart sank. This looked like a firing meeting. The security staff had been her first clue, but she hadn’t wanted to believe it. She stepped through the door in a numb haze. Why hadn’t Chase stayed here for whatever this was? Someone must have found out about the two of them, and she was being fired.

“Tana.” Jonas nodded at the security guards, and they stepped back, leaving her to face off with him and some stranger. “Have a seat.” He gestured to the chair in front of his desk.

“I’d rather stand.” If she sat down, her muscles would cramp and tighten from stress. “What’s going on?”

“We’ve had an accusation from one of the guests here at the lodge.” Jonas’s eyes met hers, but he looked stiff, uncomfortable. No wonder. This was the most uncomfortable

she'd been since the day the police had come to her apartment and arrested her years ago. "Against you."

"For what?" An accusation could mean anything. Jonas had reassured her regarding the disgruntled guest, so this had to be about Chase. Whatever it was, it had gone to the level of Jonas and security—which didn't bode well for her. "I only had one lesson scheduled for this morning and it was canceled. I haven't done anything wrong."

"Stealing." Jonas said simply. "A tennis bracelet has gone missing, and our guest came to us with concerns that you were responsible."

Tana sucked in a deep breath and swallowed back the urge to be sick. This was so much worse than she'd thought. She felt as if the floor had suddenly opened and was trying to swallow her whole. "I didn't steal anything." Her voice sounded thick with tears and she hated it.

"You're officially on temporary leave effective immediately. It's come to our attention you have a history tied to some other burglary charges, which forces our hand to move in this direction while we have the accusation investigated." Jonas dealt the blow without flinching, his steely gaze never leaving her.

Chase hadn't been brave enough to face this with her. A secondary wave of humiliation hit. *He'd known*. He'd known this was going to happen and he hadn't wanted to be there.

"Mr. Elkin, I didn't steal anything." Neither one of the men relented, their faces stoic and unyielding. They didn't believe her. Tana had never felt so alone in her life.

"I want to assure you," Jonas said, "that you absolutely won't lose the cottage or your employment benefits while things are being investigated. That will only happen if we terminate your position."

"Do what you have to do," Tana said, biting back everything she wanted to scream. She turned and started for the door. She wanted to break into a run. Anger pulsed along her nerves, lighting them up, and her hands clenched into fists. She dimly

heard Jonas call after her, but her pulse pounded in her ears. What did any of it matter now? She was going to lose it all anyway. That's how these rich clientele places worked. Reputation over everything. One accusation could ruin Tana's life. *Again.*

"Tana, wait." Chase's voice echoed from behind her as she entered the lobby. "Please."

She rounded on him, unsure of what to say.

"Are you all right? Tell me what happened," he persisted.

Tears slipped from the corners of her eyes. "Do you know already?"

"I know we had a disgruntled guest. He came into the office when I was with Jonas, and he brought a newspaper article. He said you stole a bracelet, and then that article—Tana, I don't believe it. Why didn't you say something before?"

"Because it was my ex," she burst out. "He had a part-time job at a store that sold electronics and he'd been accused of stealing. I had no idea. They investigated me as an accomplice but I was never charged." It had been so mortifying, the anger and embarrassment more than she could bear. Just like now. The tears of rage had dried on her cheeks, leaving salty trails. "I had nothing to do with it."

"Why didn't you *tell* me? I vouched for you, you must know that I did, but you could have prepared me. You could have said *anything*." Confusion raced through his eyes.

"Because. I was. Never. Charged." Her voice shook. "It happened right after I found out I was pregnant with Lindsey and my ex had bailed. The cops showed up at my door with a search warrant and didn't believe that I didn't know where he was. I was brought in for questioning, in handcuffs, and then released."

"You had so many chances to tell me this sooner," he said, looking violently beautiful in the midmorning sunlight.

Tana broke, sobs bursting from her like a fountain. She felt destroyed. When Lindsey was a baby, she had no choice but to

keep it together. And now, here she was ugly crying in the lobby of the lodge.

“You’re not listening to me. I was questioned. *Not* arrested.” She held up her hand when he opened his mouth to speak. “Do you want to know the worst part about all this? It’s that I was falling for you.” Tana couldn’t stop. “I should have known better after the first time I did that, but no, I had to go ahead and make the same foolish mistake all over again.” She had to get to her car and get out of this place. She’d go to her parents’ house and try to figure out her life. “You’ll be pleased to know that we’ll probably never see each other again.”

Tana had to get away from him.

“What? Tana, stop!” he called out as she walked away.

With one last glance back at him, she shook her head. “I have to pick up my daughter from school.”

Tana drove out of the lodge’s parking lot with infinite care. By the time she reached the school, her eyes were still red and blotchy. Lindsey tumbled into the backseat and noticed it instantly.

“Are you okay, Mom? Did you fall?”

“I didn’t fall. I just had...a hard discussion with Chase.” *And I’m probably going to get fired.* “Sometimes, grown-ups have hard discussions.” She smiled at Lindsey in the mirror. “Everything will work out one way or the other.”

If only Tana could believe that, too.

TANA

It was an hour-long drive to where Tana's parents lived, and every fifteen minutes, she thought she'd gotten over the emotional outpouring. Then the hurt and the heartbreak would come rushing back in, and she'd turn up the radio and sing loudly. It didn't matter if it was off-key. Lindsey watched *Frozen* on her tablet, weeping. She kept repeating how much she wanted to go back and see Chase.

Okay, maybe it wasn't *her* home anymore. But she knew that when she knocked on the door, everything would be okay. Or at least partially okay. It would at least be a place where she could wallow in self-pity, something long overdue. This day had gone so far off the rails she still couldn't believe it. The old specter of her past had reared its ugly head, and this time, she didn't know if she could shake it off. She'd rather leave than face this again.

She changed lanes around a van with a ski rack on top and switched the radio station, too. Lindsey needed her to be at her best, and this was most certainly not her best. She just needed a minute or two. Maybe an hour or two.

Several times she considered calling her mother to warn her she was coming, but she couldn't bring herself to do it. It felt too much like the times she'd had to call them after Lindsey was born, asking for help. She'd find out soon enough anyway.

They pulled into the driveway as the afternoon light was beginning to fade. That was good—Lindsey wouldn't fight bedtime as hard if it was dark, and Tana needed time to collect

herself. She'd thought to pack enough to stay for a few days without needing to buy anything.

Through the front window of her parents' house, Tana saw her mother sitting in the living room, reading a book. As a kid, she'd taken her parents' relationship for granted because they'd always been so comfortable together. Their routine was always so pleasant, orderly, and happy. Something she never had with her ex, whom she'd found exciting, and would never have with Chase. How could she even have hoped for it? Her heart was a silly creature.

Tana helped Lindsey out of the car. "Are we there?" Lindsey rubbed her eyes. "We were driving for a long time."

"Yes, we're here." Tana took her hand and led her up to the front door, where she knocked. For one horrible instant, Tana thought her parents might not be happy she was showing up unannounced, but then her father opened the door, a big smile on his face.

"My favorite granddaughter." He opened his arms wide and Lindsey ran to him. "And my daughter's not so bad, either." He looked from one to the other, and Tana caught the slight concern in his eyes. "I take it you're here for the night?"

"A couple of days maybe, if that's okay?" Lindsey would have to miss the last couple days of school before they broke for Christmas, but it couldn't be helped. Tana wondered when she was going to be able to make it on her own. Was that *ever* going to happen?

"It's always okay," he said, pulling her in for a hug, and kissing her temple. "My girls can come here anytime."

"Is that Tana? I saw a car pull up in the driveway." Her mother, book still in hand, came out and surveyed the scene. "It *is*. Hi, girls."

"Hi, Grandma." Lindsey let out a huge yawn.

"Let's go into the guest bedroom, Lindsey," her dad suggested. Code for giving Tana and her mom a chance to talk. "Do you have a show you want to watch?" He led Lindsey away with a backward glance and a thumbs up.

“*Frozen 2*. I just watched the first one in the car. And it’s not really a show, it’s a movie, but I really like movies.” Lindsey followed him down the hall.

Tana was exhausted and wished she could go straight to bed, but that wouldn’t be the case, and she knew it.

Her dad closed the door to the guest bedroom softly, and for the second time that day, Tana felt something inside of her snap. She’d been *done* crying, and now her face was leaking sadness. Tana slapped a hand over her mouth, trying to stifle the sobs, and a moment later, her mother’s arms went around her.

“Come here, hun. Let’s sit down. It’ll be all right. Whatever it is, it’ll be all right,” her mother said, trying to soothe her the same way she’d always done.

The two women sat together on the sofa, Tana’s mom rubbing her back as she cried. Every time she took a deep breath, a fresh wave of sobs came up. Time became meaningless. After what seemed like forever, the awful pressure in her chest subsided. Tana took a fresh tissue from her mom and wiped her eyes.

“You want to talk about it?”

Tana took a shuddering breath. It was now or never, wasn’t it? She couldn’t stand to have this conversation more than once, even with her own mom. “I met a guy at the resort.” One sentence and the floodgates were opened. She told her mother everything. That first meeting on the ski slopes when he rescued her from that guy. Staying at his house. How Chase had such a different life from her own. The job interview, the cupcake debacle, the presentation—all of it. She told her about her ex, about being questioned by the cops, the missing bracelet, and the way she’d been left behind. *Including falling in love*. Tana tried to hold her broken heart together with both hands. Losing Chase was the worst.

“And now I might need to move in with you again.” Tana had reached the part of her story that she’d desperately wanted to avoid. The job at Elk Lodge was supposed to seal the deal and

make sure she never got to this place again. “If things don’t work out with the job. I know how these places work.”

“We’ll figure everything out. It just takes a little time,” her mom said. “We love having you. It’s not an imposition at all, Tana. You can both stay as long as you need.”

“Thank you,” she whispered. It might not be an imposition for her mother, but it felt like giving up. Tana wanted to sink into the sofa and never get up again. “I don’t want to put this on you, but I have to play it safe while I find a new job.”

“I understand. I really do.” Tana’s mom gathered her into a big hug.

But Tana had a hollow pit in her stomach. She was doomed to be alone forever—that was the main truth at the bottom of everything else that had gone wrong.

Her parents—they were the heroes in all this. They were always waiting to catch Tana when she fell. If only she could stop falling.

“Mommy?” Lindsey appeared at the living room door, dressed in a fresh set of Frozen pajamas.

“Hey, honey. What’s up?”

Lindsey padded across the room, her small brow crinkled. “Just call Chase. Make things better. I miss him.” Her daughter’s dark eyes met hers, and Tana wanted badly to tell her that it would be fine. That they could see him the next morning. But she didn’t know if she wanted to go back to that place. The old humiliation of being accused of theft—and now for a second time—seemed imprinted on Elk Lodge now.

“I do too. But I don’t think we can see him. It’s just not the right time.”

The agonized wail that came from her daughter tore into Tana’s heart, shattering what was left of the little pieces. Tears were an endless resource, it turned out, and Lindsey had plenty of them. “I want to go back and see Chase,” she sobbed into Tana’s shoulder.

Her mom stood and went into the kitchen. Hopefully she'd have an idea to see them through this, because Tana was at a loss.

"I want my ski lessons. I want my *skis*," Lindsey sobbed.

"We'll get the skis," she whispered fiercely in her daughter's ear. "Of course I'm not going to leave your skis behind. But lessons..." The only words she had for Lindsey were the ones her mother had given her. "We'll figure everything out."

It didn't seem to make Lindsey feel any better, and Tana understood it deeply. At this moment, knowing that they would figure things out wasn't enough. They still needed to grieve the things they'd lost. Tana's own dreams about Elk Lodge and Chase and the future had been a pipedream, and Lindsey more than likely had her own fantastic vision for their future.

But she reminded herself sternly as she stroked Lindsey's hair and whispered into her ear, she couldn't keep letting this shake her. What Lindsey needed now was a mother who had her life together. Someone who knew what was going to come next and tackled it without melting down. Feelings had merit—they did. She'd tried to instill that in her daughter. Still, there came a time when wallowing in feelings of heartbreak wasn't productive. It wouldn't do anyone any good.

Tana had broken her daughter's heart for the last time. There would be no more passionate flings with men—not that she had them often, but now, that was all done. There would be no more casual friendships that led her daughter to believe that they would live happily ever after with a man who'd become her daddy.

The future stretched out in front of her, and as much as Tana was determined to make it by herself, it seemed...bleak. Empty. It wasn't empty, of course. She'd have her parents, and she'd have Lindsey. She'd have a lot of hard work to do to get them back on their feet. The fierce burst of energy she'd had a minute ago faded.

"It'll be all right," she told Lindsey again. "Because we have each other."

As the words came out of her mouth, a bone-deep weariness settled over Tana's body. God, she was so tired of being alone, even if it was the right thing to do for her daughter. Tana's throat went tight and her face heated. Oh, no—not again. She took a set of deep breaths—one, two, three, four, release—and calmed herself.

In that calm, another question surfaced among her thoughts. She hadn't paused to think about what Chase's position was in all of this. She'd driven away from him without giving him the chance to tell her what happened. Tana had left him in the rearview mirror and not looked back. Maybe she should go to him, give him a chance.

No. Tana wasn't going to make that kind of decision tonight. Maybe not ever. What she *was* going to do was take care of her daughter and take care of herself.

“Are you hungry, sweetheart?” Lindsey nodded against her shoulder and rested her forehead there, the familiar warmth of her settling into Tana's skin. “Then let's eat, and we'll go to bed. It'll all look so much better in the morning.”

By the time Tana tucked her daughter into bed, she knew what she had to do. There was no way she was going through this again. She might not be able to avoid talking to the police or the press, but she was innocent. And she was tired of being falsely accused and dragged through the mud by others. Even if she was charged, they had no proof since she hadn't done anything wrong, but it wouldn't stop the other employees and her bosses from wondering.

It was time to leave and start over. On her terms. She'd pack up her belongings and turn in her resignation once she'd fully moved out of the cottage, but she was done with Elk Lodge. And Chase.

CHASE

Chase sank into his sofa with a sigh. That hadn't gone well.

The sun was finally sinking beneath the horizon on what turned out to be the longest day of his life. Tana had stormed off and left him there in the lobby, and she'd been right to do it. Leaving Jonas's office had been a *huge* mistake. He picked up his phone for the hundredth time and scrolled through the apps to his gallery. He pulled up photos of Tana and Lindsey. He'd taken them one day after Tana's lessons had finished for the day and she and Lindsey had skied together. They'd goofed off at the top of the hills by the chairlift, making faces for the camera and laughing. Lindsey had worn her brand-new Frozen skis. The picture twisted at his heart.

The doorbell rang, and Chase got up so quickly his phone tumbled to the ground. If it was Tana at the door—

His grandmother stood there, dressed neatly in a winter coat. She looked him up and down. "Hello, Chase," she said finally. "I was wondering if you had time for a quick chat."

He and his grandmother were almost never at odds, but right now he felt like a giant disappointment. If she told him he'd screwed things up royally for everybody involved, well...it wouldn't be anything he hadn't already told himself.

"Of course I do." He stepped back to let her in. "Want to sit in the living room?"

"Sure, but I'm not staying long. I have a few things to say to you." His grandmother stepped out of her boots and folded her coat over her arm. His parents had given it to her one

Christmas when Chase was younger than Lindsey, and it looked almost as good as the day she unwrapped it. His grandmother had always been a woman of wealth who refused to spend it on what she considered excess.

Chase followed her back to the living room, where she took a seat in the wide armchair opposite the couch.

His grandmother cleared her throat. “Listen to me carefully. I have always loved you, and you know that.”

“I do,” he said miserably, sitting down on the couch to face her. “I love you, too.”

“And it’s not because you took after your grandfather and became a fantastic skier, though, of course, you were.” His grandmother smiled at him, and the warmth in her expression eased some of the pain in his heart. She’d spoken in the past tense and for the first time it didn’t seem to matter as much. “I’ve loved you because you’re my grandson *and* because you have so many wonderful qualities. My favorite thing about your skiing career was that it let you showcase your persistence. Your dedication.”

She shook her head, her eyes going distant. “You’ve always gone after the things you wanted most with your whole heart, and it never seemed to matter that you won or made lots of money. It was about doing your best. And giving everybody around you your best.”

Chase swallowed a lump in his throat. Maybe he’d been that person once. “I—I don’t know what to say.” He felt wretched about it. Torn up. “That hasn’t been how.... things have gone lately.”

“Maybe not,” his grandmother said diplomatically. “Things have been hard. But I know deep inside you’re still my fierce and determined grandson. And I’m here to suggest that you should apply that same determination to make sure the woman you love doesn’t get away.” She looked him directly in the eye. “I heard all about what happened with Tana and I don’t believe a word of what that man says, but I also need to stand by Jonas until the investigation is over. However, no investigation should keep you from going after the woman you

love. I'd sure love to have her sweet daughter as my great-grandchild before I die."

Chase's mouth dropped open. What could he say to *that*? He'd already let Tana leave. His grandmother stood up and kissed the top of his head.

"All else aside, what happened between the two of you, Chase? I wasn't at the meeting earlier, but I've been apprised of the situation. The staff at the front desk heard the two of you talking."

"We had an argument. She probably went to her parents to get away from here," he said woodenly.

"And how are you handling that?"

He rubbed the back of his head. "I'm not. Because you're right, I love her." He hadn't meant to admit it out loud. "I've fallen for her, and I didn't go after her because I thought she might not want me to."

"Of course she does." His grandmother patted his leg. "And if you love her, you'll find a way to make it right. I believe in you, Chase. Now take some time and figure out your next course of action."

"I will." He rose to hug her, and then she made her way to the door.

"Call if you need anything," she said before she departed, leaving him alone with his thoughts. It was too late. Or maybe it wasn't. He could still go after Tana, but going after her wouldn't solve the problem of the ridiculous accusation against her.

You're still my fierce and determined grandson. His grandmother's words jogged something in his memory. *Don't grab anything with Emily's name on it.* Chase had gone in search of Tana after leaving his grandmother's office and found her in the lost and found room, just in time to hear the secretary's warning.

Emily. The girl who'd lost the tennis bracelet.

What if she'd lost it on the slopes and panicked when her father asked where it was? It would be the kind of lie that would seem harmless to a child—or at least a better option than admitting she'd lost something expensive. Judging by her father's reaction, Emily wouldn't have wanted to admit to losing the bracelet.

Chase had the feeling that his brother had made a terrible mistake. He put on his coat and was out the door before he had time to second-guess his plan. Within fifteen minutes, he was standing at the bottom of the ski hill where Tana normally conducted her private lessons.

The last rays of the sunset were long gone, and stars sparkled in the sky above him. It was an ideal night to spend in the hot tub. Oh, it would feel great on his leg, too. Later, when he'd found the bracelet, he'd reward himself with a long soak. And he would find the bracelet. He had to, no matter how impossible it seemed.

But in order to do that, he'd have to ski.

His heart thudded in his chest on the way to the ski shed. Ski boots felt strange and clunky on his feet, too heavy, but he clicked them into place and stuck his poles into the snow. His body remembered the movements, but his legs struggled to keep up. *You can't give up. Do this for Tana.*

It took him ten full minutes to get to the chairlift on the bunny slope. The ride up jostled his leg, but it wasn't so bad he couldn't stand it. It was a good thing nighttime skiing had fewer people and they had huge lights to illuminate the slopes.

Going down? That would be the tough part.

He made a few wide, slow turns, his leg protesting every movement. From this vantage point, the hill seemed huge. How was he ever going to find the bracelet? Chase gritted his teeth and kept going.

One run. Then another. Chase focused on the trees along the edges of the hill, but it was hard to see something as small as a bracelet in the snow. It could be buried deep by now, but at least it hadn't snowed today.

By his fifth run, his legs were killing him. Avoiding the skiers took him all over the hill and searching at a slow pace was agony. The slopes were beginning to clear out and soon the lifts would close for the night. He had time for one more trip down.

His leg disagreed. A bolt of pain shot through it halfway down, and he sat down hard in the snow next to one of the trees on the side of the run—a big fir tree, the branches poking against the sky. Chase hustled himself in next to the tree. It would be best if nobody saw him like this...breathing fast, crumpled on the ground, in pain.

That was when he saw it.

A glint in the snow from the lights on the hill, a glint that looked almost like the snow itself—but it wasn't.

The bracelet.

He could hardly believe his eyes.

But he *could* believe his hands, and he scooped it up into his glove as a cramp seized both legs. It laid him out flat, it was so intense, but Chase held on tight to the bracelet. This was his proof.

Proof he'd do anything for her. Proof that he loved her. And proof that she belonged here, too.

The only problem was that Chase couldn't stand up, the pain in his leg was unbearable. It began to dawn on him as surely as the moon rose in the sky. He was going to have to let himself be discovered this way. Might as well do it now.

He eased himself up into a sitting position and pulled out his phone. Dead. Just great. And he was too far away from the lodge buildings to be able to make it back in his condition. He'd have to wait for the last run of the ski patrol when they checked the slopes for wayward guests.

Chase felt himself spiraling toward a sense of hopelessness. He'd felt this way before, after his accident, and he recalled exactly how he'd wanted to fade away instead of making the decision to get up and go to physical therapy. *Not* participating

in life seemed easier. This situation just wasn't going to get better.

He had to shake the crappy give-up attitude. "No," he said out loud. Who would he be if he gave up on everything over a bum leg and a little snow? His grandmother was right. Giving up had never been an option and he blinked hard to clear it from his mind.

Chase shoved his phone back into his pocket and put his hands out, ready to brace himself. If he couldn't walk, he could sort of...slide.

He dug his fists into the snow and tried to lift from the hips. Gravity helped, but only a little. *Keep your head in the game, Elkin.* He dug in again. Pushed off again. His bad leg hit a rise in the snow, and it felt like a knife had been plunged into his kneecap. He bit back a cry of pain, not wanting to give in to it.

A rumble came from above him that sounded like a snowmobile. *The ski patrol.*

Chase threw his arms up over his head and waved them, shouting as loud as he could. Getting hit by a snowmobile would be a terrible conclusion to this adventure.

They were getting closer, almost on top of him, and he heard a shout over the sound of the motors. Two guys, two snowmobiles. One of them split off, and the two of them rolled up on either side of him. The man in front lifted his goggles.

"Hey, man. Don't you know this is a ski hill? You're supposed to ski back down!" Pete the chairlift operator peered down at him, a confused expression on his face. "What are you doing out here? I thought you weren't skiing."

"I'll excuse your joke, but only because I'm so glad to see you." Chase's teeth chattered with cold and a pure shot of relief. "But listen, I'm going to need some help."

"Yeah. Looks like it." Pete leaped off the snowmobile and waved for the other guy to help. Chase was embarrassed to only vaguely recognize the other employee.

He winced as the two men lifted him to his feet, the pain shooting through his entire leg. It was a team effort to ease

him onto the back of the snowmobile.

“Sorry we don’t have a rescue sled,” Pete said as he got back on the snowmobile. “We didn’t expect to find anybody on the slopes since they closed twenty minutes ago.”

“No problem. Hey, would you call down to the lodge and make sure my brother’s around? I’ll need to talk to him, and my phone’s dead.”

Pete made the call and drove Chase back to the main lodge. Every bump hurt his leg, but the pain was already beginning to ease—if only a little. His awkward angle sitting in the snow probably hadn’t helped. At the front door, Pete offered him an arm to get off the snowmobile, and Chase found he could bear weight.

“Thanks, man. Really appreciate the rescue out there.”

Pete saluted him and headed back out.

Dealing with the situation probably could have waited until morning, but Chase couldn’t wait another moment to put an end to all the stolen-bracelet nonsense. He hobbled through the lobby to the bank of elevators and went up to the second floor. This guest and his family always booked the largest suite available when they visited. He made it to the end of the hallway and rapped on the door.

A confused murmuring came from inside, and after a few moments, the door cracked open. Emily’s mom, a platinum-blonde who he’d never seen without all her makeup, squinted at him in a pair of silk pajamas. “Emily, get back in *bed*,” she said in a loud whisper. “How can I help you? My husband isn’t here right now if he’s who you were looking for.”

Chase took the bracelet from his pocket and held it in the air so she could see it. “I think someone lost this.”

“He found my *bracelet*?” The door flew open, and a squealing Emily ran out. She tore it from Chase’s hand, pressing it to her cheek. “I can’t believe you found it!”

Chase met the woman’s gaze, her open mouth proof of her shock. “Where—where was it?”

“It has a broken clasp,” he explained. “It was in some churned-up snow near a tree.”

The little girl burst into tears.

“Emily, what—” Emily’s mother put a hand on her shoulder.

“Hey, listen—it’s okay.” He knelt to Emily’s level biting back a groan. “Did your bracelet break while you were skiing today? I’d love to hear what happened.” He wanted all the truth and needed to hear the words for Tana’s sake.

Emily looked up at him, her bottom lip quivering and her face red. “It broke,” she howled. “It fell off my wrist. I got to the bottom of the hill, and it was g-gone.” Her eyes went wide. “I didn’t want to tell my dad. He would have been so mad at me. So, he saw I wasn’t wearing it, I said my teacher took it.” Emily hung her head, tears dripping down onto the floor.

Her mother gasped. “Mr. Elkin, I promise you, we will make things right. Emily?” She crooked a finger at her daughter. “Come back to bed. We’ll sort all this out in the morning.” She turned back to Chase. “I’m sincerely sorry about this and my husband’s overreaction, Mr. Elkin. You leave him to me.” The glint in her eyes suggested that her husband should be very, very worried.

She shut the door with a muted *click*, and Chase felt like the weight of the world had been lifted off his shoulders. Almost all the weight, anyway. He still had one more conversation to have tonight before he could finally give in to the pain and head for home.

Chase took the elevator back down to the main floor and headed for his brother’s office.

“Hey,” he said. Their faces lit up, and his grandmother rushed to him, throwing her arms around him.

“Chase, we heard from the ski patrol. What made you go out on the hills? Your leg—” His grandmother started, her voice worried and strained.

“I was looking for the bracelet.” Chase held his grandmother tight. She could beat her cancer, but tonight was proof life was short and fragile enough as it was. “And I found it.”

Jonas scoffed. “You didn’t. In the snow?”

“I was lucky.” He straightened up, keeping his arm around his grandmother. “I put on a pair of skis and then skied until my leg gave out. It happened to give out next to a big fir tree, which is exactly where I found the bracelet. I’ve returned it to the family. The little girl, Emily, admitted that it broke while she was skiing, and she made up the story about Tana to keep her dad from getting upset.”

Jonas put a hand to his forehead, dropping into his leather chair. “Damn.”

“So, what *you’re* going to do,” Chase continued, “is give Tana her job back right now *and* promote her to the position she earned. Either that, or I’ll leave with Tana to wherever her next job is, assuming she even wants me anymore. From now on, we’re a package deal.”

Grandmother took a step back and beamed up at him. “That’s my Chase.”

“Right now, Jonas. And be prepared to grovel.” Chase wasn’t backing down, and he wanted this over so he could go home with some dignity before his leg gave out.

Jonas nodded. “We have to make things right.”

He hadn’t failed Tana after all. Chase went back to his house and waited for word Tana had returned. Except all he got was a text from his brother saying that she wasn’t answering his calls. Come morning, Chase would make sure the message got delivered. Personally, if he had to. But right now, he had to get off his leg.

TANA

Tana didn't have much to pack, but it was taking forever. She surveyed her bedroom in the cottage and sighed. This place was supposed to be a new beginning—a house stuffed full of memories. She still had boxes in the closet that had yet to be unpacked from the move. Now they'd go into storage in her parents' basement until she found another place. Tana lifted her suitcase, surprisingly light, and hauled it out toward the front door.

She didn't want to leave. Leaving felt like giving up.

But Tana lifted her chin and went back for the last few boxes anyway. Lindsey was waiting for her at her parents' house, and she couldn't—wouldn't—leave her daughter hanging. Not now, and not ever. They had a life in front of them.

It wouldn't be the one Tana had planned on when she first got the job offer at Elk Lodge. But it would be something amazing. It had to be.

Speaking of the greatest kid on the planet—or thinking of her, she supposed, since there was nobody in the cottage to talk to—Tana needed to figure out something special for her. Something to make up for the upheaval in her life.

There were no ski slopes in her parents' town, but maybe she could treat Lindsey to some borrowed studio time at one of the dance places. Once upon a time, Lindsey had been in love with tutus and pliés.

Tana was halfway to the door when a knock sounded, startling her. She set the box in her arms down before pulling the door

open. “Chase! What are you doing here?”

Chase stood there, feet planted, looking slightly out of breath and as gorgeous as ever. His presence flooded the room along with the morning sun. He looked slightly tousled, as if he’d just climbed out of bed. Tana was seized by the urge to drag him directly back to her bedroom. Against all reason, because she was leaving. The bed wasn’t made, but they didn’t need sheets to do what she wanted to do. She didn’t need sheets to lose herself in Chase’s body and forget all the things that hurt her.

“I couldn’t get a hold of you.” His green eyes shone with light and hope, and Tana couldn’t catch her breath, either. “Your voicemail is full, and nobody at the lodge can get you to pick up, either. But I had to see you. I had to *talk* to you. I kept coming by here to see if you’d come back. It’s been two days, and I—I can’t let you drive away for the last time without hearing me out.”

“I turned my phone off.” Her life was in shambles around her, or at least it had been until this moment. Chase was the first real spark of hope she’d felt, aside from Lindsey, in days. A spark she didn’t want to feel. “I emailed my resignation this morning, and I don’t want to talk to anyone from Elk Lodge. Anyone, including you,” Tana huffed. She’d done enough crying, and now she needed to stay strong. But it was hard with him standing in front of her.

“If you don’t like what I have to say, then I’ll turn around and leave, and I’ll never bother you again. Okay?”

I want you to kiss me. Less talk. More kissing. At the very least, she needed to hear him out. “Go ahead. I’m listening.” It was the easiest way to get him to leave.

“What happened in the past isn’t important to me. What’s important to me now is that you *know* I believe in you. I shouldn’t have reacted the way I did when I found out what happened because of your ex. You’re right, it was in your past. You couldn’t be expected to divulge every detail when you didn’t know how I felt about you.”

“How you felt?”

“How I *feel*. I love you, Tana. That’s why I went to find the bracelet.”

“Wait, what?” Tana tried to wrap her head around what Chase just said. *Impossible. All of it.* Thinking back to the morning it happened, she knew she’d been all over the ski slope with Emily. The odds of Chase finding a delicate tennis bracelet made for a child were astronomical. And the odds of him falling for her? Miraculous. She wasn’t sure which shocked her more—the bracelet or the *I love you*. “You found it in the snow? On the slopes? But you don’t ski anymore.”

“I do now.” Chase grinned. “I skied until my leg gave out. Landed almost on top of it. But I found it. It had a broken clasp. I took it back to the family, and Emily confessed that she’d made up the story about it being stolen because she knew her dad would be mad.”

“Chase, that—that couldn’t have been easy, searching in the snow. Are you okay?” Even the bunny hill would have been painful for him. And yet he’d kept going. *For her.* Tana thought her heart might explode into a ball of glitter and song. Gratitude sang in her veins. She could be thankful for this, even if he said nothing else to her.

“I’m fine. I’m completely fine. And it’s over, Tana. You’re cleared. Right before all this happened, my brother told me he was going to give you the promotion. After I returned the bracelet to Emily and her parents, I talked to Jonas and demanded he give you your job back *and* give you the promotion. I made it pretty clear to my brother that if he didn’t reinstate you, I was leaving with you.”

His words hit Tana like the world’s most exciting snowballs. She hadn’t checked her voicemails, not wanting to face the inevitable message that they were letting her go before she got the jump on the situation and resigned. It was a matter of pride. But this, this was a miracle.

Chase wanted to leave with her more than he wanted to stay here without her. Her heart broke open, spilling hope all over her insides in a warm wave.

“And,” Chase continued, “I guess I should say that...it’s okay if you’re done with this place. But I hope you’ll at least consider the offer.”

Tana stepped closer to him. The longer he stood in her house, the harder he was to resist. *Don’t just melt into his arms, Tana. Be honest with him.* “I was really hurt when you ran out before that meeting. That was one of the most humiliating moments of my life, and you just...you walked away.” There. It was out in the open, and not during a shouting match. “And... I’ll be honest because that’s kind of my thing. The pain hasn’t faded. I can still feel it...” she tapped her chest, “in here. But the fact that you did what you did to clear my name means something.” Tears welled up in her eyes. *Don’t cry. Don’t do it.* She swallowed back a relieved sob.

“Oh, Tana—” He took a step closer.

“Wait, I’m not done yet.” She didn’t stop Chase when he put his arms around her. “I realized after the fact that you were in a really awkward position with your family. I should have taken that into account. You were probably just as blindsided as I was.” Another deep breath, this one for courage. “The reason I never mentioned what happened is because I never wanted to think about it, or him, ever again. That part of my life doesn’t even seem like it belongs to me.”

“What about *this*, Tana?” Chase took in all the boxes in the living room. “I don’t want you to leave.”

“Oh, God.” Tana leaned her head forward until it rested on Chase’s chest and let out a laugh that carried an incredible tension with it. “I’ve never been so lonely in my life. I miss you. I...*love* you.”

She felt his shock through the palms of her hands, and then Chase reached to cup her face, tilting it up toward his. “Say that again,” Chase murmured.

“I love you.” One errant tear fell onto her cheek. “And Lindsey loves you. We both miss you like crazy. She wants to come back here and do her ski lessons. She never wanted to leave.” She laughed, but it made her cry to think about it. “I didn’t tell her what was going on, but Linds was sure that if I

just said sorry for whatever happened, everything would be okay, and we wouldn't have to go away. This place is home to us."

"Thank goodness." Chase leaned down and kissed her, his lips soft and manly, confident and sensual. They *fit*.

Her arms went around his neck like they were made to do it, and he pulled her in close. The heat between them grew until Tana was panting, desperate to be free of her clothes. But the conversation wasn't over yet. If she tumbled into bed with Chase before they were finished talking, she knew she'd let it be—water under the bridge. And she couldn't be that woman anymore. He had to know what she wanted.

"Chase," she said.

He paused, resting his lips against her neck.

"I want to stay at the lodge."

"I kind of gathered that," he joked.

"I know you want to leave."

He pulled back, his expression sobering.

"I know you talked about moving to California, and maybe you still want to do that." Tana wasn't going to hold him back from doing what he loved. If they had to be apart, so be it—she'd wait for him. Or go with him. They'd figure it all out. "Again, I want to stay here, but if you want to leave, there's room in my car for one more, though you'll have to put up with *Frozen* playing on repeat on the iPad."

"What about this?" He kissed her neck, working his way up to her earlobe. "What if we stay here for a bit longer? You have a killer job for as long as you want it, and you could always move into my house."

"That's an Elkin family house," she said automatically. Those houses were places Tana could only ever dream of owning, because she'd never have the money. Unless...

"And you would be part of the family." Chase went still, except for the pad of his thumb stroking her cheek. She leaned her face into his touch. "I love you, Tana. I don't want to

spend another day away from you. Wherever you are, that's where I want to go."

Tana breathed in the scent of him, all cold air and soap, and knew she couldn't live without him, either. She'd do anything in her power to avoid it. She'd found the perfect man, and she was going to hold on tight.

"I want to go to the bedroom," Tana said. "Right now."

EPILOGUE

Chase

March

Ever since his first attempt on the bunny hill three months ago, Chase had returned to physical therapy with a new goal. Getting back on skis. The first two months had been agonizing, but little by little, it became easier as muscle memory kicked in and he got stronger. Soon enough, he was enjoying his time on the slopes and his love of skiing was as strong as ever. Provided he didn't overdo it.

"Okay, ready?" Chase led Tana to the bunny hill chairlift, and they rode together to the top. But instead of turning right, they turned left toward the base of the closest intermediate slope. "Close your eyes until I say you can open them."

"What's this all about?" she asked.

"You'll see soon enough." Back when Chase was a little kid, he'd been so anxious to graduate to these hills. He still remembered the adrenaline rush now. It was almost that same kind of day—sunny, crisp, clear. If he closed his eyes, he'd be able to take himself back to his former body and back to those limitless days.

"Let me *see*." Tana jiggled in place, bouncing up and down on the balls of her feet. "Come on. You can't bring me all the way out here and then not show me."

"Look," Chase said, pointing up the slope.

Tana blinked against the bright sun. Chase studied her face, waiting for the moment when she saw her surprise. For when she spotted her daughter.

Chase had asked another instructor for a favor that morning, and now Lindsey came down the slope with the woman, whose cheering voice carried all the way down the hill. The pair steered their way down, successfully navigating the steep parts and the small rises. He had originally thought he might like to do these runs with Lindsey himself, but he'd also wanted to experience watching with Tana. If only he could have made a clone of himself.

"Oh, my gosh! It's Lindsey," Tana exclaimed, the excitement in her voice contagious.

Lindsey looked just like Tana, down to the fierce determination on her face and her natural grace out on the slopes. Chase got choked up watching it. He turned to Tana and noticed her cheeks glistening with happy tears.

She stood watching for a few more moments, and then raised her arms above her head and let out a loud *whoop* that he guessed could be heard in Utah.

"She's so good!" Tana shouted at Chase. "She's so *good!*"

Lindsey whizzed by, waving a pole in the air. "Hi, Mom," she shouted. "I'm going again! Watch me!"

The instructor followed, waving to them, too.

Tana threw her arms around Chase's neck and gave him a kiss that was so hot it verged on inappropriate. "You are the best instructor my daughter could ever have. Did you know that?"

"I do." Chase grinned. Tana's comment and laughter made him prouder of the accomplishment than anything else he'd done in his life.

"I'm so excited to work with you." The heat in Tana's eyes was enough to melt him on the spot. "You're going to make a great athletic director."

"I couldn't do it without you."

“Pshhh.” Tana swiped at the front of his jacket, then pulled him down for one last kiss. “You can do anything, Chase Elkin.”

Chase was finally starting to believe it again, now that he’d found his footing at the lodge. He’d just been named the director of their new and expanded athletics program. They’d make ski instruction more comprehensive and now offered cross-training classes in the gym. He would oversee all the specialized programs, from beginner development to expert-level training. He couldn’t have dreamed up a more perfect job, and that was it—that was the peak of his dreams. That, and having Tana there by his side.

“I heard from Chris Denton this morning.”

“You mean, Chef Chris? I still can’t believe you two are such good friends.”

After the holidays, Chris had contacted him to gauge his interest in investing in a studio that had created a series of video games geared toward the VR market. Hilariously, one of their first releases had been based on Chris’s cooking show where players would compete against him in head-to-head cooking competitions. The game had gone viral on TikTok with players vying to win a cooking lesson on the set of *Cooking with Chris*.

Now the studio was looking to add more games and Chris had floated the idea of basing one of the games on downhill skiing and they wanted to use Chase. Initially, he’d turned it down, but Chris had been relentless and Chase agreed to meet with the developers. Before he knew it, he was wearing a green suit covered in sensors while they mapped out a series of movements that would take real-life Chase and place him in virtual reality.

Chase wrapped an arm around Tana’s waist, and the two of them stood side-by-side, watching Lindsey come down the hill again. She’d come so far from when he first met her. Tana had been so scared that her daughter would be injured on the slopes, but now her face glowed with excitement on behalf of her daughter. “Beta users are having a blast with my game and

they're supposed to send over the latest version for us to try out. I'm hoping you'll be impressed."

"You know I'm already impressed with you."

Chase's heart pounded, though he'd been planning what he'd say next for days now. "Well, I hope you'll be impressed because I'm working hard on another promotion, too."

"What's that?" Over at the chairlift, Lindsey climbed back on. Tana searched Chase's eyes. "Are you looking to take over the Lodge? I don't think Jonas would like that very much."

"No. Actually, I'm going to put all my effort into getting promoted from athletic director to dad." Tana froze for a dizzying instant. If she said no, Chase would sink into the snow and never resurface. "I'm pretty determined to do whatever it takes to get this promotion, if you'll both have me."

Tana burst out with a laugh that turned into a cry, and she pulled him down into another kiss. If this kept up, they were going to have to sneak away to their place. It wouldn't do for them to jump each other in front of all the guests. "If that's what you want," Tana said fiercely, "then you keep doing what you're doing. Because honestly, Chase, the hiring manager in charge of *that* position is more than halfway convinced."

"More than halfway?" he mused. "I don't know if I'll get the job. Unless—"

"All the way." Tana kissed him one more time and pulled back, putting space between them and holding her arms up toward the sky as if surrendering to him. "I'm convinced. You're hired."

**END OF THE BILLIONAIRE
ATHLETE'S CHRISTMAS FLING**

CHRISTMAS WITH THE ELKIN BILLIONAIRES BOOK ONE

THE
BILLIONAIRE'S
Fake Christmas Engagement

CHRISTMAS WITH THE ELKIN BILLIONAIRES: BOOK TWO

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

BLURB

Business and pleasure were never meant to mix...

Billionaire Gabe Elkins is known for making brilliant decisions. Asking Anna Waters to pretend to be his fiancée at his family's Christmas celebration isn't one of them. All he wanted was to make his dying grandmother happy, to show her that he could find the perfect woman. But Anna is a little too perfect. Too vibrant. Too...sexy. It was supposed to be a business deal. So why does he find himself wanting much, much more?

Anna only wants one thing: to open her own business. All she has to do is convince Gabe's family that she's in love with him. Turns out, she's really good at this fake fiancée stuff. Maybe a little too good. She's starting to like being a part of Gabe's family—and starting to like Gabe a little too much too. The red-hot attraction between them feels far too real. Maybe because there's nothing fake about it after all...

GABE

“Here’s to OTT and Marketiq!” Gabe Elkin clinked flutes with the beautiful woman sitting across from him and they both sipped their champagne.

“I still can’t believe you named your company OTT. I know, it’s On Trend Tech, but it really *is* over the top and you clearly didn’t have a PR person helping you out when you came up with that name. So, tell the truth. How drunk were you?” Anna Waters grinned at him, and the deep, rich color of her skin shone under the twinkling lights.

Gabe laughed, his cheeks feeling the pull after spending all day smiling and talking to people at this year’s Tech Expo. “Would you believe me if I said that my roommate was actually a marketing major?”

Anna snorted and set her flute down. “Tell me he didn’t go into marketing as a career. Please.”

Pulling his phone out, Gabe did a quick Google search as he said, “I hate to break the news to you, but here,” and he handed the phone over to her. She took it from him, looking nervous about what she was going to see, and he felt his grin getting wider. “Go on,” he encouraged her.

Looking down, she looked at the webpage he’d pulled up and blew out a breath. “This is him?”

“It is.”

“Oh, thank goodness he became a vet.” She returned his phone and smiled at the server who had stopped to refill their flutes.

“Although I bet all his pets have terrible names.”

Gabe had just taken a sip and ended up snorting bubbles as he coughed and laughed at the same time. “Actually, he gives all his pets normal human names like: Steve, Bob, and Doris. He said he likes to confuse people about who or what he’s talking about.”

“Of course he does.”

Gabe’s phone buzzed with an incoming call. He glanced at the caller ID. It was his brother Jonas calling. Gabe had been ignoring his calls or claiming he didn’t have time to talk ever since he skipped joining the family for Thanksgiving in Colorado. Gabe would be the first to admit that he loved his family, but dealing with his grandmother’s and oldest brother’s expectations was frustrating on a good day. He swiped his thumb over ignore, and before he could set his phone down, Jonas texted him.

CALL ME! I NEED TO SPEAK WITH YOU!

Huh. He’d spoken to Chase just a few days ago, and he’d sensed something was off. Chase’s insistence that he come back to Colorado for Christmas had seemed out of character, but he’d put it down as Chase’s misery wanting company. But maybe he’d been wrong. He’d figure it out later.

“Earth to Gabe. Have you heard a word I’ve said?” Gabe snapped his head up to see Anna smirking at him. “Must be one helluva a message. What is it? Is Alphabet offering to buy your app before it’s full release?”

“I wish.” He had high expectations for his latest app, Marketiq, and judging from the response to their soft launch during the Expo, he couldn’t wait to see where it would go. “No, it’s my brother. I’ll call him later. Tonight is for celebrating.”

“Hear, hear.” Anna raised her glass in a toast and Gabe downed the champagne in one swallow. He’d barely set it down when an attentive server swooped in to refill his glass. “This place is fantastic.”

Gabe agreed. Located at the top of the STRAT, the Top of the World restaurant treated guests to a spectacular, rotating view of the Strip, all glittering lights and flashing signs under a night sky tinged orange on the horizon by the glow rising from Las Vegas. He loved coming here and it was a great way to wow potential clients and investors, but tonight, the view was eclipsed by his company—Anna Waters, the PR specialist who'd spent the last three months at his side helping him prepare Marketiq for its product launch at the Las Vegas Tech Expo.

“We couldn't have done it without you,” he told Anna. “Thanks to your outreach and the creation of Marketiq's brand ambassadors, everyone is talking about how they can use the app to structure their own marketing campaigns.”

She looked across at him and winked. “Just doing what you hired me for, Mr. Elkin. But I have to admit, creating superfans through those ambassadors was a stroke of genius, if I do say so myself.”

Gabe wrapped his hand around his champagne glass as he contemplated where the night might lead. Anna's dark chocolate eyes still lingered on his. Her eyes were a perfect complement to her hair, which reminded him of silken waves. He loved the dimple that popped up when she smiled, one that far too many times he thought of kissing. And then there were those *curves*. He wasn't supposed to be thinking about those, either. Then again, she technically no longer worked for him.

Gabe cleared his throat. “I wanted to thank you for everything you did.”

“You're welcome.” Her smile got wider. “I take pleasure in a job well done.”

“It was a job *very* well done. I wish I could steal you away for my own company.”

She waved this off with a grin that tugged at something deep within his chest. “You promised—no work talk at the celebration dinner.”

“I would never promise that, and you know it.”

Anna laughed again, sending a bolt of joy straight into the middle of Gabe's chest. Making her laugh—he was going to miss that most of all. It was a low, sweet sound, and he'd heard it plenty over the past weeks, both over the phone and in person.

“Okay, fine.” She smoothed her napkin over her lap. “Can't get anything by you.”

From the way she was looking at him now, all big eyes and pink cheeks, she didn't *want* to get anything by him. Gabe wouldn't mind taking her back to his penthouse. He wouldn't mind it at all. The air heated between them. Dinner was only half-finished, but at the end of it, he had the feeling he wouldn't be going home alone. Anna leaned forward, one hand beneath her chin, and watched him.

Yes.

Gabe's phone buzzed again. Irritation quickly replaced the heady feeling of anticipation that had spilled over him like fine wine. Jonas really needed to stop being so damn impatient. He dipped a hand into his pocket and silenced the call.

But Anna had heard it, and her wide smile shifted to one of concern. “Your brother again?”

“He can wait.” His phone rang again, followed by another text message, and worry crept in at the edges. “All right—maybe it can't. I'm so sorry. Let me take this.”

“Of course, but I'm not going to let my dinner get cold.” Anna shooed him away and picked up her fork. She'd ordered fillet mignon, medium rare, and grilled to perfection. He'd ordered the same, with roasted veggies and potato puree, reminding him of long-ago family dinners at Elk Lodge.

Nothing, however, reminded him of his home so much as the sight of his brother's name on his phone screen. Again. Gabe headed for the restaurant's lobby, bypassing a couple wrapped up in each other on the bench. He found the first available quiet spot near a window that looked out on the Strip.

“I'm at dinner, Jonas. Can I call you back?” He expected his brother to agree.

“No, I’m afraid not. You’ve been ignoring my calls and messages. This can’t wait.” His brother’s tone shook Gabe out of his rushing thoughts. “I need you to come home.”

“What? Now?” A hundred possibilities tumbled into his mind. An accident with one of his brothers. A fire at the lodge. Or worse, something about his grandmother. “Is everything all right?”

Jonas sighed, and Gabe felt that sigh in every bone in his body. “This would have been a lot easier if you’d come home for Thanksgiving.”

Gabe wasn’t interested in his brother guilt tripping him. “I told you, I was busy. If Gran wants to see me so bad, I can always video chat with her or arrange for her to fly out here for a visit.” His brother huffed out a breath and Gabe could hear him mumbling. He combed his fingers through his hair trying not to rub his head in irritation. “Out with it, Jonas. I have a dinner guest waiting for me.”

“You know it’s not even a two-hour flight to get out here and we could have had this discussion together, as a family.”

“Yes, yes.” Gabe hated how impatient he sounded, but his heart was beating fast and hard. If Jonas had something to tell him, then he should say it *now*. Right now. “Did something happen?”

In the beat before Jonas’s answer, dread fanned out in the pit of Gabe’s gut and clenched hard.

“Gran wanted to tell you herself, and I don’t want to make it seem worse than it is,” Jonas told him. *Shit! This was bad.* “But she has lung cancer, and it’s progressed, and we don’t—” There was a pause, and Gabe held his breath. If *Jonas* was struggling through this, then it was bad. “Look. If you were planning on skipping out on Christmas here, I need you to rethink that. She really wants you to come home and spend the time before Christmas with the family. She wants all of us to be together.”

“I’ll be there.” It surprised him how easily the words slipped from his mouth. His brother was right, Gabe had been

planning on skipping Christmas. “Of course I’ll be there. I’ll fly out in the morning.”

He could hear his brother’s sigh. “Good. That’s good. She really wants to see you. We all do.”

Gabe didn’t believe that for a second. While his grandparents had been supportive of him going to college, they’d wanted him to choose an in-state school so he could come home on weekends. As much as he loved Elin and Richard Elkin, who’d so willingly taken the brothers in after their parents had passed away, growing up at Elk Lodge had felt constrictive. He’d wanted to live his own dreams and passions, and that meant moving away.

Gabe had long ago realized that nothing he did ever measured up to Elin Elkin’s expectations, no matter how much his accomplishments impressed the rest of the world. But if this was his grandmother’s last Christmas, he would be there, even if it was as the family disappointment.

“Thanks, Jonas,” he said finally. “I’ll text you when I have my schedule.”

Ending the call, Gabe stared out at the lights below him as he tried to gather himself. He’d wanted his grandmother’s respect all his life, and now it sounded like there wasn’t much time left to get it. To prove to her that he had his life together and would be happy. Being strong financially was never in question. His parents had left all three brothers incredibly well off and his business successes were a result of hard work. But what if he could at least prove to his grandmother he’d settled down and found someone to love, much like she had with his grandfather? Maybe then she’d forgive him for leaving and see that he had his life together. Except there was a little problem with his plan—he wasn’t dating anyone, and time was limited.

An engagement would fix everything.

The idea popped into his head the same way a new idea for an app would—the outlines already there, waiting for the details to be filled in. If an engagement would make his grandmother happy, then all he had to do was get engaged. Never mind that

there was no time to actually fall in love and have a romance. The romance wasn't the point—the engagement was.

He made one quick call to arrange for his private jet to be prepped for the morning, then he headed back to the table, where Anna sat watching over the lights of the Las Vegas Strip with her hands tucked under her chin. *Gorgeous*. Her little black dress hugged her in all the right places. Her hair spilled over her shoulders, gently curled at the ends, and he wanted to run his fingers through it more than he wanted to finish his dinner. More than he wanted to do anything else. Her huge brown eyes met his as he slid back into his seat.

“Something happened,” she said definitively.

Gabe wasn't the type to get into personal discussions with colleagues, but her voice was so forthright that something broke free in him. She was *so* intuitive. It was what had drawn him to her when they were interviewing for a PR specialist in the first place. “My grandmother has lung cancer.”

“Oh, Gabe, I'm so sorry.”

He suddenly had no appetite. “It's all right. I mean—it's not all right. My family wants me home for the holidays. I'm leaving tomorrow. But the thing is—” He paused, sensing the edge of a precipice under his feet. If he admitted this to her and she stormed out of there, he had no idea what he would do. “The thing is, I've never brought home anyone who passed muster with my grandmother.” An old ache to please her reared up. “I want to make her happy, especially if this is her last Christmas.”

“Make her happy?” Anna cocked her head to the side. “You mean, give her some good news? Maybe that you're seeing someone?”

Not good enough. “I mean, I want to bring someone home with me.” The restaurant rotated, the smooth motion bringing different lights into focus on Anna's face. Sure, she wasn't an actress or a business magnate, but he'd tried bringing home women like that, and it hadn't panned out. “I want her to know that everything's going to be all right with me and that I'm settled and happy with my life choices.”

“Even if it’s an act?” There was no judgment in her tone or her eyes.

“Even then.” Nothing was more important than giving his grandmother peace of mind. And no one would be better at it than Anna. She was perceptive and skilled at making connections, and she would fit in at Elk Lodge. “This could be my only chance to paint the picture for her.” Another ache rose in his throat and he swallowed it back. “So, I have to ask you a question.”

Anna straightened up. “Are you proposing to me, Mr. Elkin?”

ANNA

“**Y** es.”

Anna stared at him, blinking her eyes. Of all the things she expected at the dinner, which Gabe had pitched as a thank-you meal between two close colleagues, she had *not* expected a proposal.

He let out a laugh, causing the sudden tension across her shoulders to loosen. “I’m sure you think this sounds bonkers, but...what do you think about marrying me?”

“I do,” said Anna seriously. “Think it’s bonkers, that is.” She hoped that he was joking and this was just his way of burning off some steam, even if she could think of far better ways to do that.

“No, really. Would you pose as my fiancée and go home with me for the holidays?”

It was fine. Of course it was fine. He wasn’t *actually* proposing. Yet Anna’s heart didn’t seem to know the difference. It jittered and pounded and leapt up into her throat like he’d really gone down on one knee at the table with a ring in a box. Anna did what she usually did when she had no idea what to do—smiled. Big. Warm. Inviting him to laugh it all off if he wanted.

“I think we should get to know each other better before we go in front of the priest.” She threw in a wink for good measure.

Gabe leaned forward. “What do you want to know? I’m an open book.”

He was *not* an open book. They had their jokes and conversations, but Gabe didn't talk about home or his family very much. Anna knew from tidbits he'd dropped into conversation that his parents had long since passed away, but aside from those drive-by facts, she didn't know much about him.

Except, of course, that he was extremely handsome, with what she'd call sun-kissed hair that definitely didn't come out of a bottle and made him look like he'd just stepped out of a magazine. That and his piercing blue eyes. And a body that might well make a nun swoon, it was so perfect.

Handsome. Driven. Talented. Rich. It had Anna at a loss for words. "You're sure you're not kidding about this?"

Those piercing eyes met hers again, as though he were planning something in his head. "I'm sure. I want you to be my fake fiancée."

Maybe he *was* a little bit crazy. Bad news could do that to a person. They'd had a long three days at the expo, with very little sleep. People often made rash decisions when they were tired. Anna didn't know how often those decisions amounted to "come home and pretend to be my fiancée." But it was certainly within the realm of possibility.

She scanned the restaurant, taking in all the other couples enjoying the view. They weren't so much looking out the window as they were at each other, eyes alight in the candles from the centerpieces. Those were real couples. It wasn't feasible to expect she'd pull off an act like that with Gabe. Not without potentially losing her heart. And the way he was looking at her now...

It seems real. But obviously, it wasn't.

"I don't know if I'm up for the part." She gave him a cheeky smile, one she hoped covered her nervousness and the fact that she wanted to lean in close to him. Flirt with him—even more than they'd already been flirting. But then, with a man like Gabe, it wouldn't be all fun and games. Prior to agreeing to take the gig with OTT, she'd googled him and his company and she knew his net worth, which was partly inherited, and

that put him in a whole different class. Which meant there would be press and public recognition of their engagement at some point. And then Anna's past would come out and things would get bad. Fast. "Maybe you should hire an actress."

"If I did that, I'd have to get to know an actress. I already know you. And I already like you. I want you, Anna, not some random woman from a casting call."

I want you. The words came out in a seductive tone that made her swoon. Not too much, but a little. Anna sat bolt upright in her seat, quietly assessing Gabe.

He leaned in close, his eyes alight, and focused on her. He was flirting with her. Wanted her. For a fake fiancée if nothing else. And it would be nothing else—she decided that right away. Her last boyfriend hadn't thought she was worthy enough to be seen in public with him. Anna wouldn't make the mistake of giving anyone the power to hurt her again. Relationships were a thing of the past.

"My family's not nearly as big-time as yours," she said, trying to keep her voice in check. "We might not fit on paper."

"What does that matter?" Gabe cocked his head to the side, blue eyes skimming over her skin and heating her up from the inside. "This is only a charade, not a real engagement, and even if it was a real engagement, a person's past doesn't matter nearly as much as the present. And the future."

"It could matter," she argued, keeping her tone light and pretty. "Wouldn't that kind of thing matter to your grandmother?"

"She's not going to dig into your past if that's what you're saying." A grin flashed across his face and disappeared. "She'll be preoccupied with the holidays and being happy. She'll like you, Anna. That's why I want you to come with me. You'll be wonderful for her."

I could be wonderful for you, too. But she didn't say that out loud.

"Listen." Gabe leaned in another inch, nudging his plate out of the way so he could speak to her in a low voice, one that sent

desire curling through a place in her belly Anna had ignored since the breakup.

Desire! Who got such a mad crush on her own boss? Or colleague—whatever he was.

“We’ll stay at my family’s luxury ski resort for the holidays. It’s one of the nicest, most sought-after places in the country for winter vacations. Seriously. Every year, the place is decked out like something out of a Christmas movie. No expense or Christmas tradition is spared and if there’s something that’s missing, you just have to say the word, and I’ll make it happen. Come on, what do you say? There will be tons of Christmas traditions, like carols and cocoa and the whole nine yards. Lights on the trees—everything. Enjoy your Christmas in a winter wonderland and we can also talk about your dream.”

“What dream?” She wrapped a hand around her champagne glass and took a sip. They’d traded dreams back and forth over the many hours they’d been working together, but it had always been lighthearted and joking. For the life of her, Anna couldn’t remember what she’d told him.

“Of owning your own public relations firm. There are ways I can help you with that.” Gabe’s mouth curved up in a smile so attractive that she felt a gravitational pull toward it and had to keep herself firmly planted in her seat to resist it.

Anna would never have dreamed of asking him to give her a hand up. She’d worked hard all her life to overcome the lousy hand she’d been dealt—the father with the criminal record, the mother who married four times and couldn’t ever decide when to come down to earth, a brother who—well she wasn’t going to think about him. Holidays had been nothing like the picture Gabe was painting of his family’s resort. No cocoa, no carols, just fighting and bitter silences. She’d actually been relieved the year her parents had finally split.

Not that she was going to tell Gabe all of that. Getting that deep into her history would be *way* across the line for two people who worked together, no matter how close they’d been over the past three months.

“And...” Gabe sat up, looking her square in the eye. “Don’t forget, my grandmother is dying.” The confident look on his face slipped. “Please. Do it for me. It would mean the world to me if she knew I was engaged to someone wonderful and had my life all sorted out.” He let out a breath. “There. That’s it. That’s all my cards on the table.”

Anna felt like she was still holding a fistful of cards with things like a *criminal father* and her *mother’s four marriages* in her hand. But none of them could top the pleading look on Gabe’s face, or how incredibly handsome he was. She’d stolen so many glances at him while they were working together, trying to ignore the twist of want in her chest. Up until now, she’d been pretty successful at it.

Beyond that, the offer was one of the most attractive she’d ever received. Christmas at a luxury resort, far from anywhere she’d ever lived. No tense hours spent trying to calm high emotions with her parents. No new husband showing up with her mother. It would be like stepping into a different world for the holidays—the kind of world she saw in Hallmark movies.

“For how long? Fly out Christmas Eve, come back Christmas morning?”

“Oh, no. My family wants me there as soon as I can get there. I’m planning to fly out tomorrow morning, if possible.”

Her breath caught. “You want me to spend almost two weeks with you out there?” Suddenly Colorado seemed like a vast state of forests and wildlands, Anna trying to picture a luxury mountaintop resort they’d need snowshoes to get to.

Gabe shrugged. “Two to three. We’d leave in the morning and come back after New Year’s.”

“But my job...”

He gave her a look. “You and I both know there’s nothing scheduled from now until after the holidays. Everybody’s going home for Christmas.” His eyes twinkled. “Honestly, Anna, no pressure. If it doesn’t seem like something you can do, then I’m not going to hold it against you. But it would be nice if I could show you off as my significant other.”

“I know you wouldn’t hold it against me.” She heard the sincerity in his voice as clearly as she felt it. Gabe moved fast when it came to making plans, but he was flexible, too. It was why they’d managed to put together such an excellent product launch. It was why they’d hooked all those international clients on his app. It was another success in his portfolio.

If that was how he was when it came to romance...

No. This wasn’t going to *be* a romance. This was going to be a project, like the one they had just wrapped up, only with more acting. A bright spark of anticipation lit up in her chest. A luxury Christmas—the very first in Anna’s life. And a chance to collaborate with Gabe on her own business idea. When she landed in Vegas after the New Year, life could be completely different.

The ten-year-old version of Anna, who had wanted a whole new life more than anything in the world, had become her personal cheering section inside her mind.

Look at him! that part of her squealed. *Go to Christmas with him!*

And really, she had nothing to lose...except Gabe as a client if the whole thing went south. Anna had never allowed a project to end on bad terms in her entire career. She wasn’t about to start now.

Gabe rested his fingertips on the linen tablecloth, his plate abandoned, and his body tense. He was ready to go *now*, she realized. *Right now*. And if she waited to leave until morning, she might lose her nerve. Might decide that it wasn’t very professional to jet off with one of her clients to spend Christmas as his pretend fiancée. Might consider all the many and varied possible consequences and decide that it wasn’t such a good idea after all—for either one of them.

“Let’s go now,” she said quickly.

His eyes went wide. “What?”

“Isn’t part of the bargain a flight on your private jet? How soon can it be ready?”

The shock on Gabe's face gave way to a surprised grin. "Ninety minutes, if I make the call now. But we can't just hop on a plane, you know. We need something first."

"Our clothes?" She would have to shop, come to think of it, her mind was already picturing the Forum Shops at Caesar's Palace and wondering if she'd have time to head out to the sportswear store at the outlet mall. Anna's wardrobe was geared toward business dressy, not winter in Colorado. After a lifetime in the Nevada heat, she'd need a parka and boots. The thought thrilled her more than a little. Maybe a parka with faux fur around the hood. Something soft and sexy.

"More important than that." He reached out a hand to her across the table, and Anna took it. The simple touch took her breath away. *Play it cool*. She couldn't be breathless and blushing the entire time they were with his family, or else they'd know something was up. Gabe ran his thumb over the empty space on her ring finger. "We need a ring."

GABE

Gabe's high from getting the go-ahead on the most ambitious plan of his life lasted all through their trip to the jewelry store. The owner, a close friend of his, had opened during off hours as a special favor. They'd managed to catch the owner of the winter sports boutique next door as she was closing, and she was happy to remain open for them while they picked out what they would need, especially once she realized how much they were spending.

He'd bought Anna everything he could think of for the trip to Colorado. Never mind the cost. Any woman who agreed to marry him would have a full winter wardrobe, of course, and be comfortable in it. It took three hours to shop and another thirty minutes to get to the private jet, which waited for them on the airport's tarmac.

By the time they landed in Colorado, it was late. Too late to wake up his entire family and have a meet-and-greet with Anna. Gabe felt like he was sneaking in after curfew. As he walked across the lobby at a fast clip, the night receptionist blinked at him curiously. "Mr. Elkin?" She wore a pleasant smile, but it was clear they hadn't expected him to arrive mere hours after Jonas's call.

"Hi, Rebecca." He leaned on the counter, trying not to let sleep drag him down into oblivion. "I'm a bit early, or late, depending on how you look at it. I'm assuming the family suite is available?" He could have chosen to stay in his personal home, but he wanted to be close to his grandmother.

“Of course it is.” Like several of the properties around the resort, the penthouse family suite was reserved for visiting Elkin family members and other high-profile guests.

His phone beeped, signaling that it was set to act as his key card, and the receptionist’s hand hovered over her landline phone. “No need to wake anybody up. I’ll let them know I’m here in the morning.”

He brought a half-asleep Anna through the lobby and up to the suite on the lodge’s top floor. To call it a “suite” was a bit of an understatement. It featured a hot tub, a formal dining room, and a sunken living area with a spectacular view of the ski slopes and the mountains. She fell gratefully into the king-sized bed in the master bedroom. It was only then that the full extent of the suite hit Gabe.

It only had one bedroom.

The sofa was an option.

Gabe hadn’t been able to sleep on the plane, and now exhaustion pulled him toward the bed with all the force of a black hole. He tumbled onto the other side, leaving a big gap between them, and fell asleep as soon as his head hit the pillow. Only to wake up to his cell phone buzzing itself off the bedside table and falling to the floor. Gabe rolled over and snatched it up, answering without looking to see who it was. “Lo?”

“You’re here already?” Jonas’s voice was all too chipper, as though he’d been up for hours, showered, and exercised. His brother ruled the resort with an iron fist and expected others to have the same determination. “I thought you weren’t coming until today, and Rebecca let me know you checked in in the middle of the night. You should have told me.”

Gabe rolled onto his back and groaned. “I didn’t want to wake anybody up.”

“Well, if you’re up now, we’re waiting for you in the lobby.”

He stared at the ceiling, trying to make sense of this. “Waiting in the lobby for what?”

“For you.” The bed rustled next to Gabe, and a painfully sweet awareness shuddered through him—Anna, stretching and yawning, her dark hair spread out over the pillow in gentle waves. “We can all sit down to breakfast together.”

“No,” Gabe said quickly. Too quickly. “I don’t know if we’re ready for breakfast.” Oh, God. The word *we’re* slipped out before he could stop it, and now it was time to put his plan into action. And all without his morning coffee.

“We?” Jonas did an extraordinarily bad job of hiding the surprise in his voice. “I didn’t know you brought a guest.”

“I did. But we need some time before we make introductions. Meet you after breakfast?”

“Sure. See you then.”

Gabe dropped the phone and rolled back over to find the bed empty and the door to the ensuite bathroom closing. He could hear the water running a minute later.

Anna, in the shower. In the shower. After sleeping in bed with him all night.

That’s what a fake fiancée did, right? It was no big deal. It was nothing. He brushed by her once she’d gotten out, wrapped in several towels. “Go like that,” he joked.

Her beautiful smile was reflected in the mirror as she dried her hair and put on her makeup. Gabe showered, trying to eradicate the freshly showered and still wet image of Anna from his brain.

Gabe emerged a few minutes later dressed in a button-down shirt and pants that wouldn’t have been out of place at a fancy dinner. He never knew what to do with himself here. Should he play the tech mogul, too suave to go out on the slopes? Or should he switch into ski gear and head off into the snowy distance? There had to be a middle ground and a button-down shirt was it.

For now.

Anna looked him up and down and then looked at her own clothes. She was dressed in a pair of gray slacks and a

matching jacket that had the shape of business wear but in a softer fabric. It made him want to slide his palms over it and pull her close. “I was going to ask if this was okay to wear, but it looks like we had the same idea.”

“You look perfect. Let’s go.”

She followed him out to the elevators, and they got in, sharing a collegial silence. *This isn’t another expo.* But Gabe couldn’t help treating it like one.

“So, my family is downstairs,” he said. “They’ll be headed out from breakfast soon, and we’ll have introductions.”

“All right.” Anna didn’t seem particularly bothered by this. She watched him intently. “Are you thinking about a change of plans? We can always say I’m a business associate. I mean, I’m dressed for it.”

His stomach turned over. “No. This is for the best.” But the high he’d ridden the previous day had melted. The last dregs seeped away as the elevator let them out into the lodge’s grand lobby, with its soaring ceilings and enormous Christmas tree decorated to its last inch. All that, and his family, standing at the foot of the tree in a tight circle. Waiting. For him and Anna.

Oh, no. This hadn’t been a good idea at all. Gabe had brought home a stranger, and now what? Jonas caught sight of him and waved as if they were in a crowded room and not a mildly busy lobby. And then they were all looking at him—Chase, Jonas, and his grandmother.

He grabbed Anna’s hand, relieved when she squeezed back. A stolen glance at her revealed nothing but a confident smile. She was so *good* at this, and they hadn’t even started to talk.

They joined his family, Anna’s ring pressing against his own fingers, and Gabe couldn’t wait to share the news. “Grandmother.” He bent down to embrace her and kiss her cheek. She seemed smaller and frailer than she had before. It twisted at his heart. “I’d like you to meet my fiancée, Anna Waters. I brought her with me for the holidays. Anna, I’d like

you to meet my grandmother, Elin Elkin, and my brothers Jonas and Chase.”

Jonas blinked at him. “Your fiancée?”

“You got *engaged*? Good for you, man.” Chase stepped forward and pounded his back with an open palm. “Nice surprise for the holidays.”

“It *is* surprising,” his grandmother said quietly. “Why would you keep this from us, Gabe?”

Abort mission. This wasn’t what he wanted—not more disappointment from his grandmother. He searched for a way to say that he was only kidding, that this was a joke, a family joke, but Anna’s soft voice interrupted his thoughts.

“I know it probably seems shocking. We got engaged a few months ago, but we wanted to spend some time settling into the idea before we announced it.” She shyly held up her ring for everyone to see. “It felt right to come here and be with his family while we celebrate.”

Grandmother’s face softened, but she still hesitated. “Won’t your family be expecting a visit?”

“They’re very supportive of our plans, Mrs. Elkin,” Anna said smoothly. “I just had to see where Gabe came from.” She looked all around the lobby, her eyes shining with excitement. “Can you blame me? It’s even more spectacular than Gabe described. The garland with the holly and juniper berries is great and the Christmas roses are gorgeous.”

That earned her a smile from his grandmother. “No, I can’t. I’m glad you love the flowers. My Richard, the boys’ grandfather, always gave me Christmas roses and I like to have them on display in his memory. And we do have a lovely home. Though our real home isn’t in the lobby, naturally.” She laughed.

“I can’t wait to see it,” Anna said. “Do you live on the grounds, Mrs. Elkin?”

“I live in the lodge upstairs,” his grandmother confirmed. “The brothers have space on one of the upper floors as well as

private homes elsewhere on the property. And please, call me Elin.”

“Which we can see at dinner,” Gabe put in. He needed time—time to make a better plan. “We were about to take a tour of the grounds.”

“With no coats?” Jonas put his hands in his pockets and frowned.

Why? Why did you have to say that?

Anna laughed. “Too excited to come down and meet everyone. We’ll grab them, and then head out. It was so nice to meet you all.” She slipped her arm through his and tugged him back toward the elevators, smooth as could be, waving behind them at his family.

The moment the elevator doors shut, she whirled toward him, a laugh on her lips. “We need a *way* better plan before dinner. And, why didn’t you tell me your younger brother is Ace Elkin? My friend Elena is going to lose her mind when she finds out.”

Relief swept through him that they’d survived their first encounter. “We should have come up with a story on the plane. And my brother hasn’t competed since his accident, so he prefers Chase.”

“Got it, not Ace. Okay, how about this?” The elevator dinged and let them off at their floor. “We’ve been seeing each other for months. Almost a year.”

“Why would we have hidden it?” He led her into the room, where they grabbed their brand-new outdoor coats. Anna slipped into a gray parka with faux fur around the hood. With the hood on, she looked like she’d just stepped out of a winter sports magazine. Why *would* he have hidden a woman like this from his family?

“Maybe you wanted to see if it would last before telling your family.” Anna glanced away, looking down at the floor. *What’s that about?* Gabe didn’t ask. It wasn’t his business.

“Makes me seem like a jerk, though. Who would do something like that?” They went back into the hallway,

wrapped up in winter coats and boots. “What about this—we *both* wanted to keep it a secret because we were working together, or something.”

At that moment, he knew that simply *saying* they were engaged wouldn’t be enough. They’d have to sell it physically. “Before we go back down, we should practice.”

“Practice what?” She fiddled with her hood, making it look even better than it had moments before.

“Kissing. You know—being a couple. We can’t just hold hands with stone faces the whole time.”

She laughed, skepticism shining in her eyes.

Fine. He *did* want to kiss Anna, and not only because they were pretending to be engaged. He *wanted it*. Gabe wasn’t about to say that now, not when they were firmly stuck in the plans they’d made. They entered the elevator, and the door slid shut behind them. “Now’s a perfect time. No audience.”

“Do your worst,” she said, hand on her hip, and Gabe leaned down to kiss her.

Their lips brushed together, then connected. *Wow*. She was soft, her lips parting like they were meant to be kissing, and Gabe couldn’t help pushing forward to explore her mouth. Anna tipped her face toward his, her fingertips brushing against the back of his neck. It lit up all the nerves in his body with a strange heat. Where had they been headed again? He stepped back suddenly, remembering that this was supposed to be practice, not an end-all, be-all kiss.

Anna stepped back against the opposite wall of the elevator, cheeks pink, breathing hard. “Okay. That was a *kiss*.”

The doors to the elevator opened again, letting them out into a lobby blessedly free of his family. He still felt the heat of her on his mouth, and the hairs on the back of his neck rose in expectation of having her touch him there again. “I think we’ll do all right.” He winked.

“Sure will. Now. Show me the resort like you promised. I want to see *everything*.”

ANNA

In the buttery light of morning, Gabe showed Anna Elk Lodge—the ski resort tucked into Cardinal Mountain. It was more than just one lodge. It was more than just one house. He took her up and around some trails near the family properties, which featured one house for each brother. Closer to the road, there was a series of staff housing and rental cabins for guests who wanted to stay in a private residence instead of the primary lodge.

Gabe didn't have much to say about why they weren't staying in his personal home other than he wanted to be closer to his grandmother. Throughout the tour, he pointed out the Christmas lights and decorations on every building. The whole mountaintop looked as if they were in a rustic Alpine Christmas wonderland. There was even a giant snow globe with a tiny ice rink in it big enough for two people that would make for amazing Christmas cards. They paused near the bonfire at the bottom of the ski hill, where guests drank gourmet hot cocoa or cider and munched on cookies that were created by *the* Chef Chris. They walked under a bower dripping in icicles, and she wanted to reach out to see if they were real. It was a Christmas movie come to life and she loved it.

“Would you like to see the view from above?” he asked her, pointing to the ski lifts. “We can take the lift up and hike down one of the walking trails.”

Anna grabbed his hand and tugged him along. “Are there Christmas decorations up there too?” Gabe laughed and

nodded. “Well then, lead the way, Mr. Elkin.”

The ride up was fun, sitting together on the open bench. She could hear the excited chatter from the other guests on the seats ahead of and behind them. They then hiked down some trails set aside for snowshoeing and walking. Even the benches on the trails were decorated, and when she sat down on one, she was surprised to find it was heated.

“Oh, I could get used to this,” she said, sliding back and forth on the bench to warm up her butt.

Gabe sat down next to her. “I’d forgotten they were heated. It’s great because it keeps the snow off.”

Anna pulled out her phone and leaned against his shoulder. “Smile, fiancé, let’s make some memories.” Gabe laughed and the two of them made faces at the camera while she snapped their pics.

On the way back, Anna tossed sparkling handfuls of snow at him, dusting his nose. When he pretended to glare at her, his eyes were shining, and she had to remind herself that this was pretend and they weren’t even dating, much less actually engaged.

The mood shifted once they returned to his suite. It had been one thing to collapse on the bed in the middle of the night, exhausted from the shopping and the flight. Now Gabe stood awkwardly in the center of the living room. “I’m sorry there’s only one bed. If you want, I’ll sleep on the sofa from here on out.”

“That won’t be very realistic.” Anna’s body still hummed from the kiss they’d shared in the elevator. Some practice kiss—it was more like what she expected on her wedding day when the priest announced the happy couple as husband and wife. “It’s really okay. It doesn’t bother me at all.”

How he’d react if she admitted that she wanted him to sleep with her was another story.

Gabe nodded. “That’s good. Listen, I need to go talk to my brothers about our situation. Now that we’ve got a better storyline, I owe them a conversation. Will you be all right here

for a bit?” His eyes searched hers. One minute he was acting like the Gabe he’d been when they worked together. The next, he was her fake fiancée, hesitating to leave her alone without company.

Anna snorted a laugh, and his eyebrows rose in response. The light dancing in his eyes made her want to say something witty. It was hard to come up with the words. “Will I be all right in this luxury suite in the fanciest ski lodge I’ve ever seen? I think I can handle it, Gabe. Don’t worry about me.”

A smile crinkled the corners of his eyes, and for a moment she thought he might take her in his arms. Kiss her again, even. But then he seemed to pull back, shifting toward the door. “I’ll be back soon.”

And then she really was alone in the luxury suite.

Taking off her boots, her feet sank into the plush carpeting and she wiggled her toes, sighing. The floor-to-ceiling windows offered a breathtaking view of the mountains. Skiers made their way down the slopes, helmets glinting in the sun, and it was *warm*. Oh, it was warm.

Despite the cold outside, the room was the perfect temperature. Little touches here and there reminded her that this was a high-end resort. The soft blanket on the back of the sofa arranged to perfection, the tray of luxury lotions in the bathroom, the fully stocked fridge with every kind of drink she could imagine. Even the rumpled bed somehow managed to look upscale. The sheets made all the difference, she decided.

Anna had no intention of sitting in the room doing nothing while Gabe met with his brothers. Item one on the agenda—make herself at home. She lugged the suitcases up onto the luggage racks and flipped them open, pulling out some of her new garments. She reached for her phone and dialed the one and only Elena, her best friend in the world.

“Hey,” Elena said sleepily. She worked as a chef in one of the upscale restaurants on the Strip and never started her days early because of how late she worked. “Are you calling me about Christmas plans?” Her friend yawned, not bothering to smother it.

“I’m calling to apologize about Christmas plans.” Anna took a brand-new ski outfit from the suitcase and hung it up in the closet. “I got swept away on a holiday vacation.”

“What?”

“Remember that guy I was working with? Gabe Elkin?”

Elena chuckled. “The hot billionaire?”

“Yes. The hot billionaire if that’s what you must call him. We were at dinner last night, and he asked me to spend the holidays with him.” A ringing silence took over the phone line. “Are you still there?” There was no use in getting into the whole engagement. It would be over before she knew it.

“And you went with this guy?”

“His family owns a luxury resort in Colorado. So, yeah, I came. We’ll be home after New Year’s.”

Elena let out a disappointed sigh. “How many times do we have to have this discussion? You cannot keep letting rich jerks take advantage of you like this. We were supposed to spend Christmas together, but it’s not really about that. This is a huge mistake.”

Anna stopped halfway between the bed and the closet, a little stunned. “Okay, well, he’s not a jerk, and I have my own plans.” Tension pulled itself tight across her chest. “He’s offered to help me with my business idea in exchange, and we’re going to talk about it while we’re here.”

“Okay.” Elena’s voice had become clipped and sharp. “I hope this doesn’t turn out to be another debacle.” *Like the one with Freddie.* That was the part she left out.

“It won’t.” Anna smiled. She was trying to project confidence over the phone, even if she didn’t feel it. “This will be *great* for my career.”

Her friend’s voice softened. “I hope it is.” The two women hung up, and Anna’s hands shook as she unpacked the rest of their clothes.

She hadn’t expected Elena to be thrilled that their Christmas plans were canceled, but then again, she hadn’t expected the

reaction she'd gotten either. Maybe Elena was right about some things. Maybe Gabe *was* another billionaire she should keep at arm's length, but it was too late to leave now. Anna wasn't going to do that to him.

Her phone buzzed. She snatched it up off the bed, thinking it would be Elena calling to add one last bullet point. That would be so like her. She'd get in her parting shot, and then they'd both back down. They'd make new plans.

"Just say it, okay? I want to move past this with you," Anna said in a rush, wanting to right things with her friend.

The phone line crackled. "Move past what?" Her breath fled, leaving her lungs worthless empty sacks. *Dammit, why didn't I check the caller ID.* "I'm calling to tell you I'm out of prison, but I guess you already heard."

Anna wrenched one of the suitcases off the bed and pulled it over to the closet. "Hi, Dad. No, I hadn't heard." A pang of strange and ridiculous guilt tightened her throat. If he was calling because he wanted to spend Christmas with her, then she had bad news for him, too. Not that she wanted to spend any time with him. He had always been focused on his criminal activities. "What's up? Besides the fact that you're out."

Her dad cleared his throat. "Well, it's been a bit of a rough time." Anna braced herself. This was a familiar pattern. "I can't go back to dealing since that's what they took me in for in the first place. I've been staying at your brother's."

"How's that going?"

"It's all right since he's back on the inside."

Anna put a hand to her forehead and shoved the second suitcase into the closet. "For what?" Her brother couldn't keep himself out of prison either.

"Grand theft auto. But that's not the point. I need a little money to get by. Can't have this place getting any bad marks on it while I'm here. If you could send me five or six hundred, that would be enough to—"

Anna hung up. *Not again.* Anna swiped hurriedly through the apps on her phone and blocked his phone number. No money. No guilt trips. Not this time. She'd spent too long trying to make everything okay in her family, but they just kept taking. She was done.

"I hope I wasn't gone too long." Gabe's voice startled her, sending her hand flying to her chest. She had no idea how much time had passed. "It's time for the family dinner and we've got to knock this one out of the park. My previous girlfriends made either no impression or a negative one, and I'm not sure why, but—wait, did you put away all the clothes?"

"I did." She put a big smile on her face but saw concern flare in his eyes. "It was relaxing, if you can believe it."

"I don't." Gabe went to the closet, opened it up, and pulled out a dinner jacket. "Did something happen while I was gone?"

"Nothing. But I *am* surprised to find out you're dressing so fancy for dinner. I can't go wearing these pants. Give me ten minutes." Anna had an outfit in hand and on her body in far less time than she'd needed. In the bathroom, she ran a hand through her hair and gave herself a stern look in the mirror while she refreshed her makeup with a skilled hand. She was *not* going to slip up and let the false front of perfection drop. The stakes were high for Gabe and his family and she'd promised to do her best.

It had taken her years after she left home to figure out how to act like someone with money and poise, and it wasn't going to crumble today. Definitely not today. This wasn't about a luxury vacation or relaxation. Anna had a point to prove, both to herself and to Gabe.

She swirled out of the bathroom, hands above her head. "How do I look?"

"Gorgeous." His eyes moved down over her body and flicked away, the glance so short she thought she might have imagined it. "Dinner is down one floor in my grandmother's apartment."

“Lead the way.” Anna kept her chin up, tossing a lock of hair back over her shoulder, all while anxiety prickled in the pit of her stomach. If Gabe’s grandmother’s rooms were anything like the suite they were staying in, it would be a very fancy place. Anna was familiar with opulent hotels, but she mainly frequented the meeting rooms, not the private suites for the owners. On the next floor, her steps faltered.

Gabe squeezed her hand. “You did so great in the lobby this morning.” The familiar tone grounded her. It was the same way he’d praised her after a productive meeting or a killer presentation. “And I’ll be right there next to you if you need anything.”

How close? She was *so* nervous she couldn’t quite believe it. And he was so comforting that she wondered who this man was she’d been working with all along. *That* man would never have squeezed her hand and coaxed her in to dinner. Anna took a deep breath and stood up straight, just as Gabe slid an arm around her waist and bent down to kiss her cheek.

“I’m a professional,” she murmured. “I won’t embarrass you at dinner. Or myself.” He nuzzled into her neck, planting light kisses on her skin. “Gabe...” She put one hand up around his neck. It felt so comfortable with him. So terribly easy. Not to mention out of view of his family. This couldn’t be part of their performance. “What are you doing?”

“Practicing for dinner.”

The words made sense, but she blushed deeply, heat spreading across her cheeks. Anna let herself sink into him—just for one moment, to see what it felt like—and wished as fervently as she’d ever wished for anything, that this wasn’t pretend.

He broke away from her but stayed close enough for his hand to linger on the small of her back. Anna wanted to curl back into his arms, but not because it was a job. She needed to remember she was playing his fiancée and not lose herself in the role. “I’m good,” she said, as much to herself as to Gabe. “Let’s do this.”

GABE

Gran's apartment—most of one floor of the big building they called Elk Lodge—reminded Gabe of his childhood. It was only now that he'd been living away from here for so long that he could appreciate it for its elegant beauty. There was something different about the quality of the light on Cardinal Mountain. The nights seemed to come earlier, making the glow of the silver candlelit centerpieces warmer. The staff had set the long table in her formal dining room, decorating the table runner with some of the family's treasured tabletop Christmas pieces. The family's formal china gleamed the way it always did when used on special occasions.

"Glad you could come." Jonas was first to greet them, sticking out his hand to shake like old business associates and not brothers.

Anna shook his hand, but then stepped forward to kiss his cheek and Gabe tried to keep a poker face at the look of surprise on his brother's face.

"Thank you for having us. This is all so lovely." She gestured to the room and Gabe tried to look at it through her eyes.

"Well, uh, thanks. But this was all Grandmother."

Gabe coughed in an attempt to hide the laugh he couldn't stop. His brother was never at a loss for words.

They made the rounds, and Chase was far more open, greeting them both with a smile as he introduced them to his beautiful new ski director-instructor girlfriend, Tana, and her daughter Lindsey.

The walked over to his grandmother, Anna leading the way and tugging his hand so he would follow. “Mrs. Elkin, Elin, thank you so much for inviting us. Everything looks so lovely.”

“Thank you, dear. This is my favorite time of year, and I admit to enjoying showing off.”

Gabe looked her over. His grandmother’s silver shawl and black outfit did the heavy work of hiding how thin she’d gotten, making him worry that she was downplaying how bad she was feeling. While Chase, Tana and Lindsey added gaiety to the evening, their laughter echoing around the room, the sound did nothing to help him relax.

Gabe wanted to know what had made Anna so nervous earlier. It couldn’t have been the performance element of all this—she was too good at her job to let something like that shake her. The urge to take her into a secluded corner and lean in close to whisper questions in her ear got stronger every second.

Maybe telling her about how his previous girlfriends had all traditionally bombed this portion of the family schedule had put her on edge. They either refused to eat anything but undressed salad, used their phones under the table to fire off social media posts or send business emails, or excused themselves to make calls. Gabe had nothing against salad—that wasn’t it—just the tension it caused with everyone else. He *did* have a problem with the phones. But he’d always found himself squarely in the middle, which meant he pleased no one.

The group sat down around the table, and his grandmother waved in uniformed servers who came in with the soup course. Anna watched all of it with bright eyes and a big smile. “Jonas, tell me about running the resort,” she asked as one of the servers ladled a delicate vegetable soup into their bowls. Anna made it a point to thank the wait staff, taking the time to make eye contact.

Jonas paused with his spoon halfway to his mouth. “What do you want to know?” Mild shock registered on his face. Of all

Gabe's girlfriends, not one had ever cared to ask Jonas about running the place.

"Well, my day job is in public relations, and I often help set up conferences. Do you hold events like that here? Or is it mostly tourism-focused?"

"We—" His spoon went back into his bowl. "We can accommodate it, but I haven't had much time to attract clients interested in larger-scale events."

"Oh, that's *great*. I mean, not that you haven't had time to do it, just that you have the space for it." Anna smiled. "My first job in the industry was working for the Las Vegas Convention Center and I would love to help you set up policies in advance for conference events instead of coming up with them as things happen. I also have a lot of experience with social media campaigns, if you ever decide you want to expand your offering here." She raised her hands in front of her. "I won't bore everybody with the topic, but if you ever want to talk conferences and PR, I'm your girl."

For once, Jonas didn't frown, didn't hesitate. "I'll take you up on that at some point, I'm sure."

Gabe let out a breath quietly. So far, so good.

"I'm so glad." She'd started with Jonas, and not five minutes into dinner, they already had plans to talk business.

"So, you're in PR?" Tana chimed in. "I spend most of my time on the slopes, so I'm wondering what that entails."

Anna looked tickled to be asked. "Well, when I worked for the convention center, I helped coordinate conferences for clients. Everything that has to do with largescale events, I've done it. But what I love doing is helping clients coordinate their media campaigns—whether it's drumming up excitement for a product launch or helping them to shape their message for their audience." She laughed, and it was a lovely sound. "It doesn't sound too exciting when I put it like that, but there's rarely a dull moment."

"Is that how the two of you met?" Gran's voice was soft but clear. She wore an unreadable expression in the candlelight,

sitting there at the head of the table.

Anna touched Gabe's wrist and let out a low laugh. "I've got this one. He's good at presentations, but this story gets him all flustered."

"It does not," he insisted, slipping his hand into hers, and oddly pleased at the way she'd been brave enough to tease him in front of his family. "Not compared to how flustered you got when you saw the ring."

"You're getting *so* far ahead of yourself," Anna said, and then cleared her throat. "We started talking about—oh, six months ago? When Gabe needed my help getting his latest app in front of the right people." She winked, drawing laughter out of both Jonas and Chase. "We got pretty close, working together for all that time. And the rest is history. Very recent history."

Gabe relaxed into the rhythm of dinner. After the soup was cleared, the main course arrived—a pork tenderloin that melted on his tongue and tasted like comfort and holiday spirit. And then came dessert. The servers brought out individual chocolate lava cakes. He glanced at his grandmother, who looked back at him with a subtle smile. She'd chosen it for him knowing it was his favorite.

His throat went tight, taking in the little cake with its dusting of powdered sugar. He savored each bite. Anna's, on the other hand, was gone the next time he looked. She put her spoon between her lips and heat shot through him, making him imagine way more than he should about her.

"Oh, I'm *so* sad that's over." Anna sat back, her comment a testament to how much she'd enjoyed it.

"Take the last bite of mine." He scooped it up with his spoon and offered it to her. Gabe, who had always loved chocolate cake so fiercely his family had made fun of him, offered his fiancée the final bite. The room seemed to hold its breath as if he were on the verge of snatching it back. But Gabe wasn't that desperate child anymore and hadn't been in a long time.

Anna leaned in and took the cake onto her tongue, making a low noise of satisfaction.

“Wow,” Chase said, amazement lacing his voice. “I think you’ve got yourself a match. Have you ever seen anybody who loves chocolate as much as Gabe?” He directed this last part to Jonas, who silently shook his head.

At the head of the table, his grandmother smiled. A genuine smile, calm and a bit reserved, the way she always was. Something in him untwisted. She *approved*. His grandmother liked Anna and believed their engagement was real. *Guilt* followed hard on the heels of his satisfaction. She approved—except it wasn’t real.

“Let’s go caroling,” Jonas suddenly announced, surprising everyone at the table. He looked Gabe straight in the eye, as if testing him. All the brothers were intimately familiar with how much Gabe hated singing carols. And they also knew how much their grandmother loved them. “We’ll go down to the lobby and sing there, so we don’t have to get cold.”

“That’s a *wonderful* idea.” His grandmother took Jonas’s hand for extra support getting out of her seat. “The pianist will still be there from the dinner hour. He can accompany us.”

Gabe fought down his own nerves on the way to the lobby, where a baby grand piano was tucked next to the Christmas tree. The family gathered around as the pianist greeted his grandmother and went through her preferred list of carols. Additional decorations had been added since they came through earlier and fresh evergreens twisted into garlands with sprigs of juniper and red berries were now draped along all the flat surfaces. The lodge wrapped up like this was a gift to everyone who entered it. The grand piano sported a giant red bow, the curls of the ribbon a stark contrast with the gleaming black surface.

He couldn’t sing and Jonas knew it. The last thing he wanted to do was to make a fool of himself in front of Anna. Taking his hand, she squeezed, leaning in close. “I love Christmas carols,” she whispered softly into his ear. “Do you?”

“Tonight, I love Christmas carols,” he answered dryly, keeping his voice low.

The pianist launched into the simple, and all too familiar *Jingle Bells*. After the first verse, Anna leaned in again. “Your family is so close. I kind of love it. Even if you and your brothers did argue over—what was that again?”

“Who was the better skier. And it was just Jonas and me.”

Anna laughed, but not loud enough to disrupt the singing. “Isn’t Chase the best skier?”

“He is. But Chase doesn’t count when it comes to internal contests.” He shot his brother an apologetic look. Tana must have had one heck of an effect on Chase because he didn’t seem bothered by the comment one bit.

“Internal contests,” echoed Anna, and he could tell she thought it was funny. *Yes. More of that.* A familial warmth spread in the center of his chest.

Gabe really did love his family, no matter how much he didn’t fit in. Not in the way that everyone else did. Gabe had wanted different things out of life—he hadn’t wanted to sign on to a permanent position at the lodge just because his brother had taken over management of the resort. But now, standing around the piano and singing Christmas songs, he wasn’t sure.

If he really were the black sheep of the family, and if he really were a disappointment to them—his grandmother wouldn’t have asked him to come home.

Maybe fitting in wasn’t the only criterion.

“You’re not singing,” Anna said, whispering in his ear. He put his hand on her waist and pulled her close. She leaned in, curvy and soft, and melted into him almost as if it were the most natural thing.

He’d been wasting time. The thought came to him as clearly as the opening notes of *God Rest Ye Merry Gentlemen*. The other women he’d brought home would have excused themselves from singing carols. They would have stood stiffly by his side, hands folded in front of them. He’d spent too long dating women who were utterly uncomfortable being around his family, or they were too wrapped up in their own worlds.

It had worked at the time because he'd been wrapped up in his own world. He had come here each time knowing that the goal was to leave as soon as possible, only putting in a token appearance.

This could be his real life. A part of it, anyway.

Anna rubbed her hand down his back, the gesture genuine. It unlocked an old feeling at the core of him. *Belonging*. That's what it was. Being back here, in this moment, he felt like he belonged, like the circle of people around him would never close with Gabe on the outside.

But he'd never get to that closeness without somebody like Anna at his side. His heart beat hard, a triple drumbeat of sadness for the day when they inevitably weren't together anymore. Those were the rules of a fake engagement. They didn't go on to become real weddings. So as wonderful as this moment was, it was doomed to end.

Not yet.

He straightened up. His family didn't care if he couldn't sing. They'd all known it when they decided to go caroling in the lobby. And they wouldn't care now. The pianist went into the next carol—*Silent Night*. And Gabe, with Anna close by his side, opened his mouth and sang.

ANNA

The wine at dinner had gone straight to Anna's head, and the effects persisted long after the singing was done. It made her skin feel warm, almost overheated, as she and Gabe took the elevator back to their suite. He didn't drop her hand when they stepped out into the hall. He held it all the way back to the room, giving a little squeeze as he pushed the door open and led her inside.

He brought her knuckles to his lips, brushing his lips across them with a satisfied light in his blue eyes. "That felt good," Gabe said, his voice husky. "Didn't it?"

"Felt pretty real to me," Anna said breathlessly. The two of them had stood with his family in the glittering lobby of Elk Lodge. The tree was nothing short of perfection with its red bows, glass ornaments, and warm lights suffusing everything with a homey feeling. The kind of holiday she'd seen in commercials and movies, but nothing she'd ever experienced.

Gabe was right in the middle of everything that made it perfect. There was a good chance the warmth she felt was not all wine and Christmas cheer, but instead, Gabe. Maybe it wasn't just warmth, but a fierce, hot *want*.

He stepped closer, pulling her in with a soft touch on her hand, and Anna thought she'd never felt so much power concentrated in one tiny gesture. Gabe was strong. He scheduled enough gym time to keep himself lean and muscular, and he could have had her in his arms—but he

didn't. He waited, those eyes on hers, asking a silent question that she wanted to answer.

Anna drew in a breath to say something, anything, but his lips hovered over her knuckles again. He lowered his mouth to the ridge of her fingers, drawing the pad of his thumb across the back of her hand. He kissed the place where his thumb had been, following it up to her wrist bone. "Yes," she said breathlessly. Then, faster than she could blink, he closed the distance between them, and Anna was in his arms.

She collided with the hard expanse of his chest, covered only in his dress shirt, and Gabe's hand slipped down to her waist as her arms went around his neck. His lips met hers in a burst of heat and something like possession. Like they really were together, and it wasn't all an act. Anna could taste it—a real holiday with him, a real heat in his touch.

Gabe groaned and his hands tensed on her waist. She pulled back, struggling to catch her breath. It was like a movie set, this hotel room, all sleek cream furniture and fancy touches, and Anna wanted to belong here. Wanted to be the kind of woman who curled up on the sofa with Gabe and watched the snow falling outside before family dinner. Wanted to go to bed with him at night, not because they were acting but because they needed to be together.

He was close now, his handsome face slightly flushed, and pupils dark with desire.

Anna could kiss him again. And she knew, deep down, where that would lead. It would lead to clothes coming off and a rush to the bed, leaving all of her on display for Gabe.

But then what? Could they shake it off and go back to the parts they were playing? It would be challenging at best, and at the end of this vacation, she'd be no closer to what she wanted out of life. He knew about her goal to start her own firm. What he didn't know about was her desire for a *real* relationship. One with love and compromise and commitment.

As if he could hear the storm of thoughts crowding her head, Gabe tilted her head up until their eyes met and held. "One

night wouldn't hurt." He sounded so sure of himself, but Anna wasn't. "It's not unethical."

She trailed her fingers down the back of his neck until they met the collar of his shirt. *Not unethical* didn't have the ring to it that *yes, let's go to bed* did.

"Maybe we shouldn't."

She took a half-step back, and Gabe broke away from her. "You must be exhausted." His voice was a bit strained, so unlike how he sounded when he sang with his family.

"I am." So not true. But it wouldn't do any good to tell him she was breathless with want and wouldn't be able to sleep. "An early night would probably do us good."

They carefully avoided each other while they took turns brushing their teeth and preparing for bed. Anna came out of the bathroom just as Gabe was on his way out to the living room with a pillow tucked under his arm.

"Oh, don't." Guilt crashed into her. "You don't need to sleep on the sofa."

His eyes met hers with a searching focus. "Are you sure?"

The question shimmered in the air. They'd been close to doing much more than sharing a bed, but sending him away didn't feel right, either. "We managed it last night just fine."

He seemed to consider it, then headed back toward his side of the bed. Anna's body thrummed with awkward pressure as she crawled in beside him and turned off the light on the nightstand. Gabe did the same, plunging them into the half-darkness of the room. Moonlight bled into the room through the cracks around the curtains, so she could still make out the shadowy shape of him.

"Goodnight, Gabe."

"Goodnight."

Ugh. Now she was arm's length away from him in bed and feeling more needy and frustrated than ever. A pillow wall might be the only solution to keep her from rolling against him

in her sleep. Nothing would be more embarrassing than waking up on his side of the bed wrapped around him.

The minutes ticked by, and still sleep didn't come. Anna corralled a herd of sheep in her mind and counted them one by one. Who'd have thought she'd be lying there thinking of mattress commercials after how well the dinner and caroling had gone? Not her.

Next, she tried meditational breathing exercises, and then pretending to be asleep. Nothing worked. After what seemed an eternity, she pushed back the covers and tiptoed out of bed, moving quickly for the living room.

At least she could take a deep breath out here.

There was *so* much space to roam. Anna headed for the kitchen to get a glass of water and then took another turn in the bathroom, washing her face for the second time that night. Elk Lodge supplied the creamiest of soaps and there were bath bombs next to the jacuzzi tub enticing her to linger in this little piece of heaven. Raspberry Relaxation seemed like a promising choice. Tomorrow, she'd treat herself to a relaxing bath.

Anna made her way to the picture windows in the living room, taking in the view. The slopes really were stunning, especially with the snow clean and white, starkly contrasting with the vast dark sky above.

"Are you all right?" Gabe's voice from the bedroom door pulled her away from the window. "You've been gone quite a while."

"I couldn't sleep. Obviously." She laughed, but it was a tired laugh, and concern flared in Gabe's eyes. He walked closer, Anna unable to look away from where his pajama pants were slung low on his hips and his sleep shirt—a Henley that she found unfairly irresistible—lay unbuttoned at the neck. "Couldn't turn my brain off."

Gabe took a seat on the leather sofa facing the window and spread out his arms over the back, the movement stretching the

shirt over his biceps. Anna sucked in a deep breath. *Breathe, girl. Breathe.*

His eyes swept over every inch of her. “Does this have anything to do with the phone call you got earlier?”

The real world pushed back into her mind with an unpleasant jolt. Anna turned away. She didn’t want to discuss her family or her past, or that she shouldn’t be at a place like Elk Lodge with a man like Gabe. “I got out of a bad relationship recently,” she hedged. “My best friend was worried I’d made a mistake on the rebound by coming here with you.”

One eyebrow arched upward and for a moment all the things she hadn’t wanted to talk about crowded together at the tip of her tongue. If she spilled her secrets here and now...

Well, she wouldn’t.

But suddenly she was aware she was standing there in a tank top and sleep shorts, Gabe’s gaze fixed on her. It was like when they’d come into the room before—and the heady, reckless feeling returned, this time more demanding.

He let out a short breath and shifted on the sofa. The temperature in the room seemed to skyrocket. Gabe’s pajama pants weren’t thick enough to hide his arousal. More than anything, she wanted to hear him make that noise again—that soft, deep groan in the back of his throat that sang with wanting her.

Gabe blinked, and his professional expression fell back in place. He ran a hand through his tousled hair. “Best if we focus on getting through the holidays here, don’t you think?”

Anna tried to shake off the ringing temptation, which filled the room and made her want to keep breathing in that excitement forever. This was precisely why they couldn’t have sex. Just the act of standing near him made her feel like she was being pulled in. Gravity teased her nipples and a point down low between her legs until it was almost unbearable. Gabe was like an undertow, and it took all her energy not to get swept away.

Which was probably for the best. Gabe asked her here to do a job for him, and it would never work once they went back to

the real world. That was the nature of contract work. There and gone again, faster than you could blink.

“You’re right,” she said, and then she let out a yawn. It started out fake but turned into something real by the end, and Anna found herself stretching her hands above her head. From beneath her eyelashes she caught Gabe gawking—stretching like this emphasized her full breasts, especially in a tank top. She hastily put her hands back down by her sides. That wasn’t playing fair. “Let’s go back to bed.”

She caught a flash of frustration on his face—*let’s go back to bed* certainly didn’t sound like something they would say to each other at any other meeting—but that was the situation.

Gabe Elkin.

One bed.

Christmas getaway.

Anna headed for the bedroom and slipped back under the covers, her heart beating fast. Surely he wouldn’t stay out on the sofa in his own suite. Half of her hoped he would, just for some breathing room.

And the other half—

Yearned for him. Anna had mostly read about yearning in the context of her mom’s old romance novels, the ones she’d kept stored in a cardboard box in the back of her closet and Anna had snuck up to her room as a teen. This was exactly what she’d imagined it would feel like.

Gabe returned and slid into the bed without a word, turning away from her. Sleeping next to him and not touching seemed all wrong, but apparently he was okay with it. So, Anna would be too. Rolling over, she faced the other way and closed her eyes. Instead of going back to counting sheep, she reminded herself over and over: *it’s just a job, it’s just a job*. As sleep slowly claimed her, she had a fleeting thought. *What if it didn’t have to be?*

ANNA

“I can’t believe you guys *do* this,” Anna murmured into Gabe’s ear as she leaned closer and snuggled next to him in the sleigh. It was drawn by a team of two white horses with bells on their harnesses, which jingled as they pulled the sleigh over the flat cross-country trails at the back of the resort. The trees to either side of them had been decorated with lanterns and silver bows. “I’ve never even seen a horse-drawn sleigh, much less ridden in one.”

Not in Nevada, anyway. There had been sleighs in Christmas parades, sure, but they sat on the back of parade floats or were on wheels. She wondered how well a sleigh would run on desert sand, but suspected it would be difficult for the horses.

Gabe squeezed her hand, sending a delightful heat to warm her cheeks. When was she going to stop having such a crush on him? Probably not during this trip judging by the way things were going so far. Especially not with Jonas and his grandmother sitting in the front row and Gabe in performance mode. All the Christmas cheer made the air almost sweet, and his grin made her want to snuggle closer, not put distance between them the way she should.

“Sleigh rides are a popular attraction with the guests.”

“I can see why. It’s almost magical.”

Gabe laughed, and she pulled out her phone to snap a few pics.

Jonas turned around, his gaze zeroing in on their closeness. “You two lovebirds enjoying yourselves?” There was an edge to his voice that his smile didn’t hide.

“Of course we are.” Anna smiled. She’d never give Jonas any reason to believe she wasn’t Gabe’s real fiancée. Any woman who wanted to marry Gabe would love the resort and everything it had to offer. Besides, the sleigh ride was so quintessentially Christmas that it would be tough *not* to enjoy it. “There’s something so romantic about a sleigh ride. Don’t you think?”

The horses pulled them around a bend and back into view of the lodge. Elin put a hand to her mouth. “I’ve lived here a long time, but the sight of that building at Christmastime is one of my favorites and never fails to disappoint.”

The lodge, all dark wood and glowing windows, was a festival of Christmas lights in matching gold tones that made the place look like it was gilded in the dusky evening. Anna lifted her phone, wanting to capture the image and remember this special moment when she was back in her boring Vegas apartment. The last of the sunset bled from the sky in an orange and purple haze as they approached the circular drive, and the sleigh driver reined the horses to a stop out front. Gabe climbed out first, Jonas following close behind. Both men helped the women down from the sleigh.

Gabe’s gloved hand felt big and powerful on hers, and he gave it a gentle squeeze as she stepped down. A smile played over his face, warm and intimate. *Is he acting?*

“I’m glad you got to come on a sleigh ride with us,” he said. “Maybe one day—”

And then a snowball hit Gabe in the side of the head. His eyes went wide and he turned and ducked, scooping snow from the ground as Elin took Jonas’s arm and headed toward the lodge, laughing as she went. Tana and her daughter Lindsey had launched the attack and Chase was backing them up.

A snowball fight.

Another first. Anna had never been in a snowball fight before, and the snow seemed unwieldy in her hands. She got one ball together and launched it at Chase, who neatly ducked out of the way laughing. Everyone was having fun, their voices echoing high in the clear night.

“Mom, look out!” Lindsey shouted, running to hide behind a giant nutcracker standing at attention.

“Hey, don’t help her,” Chase yelled as he chased a laughing Tana with a snowball before turning to throw it at Gabe.

“Dude, you are so going down.” Gabe threw a snowball back at him.

Jonas came back out of the lodge at a run, scooped up some snow, and made a snowball without stopping. He aimed at her, but Gabe stepped in front, flinging out his arms to save her from the hit.

“Game on, Elkins,” she called out. Tana and Lindsey joined forces with her, packing snowballs and throwing them at the brothers who spread out and were pelting each other more than the girls. It didn’t take long for the cold to seep through Anna’s gloves. They were meant for sleigh rides not wet snow. The chill spread to her body and her teeth started to chatter.

Gabe was the first to notice. “Time out,” he yelled, his voice louder than all the other noise. “Anna’s cold.” He put a hand to the side of her face and looked down into her eyes. “Let’s get you inside.”

“No,” she protested. “I’m good to keep going.”

“You’ll freeze out here.” Gabe slipped an arm around her waist and hustled them both toward the glowing warmth of the lodge. “If there’s anyone more in need of hot chocolate than you, I’d be shocked.”

The lobby bustled with activity—more activity than Anna had expected, but Gabe had eyes for none of it. He led her straight to the gourmet hot chocolate station on a mahogany table at the side of the room, whipping her up a fresh cup of cocoa with surgical precision. She stuffed her wet gloves into her coat pockets to better feel the warmth of the cup.

“Here. Drink this.” The blue in his eyes was more intense now that they were inside, reminding her of Lake Mead. It wasn’t just the hot cocoa that made her blush.

Gabe reached up and stroked a lock of hair away from her forehead. “Should we sit?”

“I’m really okay.” The hot chocolate was smooth and delicious—still delightful, though it was her second cup today. The warmth of his gaze went to her bones, chasing away all the chills. “Shouldn’t we get out there and finish the battle?”

“Not until I’m sure you’re thoroughly recovered from the cold.”

She laughed. *This* was the Gabe she worked with and admired wholeheartedly. It wouldn’t be so bad to bask in it for a while, would it? Possibility glimmered in the air between them. They could go up to the room and cuddle on the sofa until she was heated from her head to her toes. They could even go in the jacuzzi.

Jonas and Chase, followed by Tana and Lindsey, came into the lobby on a burst of cold, fresh air.

“You’re coming to the gingerbread house competition, right?” Chase clapped a hand on Gabe’s shoulder, and a twinge of disappointment marred the glow of the hot chocolate in her chest. They’d been having a moment together. Moment over. It did, however, explain all the people in the lobby who were making their way into one of the elegant meeting rooms to join the competition.

“I wasn’t done throwing snowballs.” Anna grinned. “But I can hold my own with gingerbread.”

Jonas gave a quick nod. “Good. You’ll make the competition *much* more exciting.”

“Excuse me,” Tana cut in. “You’ve never seen me work with gingerbread before.”

The six of them followed the guests into a room decorated to look like Santa’s workshop. The area was set up with tables covered in dark green tablecloths, topped with silver trays that held stacks of gingerbread and all the decorations a person could dream of.

Gabe guided her to a table with a light touch on the small of her back. “This one’s ours.”

First things first—Anna tugged off her coat, and Gabe took it over to a coat rack in the corner of the room. While he was

gone, she rolled up her sleeves and considered the tools at their disposal. Plenty of frosting. Plenty of sprinkles. Little bowls of gold leaf. When Elk Lodge did something, they didn't skimp.

"I think we go classic," she announced as Gabe joined her. "A one-room house, and let the decorations speak for themselves."

He dropped a kiss on her cheek, sending a shiver all the way down to her toes. "Good plan but I just have to do one thing." He whipped out his phone and started tapping.

"Dude!" Chase called out. "Tell me you aren't doing what I think you're doing?"

Gabe smirked. "You're just mad because you didn't think of it first."

"Think of what first?" Anna looked back and forth at the brothers. "What am I missing?"

"You'll see." Gabe's phone pinged with a message and he frowned as he read it. "Dammit!" Chase laughed. "When did you text him?"

"Before you!"

Chase's laughter was infectious, but Anna still had no idea what was going on. Looking over Gabe's shoulder, she looked at the text, which was a series of screenshots between Chase and Chef Chris. "Oh, he's awesome. How do you know him?" Anna read through the screenshots, which consisted of Chase asking for tips on how to beat his brothers and Chef Chris providing what looked like advice except it was all blacked out. "Ooo, sneaky."

"They used to vacation here when we were kids and we became friends with him and his cousins," Gabe told her. "But since Chase and Chris were the clowns of the group, they were inseparable when the Dentons were here."

Anna scrolled through the screenshots trying to catch anything under the black while she tried to figure out why she knew that name. When it finally hit her, she almost dropped Gabe's phone. "THE Dentons? Of Denton Hotels? Are you serious?"

Anna had actually applied for a job at their Las Vegas resort but ended up taking the position at the convention center.

Gabe elbowed her and whispered, “Stick with me and who knows who you might meet.” She grinned at him and handed him back his phone.

Over at the next table, Tana had dipped a finger in frosting and was waving it in front of Chase’s nose. He laughed, a deep belly laugh that had Lindsey giggling behind her hands, and the three of them jostled and argued as they got the house set up. Jonas had taken a table in the corner with Elin, who sat perched on a chair, delicately painting on swirls of frosting and adding decorations. The room was full of people who were already working on their masterpieces—they’d gotten a head start.

Anna and Gabe reached for a gingerbread piece at the same time, their hands colliding over the tray. Gabe caught her hand in his and kissed the back of it. Desire shot through her and heated her face.

She cleared her throat and went about setting up the four walls of the house. Gabe stepped behind her, reaching around to pipe in the frosting as she held the pieces together. The hard lines of his body bracketed her in, and her breath caught.

“There. Four walls are done,” Gabe said, smiling down at her and at what they’d accomplished as a team.

“Let’s do the roof,” she said.

Anna couldn’t help but notice the strong lines of his forearms, and the capable way his hands moved. But then he stepped back, letting her take over with the decorations as she added a row of gumdrops to the “front lawn” of the gingerbread house. Anna popped one in her mouth and savored the sweetness on her tongue.

“Don’t you want to help with the gumdrop fence?” she teased.

“It’ll be better if you do it.” Gabe stood close, supervising but not touching the candy. He always wanted things to be perfect and that’s what she intended to do. Gabe’s grandmother would

only ever see her being perfectly happy and content. The ideal fiancée.

The host—one of the head staff members—called *time* on the contest a few minutes later. Gabe took their house to the judging table. The winners would be announced the next day.

He returned with their coats and a relieved smile just as Chase and Tana approached.

“Dinner at Gran’s?” Chase asked.

“We wouldn’t miss it.” Gabe nodded. “What time?”

“As soon as everybody’s there.” Chase took Tana’s hand and she took Lindsey’s, and the three of them headed for the exit.

Elin left on Jonas’s arm right after them, leaving Anna and Gabe. They made their way to the elevator and rode up, but outside the door to Elin’s apartment, Gabe hesitated. He put his hand in hers, and Anna straightened. Obviously, they needed to make a convincing entrance.

However, she was surprised when instead of going into his grandmother’s suite, he tugged her down the hall. They stopped at a shadowy alcove with a round window overlooking the ski slopes and abandoned their coats on a low table nearby.

“Did you want to show me the view?” she asked as he led her into the deeper shadows.

“No.” And then his mouth was on hers, answering the need in her. She sucked in a gasp as the kiss deepened and Gabe’s tongue found hers. Oh—there was the wall, coming up against her back and holding her upright. His hands worked down her sides before one came back up to cup her face. Anna was almost sure her knees would buckle. She stayed standing, arms around his neck, pulling him in tighter than she’d expected. Gabe nipped at her bottom lip, and a tiny moan escaped her. They shouldn’t be doing this—not in the hall outside his grandmother’s suite, not where someone might come across them—

And what? See that they were all over each other, the way an engaged couple might be? She sank into the kiss, losing

herself a bit more. It wasn't right that they were wearing so many clothes. It wasn't right at all. Anna ran one hand down the front of Gabe's shirt, feeling the hard plane of his chest and the ridges of his abs underneath. *Tear off the buttons, shrug it down his shoulders—*

His grasp tightened on her hips, and he brought her close, *so* close, and then let go. In the dim light from the hall she could see the fire in his eyes.

That wasn't for show. None of this was for show.

It had been for the two of them, and *only* the two of them.

The line between acting and reality blurred, becoming hard to see. What was she going to do about the thudding in her heart and the desire burning hot in her belly? Because there was nothing acted about her reaction.

Gabe took her hand. "I had to." It sounded like a confession. "Come on, let's go to dinner. I'm suddenly starving." But the way he was looking at her, Anna wasn't entirely certain he meant food.

GABE

When dinner was over, Gabe's grandmother led them to the sitting room and pulled a familiar book from the shelves. A photo album—a scrapbook really, one that she'd been keeping for years. She patted the sofa next to her. "Whenever someone new comes to the family, we go through the old memories." That was his cue, along with Anna, to sit with her so they could have the best view.

Anna tucked in next to him, and he put an arm around her. It was getting harder to resist stroking her skin or playing with her hair or planting quick kisses on her cheeks. *A lot* harder. And yes, he'd given in to the desire to haul her into his arms and kiss her senseless—but he hadn't known how to get through dinner otherwise. His reward was the satisfied smile she wore for the entire meal.

Just enough to help him stay in control.

Everything was different with Anna. Gabe had never had to focus on keeping his hands off a woman before. And he'd never craved the softness of a woman's skin or the sensation of her curves under his palms like he did with her.

"Now," his grandmother began, "this is Chase and Gabe." The two boys had carefree smiles in the photographs as if they didn't have a care in the world.

"It was a little before my parents were killed in a car accident," he told her.

Anna took his hand and squeezed. "I'm so sorry," she murmured. She turned her head and kissed *his* cheek.

Out of the corner of his eye, Gabe caught his grandmother watching.

“You’re good for him,” she told Anna. “Much more demonstrative than some of the others.” She cleared her throat, letting out a little laugh. “Not that everyone needs to be demonstrative every minute, but...it’s lovely to see.”

Pride and guilt rushed through him, but he pushed them down in favor of pulling Anna close. “You’re right,” he said, smiling at his grandmother. “She *is* good for me.”

“But how?” Jonas chimed in. “How did you learn to be good for our high-powered businessman of a brother? Does your family move in the same circles?”

Anna tensed in his arms. “Oh, I wouldn’t say that, no.”

“Ah. What do your parents do, Anna? I don’t think you’ve mentioned it.”

Gabe wouldn’t have noticed the stiffness in her shoulders if he didn’t know her—if he wasn’t sitting so close. “Chase, I’d rather hear about your plans. You’re definitely going to stick around, right?” he said, hoping to divert the conversation.

“Oh, yeah.” Chase beamed. “Tana and Lindsey love it here, so I decided not to head out to California and will be sticking around.”

Anna relaxed as the conversation turned to work plans and stories from their childhood, and Gabe let out a breath. He’d done it. He’d protected her. Of all his achievements in life, this ranked pretty high.

The conversation rose and fell around them. It settled into a rhythm Gabe recognized from his younger days—Chase telling an old story about learning to ski, and Jonas telling one about the first night managing the resort on his own. The evening reached the end of its cycle when his grandmother stood. “Time for bed,” she said. “I’ll see all of you tomorrow.” Everyone responded with a chorus of goodbyes.

Anna stuck tight to his side on the way to their room. “You’re quiet,” he said, as she kicked off her shoes and put away their coats. “I hope—I hope we’re all right.”

She looked at him, an instant of warning before she was on him, backing *him* up against the wall for a change and kissing him with desperate, hungry little noises. “Thank you,” she murmured against his mouth. “I didn’t want to talk about my family, and you... you... thank you.” Her hands worked at the buttons of his shirt and then lower, lower. Anna sank to her knees on the carpet in front of him, and he gripped the waist-high chair rail. Every inch of him came alive, the feeling made even more intense by the sound of his belt coming undone in her hands and his zipper slipping down.

Gabe was already hard, and it was the sweetest relief when Anna pulled his dick free from his boxers and pants, her hand wrapped around his growing erection. She kissed the tip, her warm lips against his skin was so unbearably sexy that he let his head fall back against the wall.

And when she took him into her mouth...

Heaven. A wet, warm heaven with a rhythm he settled into, his body arching toward her with every long pull of her tongue. The rest of the world fell away. All the acting, all the stolen kisses, they were elsewhere. Gabe only existed here, in this moment.

He ran his fingers through Anna’s hair, feeling them catch and tangle, and allowed himself a few more moments of pleasure so intense it was almost painful. Then he coaxed her up with his hands and with urgent whispers. “Here.”

Gabe took her to the bedroom and went for her clothes. Her pants came off first, then panties, leaving her shirt intact. Anna was ready in seconds, and he perched her on the edge of the bed and spread her legs. It wasn’t enough to have her mouth on him—he needed *his* mouth on her delicate folds. Now.

The first gentle kiss of his lips made her shiver. The first lick made her shudder, and suddenly she was gripping the covers and moaning as he devoured her. Delicious. Soft. Pink. Wet. He licked along her core with a full-on fantasy in his mind.

This, repeatedly, for the rest of his life. Anna coming home to him each night so he could please her. She writhed beneath him, and his tongue contacted new, undiscovered places

between her legs. Oh, he needed this. It wasn't until now that he realized how much he'd been aching for it. His need for her crept over every inch of his skin and suffused him down to his bones. More. *More.*

"I have to have you." He lifted his head from between her legs, and Anna pulled him up onto the bed, her shirt tangled, and her face flushed. "I can't wait another minute."

"Don't wait." Those two words were the sexiest he'd ever heard.

Gabe fumbled in a drawer for a condom—thank God he'd had the foresight to put them there—while Anna repeated them in his ear, her arm thrown around his neck. He should get undressed, he knew, but that would take time, and he didn't want to waste a minute. Gabe settled for shoving his own pants out of the way and crawling between her legs, desperate for contact.

Anna opened for him, hooking her feet around the back of his thighs, and his crown nudged into her slick entrance. "Good," she murmured, almost feverishly. "So good."

He pushed himself into her with a powerful stroke, and Anna bit down on his shoulder. *There.* That was it. She was so tight and ready as he put a hand under her chin and tipped her head up to kiss her while she squeezed and rocked around him. Harder, harder. He let himself fall into a steady pace, taking her again and again.

She came up for air a minute later and pushed on his chest, enough to get the momentum she needed to turn them both over. Oh, God, it was a sight—her neck exposed to him, her back arched, the shirt barely hanging on. Anna planted her hands on his chest and rode him, rocking her hips in a sensuous pattern that had desire sparking all the way up and down every nerve.

He gripped her hips and pulled her down with more force, needing to bury himself deep inside her.

Yes.

The pad of his thumb brushed against her clit, and she clenched around his thickness, pulling him close to the edge of release. He drew slow circles around her sensitive nub until she gasped and fell forward onto his neck.

“Gabe, I’m—”

“Come for me,” he hissed in her ear, and then followed her over when she let go.

Anna pushed herself up and rode him through his orgasm, collapsing to the pillow afterward—her breath fast and labored.

For once, he didn’t have to live with an expanse of empty mattress between them. Gabe curled himself up around her and waited for his racing heart to settle. He didn’t know how long it had been when he finally had the urge to speak. “I was wrong,” he told her. “Last night, I was wrong.”

“You’re never wrong.” She felt languid and sleepy underneath him. He would have given any amount of money to make the moment last forever.

“I should have been more...caring about how stressed you looked last night. Is everything all right with your friend?”

Anna shifted against him and gave a little sigh. “My best friend Elena—that’s who I was talking to. We usually spend Christmas together.”

Gabe waited, saying nothing, but continued to stroke his hand over her hip.

“She was worried,” Anna continued, “because my last relationship was with a pretty-boy socialite from LA. Not that you’re a pretty-boy socialite. Just—he had a lot of money and influence, but I only ever saw him when he came to Vegas. He never invited me out to LA. When it came down to it, I wasn’t good enough for him, and he let me know that. I was just a side piece he kept on hand when he wanted sex without any complications.”

For the life of him, Gabe couldn’t understand how any man could think Anna wasn’t good enough for anything. She was gorgeous, brilliant, and accomplished. It was why he’d asked

her to come to the resort with him in the first place. The jerk had been *dating* her, and getting to do all the things that Gabe wanted to do.

Bitter jealousy sliced through him, and Gabe fought to tamp it down. At least the man was gone now. But none of this explained the tension at dinner when Jonas asked about her family.

“You *are* good enough. No matter what might have happened in your past.”

Anna stiffened for a fraction of a second, and if she hadn’t been wrapped up in his arms, he might have missed it. “You know I’m not close with my family,” she offered by way of explanation. “There are certain things about them I’d rather not talk about.”

It was vague enough to make him curious, but at the same moment, he felt it—the hurt behind her words. *Certain things* could mean a lot. It wasn’t up to him to pry or press. Gabe cuddled her closer, hoping to soothe her. Hopefully, *he* would be enough.

Whatever this was, he’d protect her from that, too.

The longer he kept his body close to hers, the more she relaxed. “Let me get you some water.”

“I’d rather you stay and hold me some more.” Anna’s tone was light, but it had a layer of longing that called to him.

“I like the sound of that even better.” It was something, how they fit together—so right, like they’d been made to do this. Gabe wanted to stay like this all night. He wanted to stand between Anna and whatever it was that made her shoulders tight and her voice thin.

“Are you sure?”

Was he? It wasn’t often that he felt this fierce protective instinct. It was confusing. “I’m very sure.” He kissed her hair. “Now go to sleep. I’ll be here all night.”

ANNA

Gabe's phone rang in the hazy light of morning, and Anna stretched out the pleasant ache in her limbs while he rolled over to grab his phone.

"We're not up yet if you're calling to invite us somewhere." His voice had a gravelly, sleepy quality that made her body respond—nipples peaking, desire curling low.

Anna rolled over on her side to watch him.

He pushed a hand through his hair, eyes still closed. Seconds later, they shot open. "Okay. I'll tell Anna. When?" A pause. "All right. Thanks, Jonas." He hung up and let the phone fall to the covers. "Gran isn't feeling well. No big lunch or dinner today." His lips had turned down at the corners, a good indication of his fear for his grandmother.

Sympathy squeezed at her chest. "What else?"

Gabe glanced at her, a wry smile suddenly tugging at his lips. "Jonas has arranged a gift for Gran. He's got a photographer coming for Christmas to do family portraits for a couple of days." His eyes grew distant. "Which means I need to think of something better for my grandmother."

His determination would have made her laugh if she didn't feel deeply for the man lying next to her. Resentment of his brother's one-upmanship was written plain as day on his face. "You know, if you really want to impress your grandmother, you should bake something. It always adds a special touch."

Blue eyes met hers, the full force of his gaze making her blush. “It might if I knew how to bake, which I don’t.”

“Didn’t you text a celebrity chef for advice on how to beat your brothers at making a gingerbread house just last night?”

Gabe rubbed his chin giving her a remorseful look. “I did, but I don’t think I could ask him for help on this. He’d laugh even harder.”

“Well then, lucky for you, I’m an excellent baker. Come on, get up. Let’s go.”

“Go where?” Gabe’s expression took on an open, hopeful cast that made her heart beat faster. He scrambled out of bed behind her and followed her into the bathroom.

“If we’re going to bake, we need supplies. You don’t want to go down to the lodge kitchen, do you?”

“No,” he said quickly. “Let’s go into town.”

Two hours later, they carried bags back into the suite and set them out in the kitchen. It was a well-appointed place, if a bit small, with marble countertops and stainless-steel appliances that looked brand new. Like everything at Elk Lodge, it was top-of-the-line. Perfect. And the man standing in it with her—

He looked pretty perfect, too.

“Peanut-butter chunk cookies,” Anna announced. “They’re my favorite, and everybody loves them. Roll up your sleeves so we can get started.”

Anna might have had practice baking, but Gabe was clueless. They mixed the first ingredients, then added the flour, baking soda, and vanilla extract.

Twenty minutes later, the whole endeavor resounded of failure. At first, she’d thought they bought too much at the grocery store—way more than they could possibly need. But the first batch was too dry from being overmixed and there wasn’t enough milk at the lodge to help with that. There was no choice but to try again. They couldn’t possibly serve these to Gabe’s grandmother.

Gabe shook his head and reached for the mixing bowl again. This time she took control of the flour while he added the brown sugar and other ingredients mixing slowly and watching the consistency. Anna felt her shoulders relaxing as she enjoyed the easy camaraderie between them.

Here, in the small kitchen, it seemed safe enough to talk. To let some of the heaviness from last night go. “My parents really hated each other,” she said, watching as Gabe stirred the mixture. “It made everything in my childhood...very tense.”

The set of Gabe’s jaw told her he was listening intently, and she was grateful for his silence, allowing her to maintain the courage to continue. “My father was never around when we needed him, my mother was always angry, and none of it was idyllic. Not like this place.” Anna took a deep breath. “Baking always made me feel better.”

“My parents loved each other and my grandparents did their best to make a happy home for us and Gran continued that after my granddad died. We were lucky.” Gabe shook his head. “It’s hard to explain, but I never felt like I measured up to Gran’s expectations. Jonas was probably born wearing a tie, and it was obvious early on that he was the best choice to follow in her footsteps and run this place. As for Chase, Granddad was an Alpine skier. He’s the one who taught us all to ski, but my brother took to it instantly. It was obvious that he was going to follow in Granddad’s footsteps. Which just left me, and neither of those options was of interest.” Jonas took a breath and used a spoon to place rounded dollops of cookie dough on the tray.

“So, when I got accepted at UCLA, I knew that was my chance. I packed up all my stuff and drove out to LA determined to strike out on my own. Starting and building OTT has been amazing, but when I’d come home for visits... Gran always seemed displeased. That’s when I started bringing my girlfriends, hoping she would see that I was doing everything right. But there was always something wrong. I was never with the right girl, never happy enough...not to please Gran, anyway.” He slid the next batch of cookies into

the oven and closed the door, setting the timer on the microwave.

When he straightened up, Anna met him with a kiss. Empathy squeezed at her heart, and she already hummed with desire from standing so close to him. Gabe didn't seem surprised at her arms on his shirt or her lips on his—he seemed *hungry*. Like a man looking for a port in a storm.

He groaned, low and soft, and the sound made her move closer. “I’ve wanted to kiss you all morning.”

“I’m kissing you now,” she said.

Gabe took her in his arms, letting his hands work over her dress, caressing the soft red material. He pushed it up to her hips like he was opening a present, and then dropped to his knees.

She sucked in a breath at the sight of him leaning in to press kisses to the line where her panties met her thighs. He tugged them down like he was undoing a ribbon and he helped her step out of them, before finding herself backed against the counter. Gabe kissed her core, sending a hot wave of desire through her body.

His tongue stole between her folds, and she put a knuckle between her teeth, trying to stifle the moans that escaped. It felt like she was falling. Like he’d opened a door into his heart and soul. It was then she accepted the truth. She’d fallen for Gabe Elkin.

Gabe brought her to a slow, sensuous release. Before she knew it, he picked her up and carried her to the bedroom while the aftershocks still echoed through her body. Instead of going to the bed, he set her down, whispering, “Don’t move.”

Grabbing a condom from the nightstand drawer, he ripped the foil and as he walked back to her, he rolled it onto his length. Then he was backing her up against the wall as he kissed her deeply. Anna couldn’t hold back the moan, it all felt so good. Lifting her up, Anna immediately wrapped her legs around his hips and gripped his shoulders as he thrust into her.

Oh, it was good. It was better than chocolate, better than cookies, and better than Christmas. The slow roll of his hips against hers and the way he dropped his head against her shoulder while he pushed in and pulled out made her dizzy with desire.

Gabe's thrusts became harder and faster, his breaths matching the pace of his hips. Anna gave in to the orgasm as it climbed higher and higher, crashing in waves as it broke over them. She could feel him coming, feel the tension in his lean body while he came. When it was over, he held her up, thumbs tracing a path on the flesh of her hips while their breathing slowed.

I hope he feels the same. The thought unfolded itself and dissolved like sugar on her tongue.

A faint beeping came from the kitchen, and Gabe let out a heavy sigh and set her back on her feet. He pressed a kiss to her forehead and was gone, off to check on the cookies.



Later that night, they wrapped the cookies in a gift box and headed for his grandmother's apartment. They met up with Jonas, Tana, and Chase at the door.

"Where's Lindsey?" Anna asked, not seeing the little girl who could light up a room.

"Sleepover with my parents," Tana told them.

Chase's eyes twinkled. "What's in the box?"

"A gift," Gabe answered. "Is she waiting for us?"

"What kind of gift?" Jonas asked.

"Not a gift for you." Gabe led the way into the apartment, where his grandmother waited in the living room, elegant in a long black sweater and a pearl necklace at her throat. He bent to kiss her cheek and put the gift box gently in her hands. Jonas and Chase exchanged a look.

"What's this?" Elin's eyes twinkled. "For me?"

Gabe rubbed at the back of his neck. “Just some Christmas cheer.”

His grandmother lifted up the top of the box, and her eyebrows went up. For the first time, Anna saw the cookies the way the older woman would see them—chunky, a little misshapen, and obviously homemade. “Oh, thank you, Gabe.” She pulled him down into a hug.

“Did you do that yourself?” Jonas asked, a slightly suspicious look on his face. “I think this is the first time you’ve ever baked anything.” He looked at the cookies, a slight frown forming. “No way Chris Denton helped with those.”

“Anna and I worked together,” Gabe answered casting a glare at Jonas.

His grandmother lifted a cookie from the box and bit into it, her eyes fluttering closed. “This is *delicious*.” She finished the cookie quietly and offered some to the others.

“Cute.” Chase grinned. “Nice gift. Not something I would have thought of.”

Gabe shrugged in response, but Anna could see the color darkening in his cheeks. He angled his body more toward his grandmother who’d managed to eat the entire cookie without getting so much as a crumb on her sweater. “I’m sorry I couldn’t host a dinner for you tonight.”

“That’s okay.” Jonas spoke without hesitation. “If you need to rest, you can rest.”

Anna had noticed the tension in the woman’s body the whole time they’d been there, so it was nice to see her relax a bit. It was, she supposed, a family tradition for their grandmother to host many meals throughout the holidays, each lovely and elegant. The mood in the room shifted, and each brother set out to reassure their grandmother it was more than okay to take it easy.

Tana moved to sit on the sofa beside Elin as they chatted, but Anna couldn’t do it.

It didn’t matter, though, because she was never going to be a genuine part of this family—the thought caused a lump to

form in her throat. She'd told Gabe some of her past, and so far, he didn't act differently toward her. But that was way more than she could expect from the rest of his family. Or deserved, for that matter.

Anger swelled, heating her cheeks and making her mouth go dry. Her father could have been a decent man who led a normal life, and then she wouldn't have any secrets. They weren't really *her* secrets, either, but no matter what she did, they seemed to cling to her like a second skin. It's one thing to try to outrun your past, and another when he keeps popping up every time he gets out of prison.

Gabe appeared at her side and put a hand on her back, his thumb tracing a slow path over the fabric of her dress. "She likes the cookies," he murmured into her ear, but she could see that he wasn't sure the gift had been good enough.

"She *definitely* did," Anna agreed. "I saw her face when she took the first bite. You can't hide joy like that."

He relaxed. "I couldn't have done it without you." He leaned in and kissed her temple, and just like that, all her frustration melted away. A kiss on the temple in front of his family didn't mean anything, but the words he spoke only for her benefit were different. Those meant something. So did the way he pulled her in close to his side and held her there for a few moments. "We'll let you rest, Gran," he called. "Let us know if you need anything at all."

Everyone said their goodbyes, and Anna and Gabe led the procession back out of their grandmother's rooms and to the elevator. They exited, Gabe still holding her hand as he led her to their rooms.

"Home sweet home," she said as Gabe paused outside the door.

His eyes met hers in a flash of heat that still managed to surprise her even though they'd already been intimate. Gabe smiled. A genuine, open, and filled-with-relief smile. "That's right."

GABE

Gabe woke to the sound of a hair dryer running, and for a minute, he didn't know where he was. He kept a hair dryer in his penthouse in Vegas, of course, but these didn't feel like his pillows. He opened his eyes. Ah. Elk Lodge. Home-home. Which meant, the person with the hair dryer was Anna.

He closed his eyes again and indulged in the fantasy of her for a few more moments. Home with Anna. It sounded right in his head. But it was the stuff of dreams, not reality.

No matter how much he wanted to keep her in bed, they sometimes had to leave the suite.

The hair dryer shut off, and she emerged from the bathroom, snugly wrapped in a bathrobe, her dark eyes lighting up at the sight of him. "Sorry if I woke you." A sheepish blush came to her cheeks, layered on top of the pink from the dryer's heat. "You're usually up earlier than me."

"I slept in." Gabe rolled onto his back and stretched his arms above his head. "Too comfortable next to you." He hadn't meant to say that out loud.

Anna only laughed and headed for the closet. She reappeared at the side of the bed, the forest green of her sweater and matching pants stunning. Her eyes swept over him. "Are you going back to sleep?"

If you come with me. "No, I have plans for us." He'd made the decision as he was falling asleep the night before. "We need to go to town."

“Oh, okay. Hurry up, then.” Her smile was the perfect way to start the day.

He threw back the sheets. “You just want to see me in my boxers.”

Anna winked at him. “Well naked would be better, but as you said, you have plans for us.”

She was too perfect. Gabe headed for the shower, wondering at every moment whether she’d climb in with him. *Or hoping.* But no, she’d just done her hair for the day. His guess was she’d be waiting by the front door when he got out. *Efficient* should have been her middle name.

Gabe was right. “Why are we going into town?”

“Shopping,” he said, as he pulled on his shoes.

Anna managed not to ask about it until they were in the car and on their way to the small downtown area not far from Elk Lodge. “What are we shopping for?”

“Christmas gifts, obviously.”

“Obviously? What more could anyone want other than a batch of homemade cookies?” At first, he thought she was making fun, but she took his hand, and the world fell back into place. “What do you have in mind?”

He pulled up into a parking spot in front of a jewelry store and got out. “I don’t know. I’m hoping you can help me.”

She put a hand to her chest, pretending to be honored. Or maybe she *was* honored. It didn’t seem to matter when her other hand was still firmly locked together with his. The town was decorated with strings of lights, and the light posts all had giant wreaths on them and Anna took in a deep breath.

“Is it me, or does it smell like fresh gingerbread here?” she asked.

“That’s the bakery.” He pointed to a location just down the street.

Anna’s shoulders shook. “This is just *so* Christmas. I love it.”

They went into the jewelry store, a hybrid place with a little boutique on the side. Soft Christmas carols played as they looked in all the cases. Gabe stopped by a collection of jeweled watches, and Anna slowly let go of his hand, leaving him to browse the boutique.

He'd just settled on the watch in the center—one with rubies and diamonds surrounding the face—when he felt her presence at his side.

“I found something.”

“So did I. This watch.” He held it out to show Anna.

“It's gorgeous.” A beat of time passed. “But given her condition, I think she might like something soft and more functional.” Anna took his hand and led him to a beautiful display of colorful shawls. They felt like water moving through his fingers. He couldn't remember the last time he'd seen his grandmother in anything this vibrant, but they were *so* soft.

“I think you're right,” he murmured, choosing one that looked like spring flowers in the evening. The colors were bright and burnished, the way they looked in the sunset from his grandmother's favorite spot on the property. “How did you choose the perfect thing?”

She put her arm through his and leaned in. “Good instincts, I guess.”

He breathed in the shampoo and hairspray scent of her, and not for the first time, he wanted to kiss her right here in front of everyone. And not just any kiss. A long, deep, lingering kiss, so that he could imprint the feeling on his memory. Anna, shopping with him for his family. He might not be an optimal fit for the Elkin crew, but he fit with Anna like a puzzle piece.

Gabe shook off the urge to do something crazy, like propose to her in the jewelry store. He handed the shawl to the clerk and Anna moved to look at the window display. The snow had started to fall, little flakes glittering in the sun, a beautiful backdrop for a beautiful woman. Although even cold and her teeth chattering, she drew him irresistibly. A quiet

conversation with the shop owner saw his gifts wrapped up and put into a small silver bag.

“Let’s walk.” Anna slipped her arm through his at the door. “It’s so beautiful here.”

“Anything for you,” he smiled. Anna laughed, but he meant every word.

They strolled down the street, taking in all the shop windows with their wrapped gifts and colorful lights. Stopping to do some additional shopping so he could buy presents for his brothers, Tana, and Lindsey. In a small courtyard, kids met with Santa Claus for pictures, their laughter high and excited. He felt an answering thrill in his chest. Gabe had long since stopped being excited about the holiday like a child would be, but the memories came hard and fast at times like this. His mother’s arms wrapped around him by the Christmas tree. His father leaned over to kiss her cheek.

Gabe cleared his throat, and they moved on. They stopped at a food cart selling hot chocolate and ended up at the massive Christmas tree in the center of town. It had been decorated with ornaments made by children.

“I just love this. Look at that one—it’s all glitter.” Anna’s enormous grin was heartfelt.

The paper plate had indeed been covered in glitter. “That one’s eye-catching, but I think this one’s underrated.” Gabe pointed out a paper plate ornament that had a single smiley face drawn in the center in a shaky hand. “Somebody worked hard on that.”

“They did,” she murmured. “Very hard. It turned out perfect.”

A minute later, her teeth started their telltale chatter. Anna was a long way from getting acclimated to the cold mountain temperatures. He pulled her into his arms. “Why didn’t you tell me you were getting chilled?” He kissed her cheek, the smooth skin chilly against his face.

“I’m a desert girl,” she laughed. “I’ll always be cold in the wintertime. Luckily, there’s a whole ski lodge to keep me warm.”

Gabe bundled her back to the car and turned up the heat. “Most of the ski lodge is colder than you’re used to,” he said sagely. “But there’s one place that’ll always be *hot*.”

Anna grinned, knowing exactly what he meant. She rubbed her arms on the way in. “I know you have the heat blasting, but somehow I’m still chilled.”

Arriving back at the lodge, they made their way to the elevator and headed for his suite. “Not for long.”

Once inside, Gabe went into the sparkling bathroom and started the water to draw a bath in the jacuzzi tub. He looked at the basket filled with bath bombs, trying to figure out which one she might like. He grabbed a Raspberry Relaxation and tossed it in.

“Oh, that looks *good*.” Water filled the tub quickly, and before he knew it, Anna had shrugged off her clothes.

His heart stopped, then stuttered to a start again. “*You* look good.”

Anna threw him a coy look. “Don’t I know it.” She flipped her hair, confident and a little sassy, but her face flushed, nonetheless. He watched as she put one foot into the jacuzzi, then the other. Taken in by her curves, he thought he might need a cold shower instead.

Anna pulled her hair up, tying it off with whatever she’d grabbed from the counter before sinking down into the water with a moan that he felt down to his toes. She opened one eye. “Are you coming in?”

“Only if you want me to.”

It was a risk, and his heart thudded with a kind of painful anticipation. Anna might not want him to. After all, they’d slept together. It was just that this would be more intimate. Like relationship intimate.

“I do,” she said softly.

Sweet relief. “There’s only one thing I need to do first.”

He went back to the table in the entryway where he’d put the silver bag from the shop and lifted out a jewelry box. He’d

meant to wait until Christmas, but everything in him said to *give it to her now*. Gabe hesitated. She was in the tub, hands already wet, so he took the gift from the box and held it in his palm. The watch was thin and delicate, with diamonds and sapphires, and it wouldn't weigh anything on her wrist. The moment he saw it, he'd known he wanted it for Anna.

Back in the bathroom, he perched on the edge of the wide tub. Anna leaned her head back against the rim, lips slightly parted, but when she sensed him there, she opened her dark eyes and smiled at him. Another arrow of desire shot through him. He was beginning to think that with Anna, it would never stop.

And now Gabe felt slightly shy in a way he never did at his office, and never had in all his meetings with her. The professional wall between them had come down over the last few days.

Her eyes searched his. "What is it?"

"I wanted to give you something." He opened his palm, the jewels winking in the low bathroom lights. "It's a thank you for everything you've done. And everything you're still doing."

She sat up with a slosh of water against the side, her eyes wide. "Gabe, that's—that's too much." Anna blinked as if she wasn't sure the watch would still be there when she opened her eyes. She lifted her fingertips and brushed them gently over the watch face. "I can't..."

"You can," he said, but that sounded almost too harsh, too demanding. "I want you to have it. Please."

Her eyes met his again, and a tentative smile played over her lips. "You're very sneaky. You know that?"

"I do." He laughed, and he saw the echo of that laughter in her grin. "I mean it, though. All this would have been impossible without you."

The tiniest frown crossed her expression. "I'm a little worried that might go down the drain."

Gabe bent down and kissed her. "I'll put it back in its box for when we get out." He started to shed his clothes, enjoying

Anna's eyes on him as they followed his every move. He slid into the hot water, letting the heat relax his muscles. Their legs fit neatly together, and Gabe closed his eyes, savoring the sensation of the slip and slide of her skin against his.

The water moved against his chest, and then her hands met his pecs. Anna worked her way onto his lap and put her head on his shoulder.

Gabe wrapped his arms around her and held her close. He felt the rise and fall of her chest as she took each breath and could feel the damp heat of her skin. He'd never seen Anna hide from anything—not a meeting or client or tough project—but she seemed like she needed a refuge in the silence of the moment.

Something he would give her.

Anna had loved the watch—that much was evident from the light in her eyes. But something wasn't right.

He opened his mouth to ask her about it, then closed it again. There would be time to talk about it later. For now, there was only the gentle weight of her in his arms and the startling intimacy of breathing together. Breath after breath in the warm water as the bubbles rose to cover them in a blanket of relaxation.

GABE

Gabe could have stayed in the jacuzzi forever. Unfortunately, their fingers and toes eventually wrinkled, and Anna lifted herself out of his lap and climbed out of the tub. He dressed, feeling calm and loose with only the slightest worry prickling at the back of his mind. Was the watch too much?

Anna came out of the bathroom, just as he was pulling on his shoes. “Heading out?”

“I need to talk to Jonas. And the best place is probably his office.” But then again, maybe he should stay and *not* have a conversation with his brother. Although sitting at the dinner table each night and hearing reports from his brothers on how his grandmother was doing wasn’t the best option. Especially since they coated everything in polite language. He had to know the truth.

Anna came over to him and bent down to brush a kiss against his lips. “Wait a minute before you leave.” She left the room and returned seconds later with the jewelry box, lifting the watch from the velvet lining. “Before you go, could you help me put this on?”

They’d been naked in the tub minutes ago, but somehow it seemed just as intimate to touch the delicate bones of her wrist and to close the intricate clasp of the watch bracelet.

Anna admired it in the light, turning it this way and that, and walked him to the door. “I’ll be around,” she said, her smile verging on the shy side. “Obviously.”

He laughed. “I’ll find you in a bit.” It felt strange, walking away without telling her something—but he couldn’t say *I love you*. That would be way over the top. And not strictly true. Or maybe it was strictly true, and he’d fallen for her. That would explain the tug in his chest when he left her in the suite instead of holding her hand as the two of them went to Jonas’s office. Like a couple.

Get it together. Gabe couldn’t lose himself in his feelings now. Not during this conversation.

Jonas’s door was open. Gabe entered, finding his brother sitting at his desk, furiously typing on his keyboard. Jonas glanced up but kept typing. “One second.” The stream of tapping tapered off a minute later, and Jonas met his gaze.

Gabe dropped into a chair across from his brother’s desk.

“What’s up?” Jonas asked, leveling a frown at him.

“We need to talk about Gran.”

His brother let out a breath and rubbed at his forehead. “It was a good thing they were able to start the treatments early on, but she’s tired.” A sheen of tears appeared over his eyes, but he blinked them away. “Not that she wants anyone to know it.”

She’d made the announcement at Thanksgiving about her cancer, and Gabe had missed it. If he thought about it too long, it ate at him, sticking in his thoughts and keeping him up at night. He knew she would never get into details like this, even with everyone gathered around for the holidays.

Especially with everyone gathered around for the holidays.

It wasn’t done in the Elkin family. Gabe’s heart pounded. When his parents had died, he’d spent months on edge, wondering when the next shoe would drop. It had been years, but it still felt like this was what he’d been waiting for. It didn’t make him worry any less. It didn’t make it any less awful.

“No,” Gabe agreed. He’d had questions for Jonas, things he wanted to talk about, but now the words dissolved on his tongue. He searched them out by sheer force of will. “Do you think she’ll beat the odds?”

It sounded so strange coming from his mouth. *Beating the odds* was a cliché, but the thoughts that dogged Gabe were starker than that. He couldn't bring himself to say them to his brother.

"I don't know. The odds—well, Grandmother might not have long, no matter the treatment. It's impossible to say. If she knows differently, she hasn't told me." Jonas shrugged. "What I do know is that you made her happy with the engagement. She mentioned the wedding to me yesterday, hoping you'd have it here. You know, before anything happens to her. Are you planning to have it here?"

Guilt swam up and threatened to choke him, but Gabe swallowed it down. "We haven't discussed it yet."

His brother arched an eyebrow. "Seriously?"

"No. The engagement happened fast."

Jonas let out a short laugh. "I would've thought you two had the whole thing planned out. She's great for you." His brother seemed to have had a change of heart about Anna.

He couldn't meet his brother's eyes, his gaze settling on a silver Christmas tree at the corner of the desk, which was in stark contrast to his brother's typical austere decor. Anna *was* great for him. They complemented each other. And with every day that passed, he was more and more interested in her. *Truly* interested.

"Elk Lodge could be good for you, too. For both of you."

Gabe snapped his gaze back to Jonas's. "What?"

"Yes, you're a brilliant developer and every app you've produced has been hugely successful. But Gabe, it's not as if you have to earn a living. Have you given any thought to your *family legacy*? You could be doing so much here at the resort." Shock caught up with Gabe in a rush of blood to his head and a thundering heart. "Nothing would make Grandmother happier than to have all of us here, taking over the resort together. Making it bigger and better."

"I—"

“You’ve at least thought about it, haven’t you? Anna seems to love it here. The two of you could be happy.”

“Jonas.” He could not move back here.

“It’s a good suggestion.”

“You’re asking me to give up my entire career to move back and help at the resort?” He’d brought home the perfect fiancée. Everyone in his family loved her. His grandmother was delighted that he’d found someone. Why couldn’t that be enough? When would what he did ever be enough? Gabe clenched his jaw and then forced himself to relax. One deep breath after another. “I’m sorry.” He sounded clipped and short, but it was the best he could do. “That’s not on the table.”

Gabe got up from his seat and left, the conversation unfinished and seeming to follow him out the door. The weight of each moment pressed down on him like a massive boulder, hovering there and crushing him slowly with each moment that passed. Yes, his grandmother had gotten terrible news and a prognosis that didn’t seem promising. But moving back to Elk Lodge wouldn’t save her. The problem was, if he returned, he might not leave again. He’d created a life for himself that was his and his alone.

He felt raw from his skin to his core and halfway to his grandmother’s suite, he realized where he was going—his old room. He knocked on the door and went in without waiting for a response, finding it unlocked the way it always was when they were in town.

“Gran?” No answer. Gabe moved down the hall into the quiet of the space, peeking into the master bedroom. His grandmother slept peacefully, shoulders rising and falling under her blanket. Good for her.

His room was down the hall from hers, and the door opened soundlessly under his hand like the hinges had been freshly oiled. Like his brothers’ rooms, she’d left them all pretty much as they were when they lived there. A queen-size bed in the center. Low bookshelves brimming with comic books. Anime posters on the walls. Gabe’s room wasn’t like his brothers’. They both had ski trophies, although Chase outnumbered

Jonas at least ten to one, and that was before he'd started competing professionally..

People were always surprised when they heard that Gabe didn't have any and the inevitable question would come up. How could an Elkin *not* be an incredible skier?

Jonas's proposal was untenable in every possible way. There was nothing for him here. Nothing permanent, anyway. He would always be looking for a place where he belonged. He wouldn't ever belong here because his family was complete without him. They belonged here at Elk Lodge while Gabe felt like a visitor.

You'll belong here if Anna stays, a voice whispered at the back of his mind—but Anna wasn't going to stay. She was only here because *he* was here, and when he left, so would she. The thought of her leaving gave him a pang of sadness. Impossible. He couldn't be sad about it.

The quiet of the room pressed in on him. He wanted to be back in his own place and he wanted to fit *here*. Such a bizarre contradiction. The person who would make everything seem less fraught would be waiting for him in the suite, so he left as quietly as he'd come. *Anna*.

The first thing he wanted to do was kiss her. And then he would pull her in close and breathe in the sweetness of her hair and feel the sensuous curves of her body beneath his palms. There would be no more ringing silence because she would make those little noises she always made in the back of her throat. It would be delicious.

He pushed open the door to their suite only to discover she was gone.

Disappointment punched him in the chest. Gabe rubbed absently at his ribs, trying to dispel an ache that he didn't want to feel. Anna didn't have to be at his side every second for the full duration of their time here. That wasn't the deal they had.

A note waited for him on the narrow kitchen counter where they'd spent so much time baking cookies.

Gabe

Chase and Tana invited me to take a ski lesson. I've only been once, and it was a long time ago, so I'll probably make a fool of myself. See you in a bit!

Anna

He threw the note down on the counter, smoothed it out with his hands, and read it again. Chase and Tana. Of course. They liked Anna, and Elk Lodge was a luxury ski resort. It would only be right for them to invite her to a lesson.

What was wrong with him?

Gabe went to the window and looked out at the slopes, trying to pick out her slender form. Not spotting her, he had to shove down the urge to run out after her and bring her back. He'd come here to tell her everything and ask for her support, but clearly, that wasn't going to happen.

He shook it off, stepping away from the view. Gabe had always been able to find something to do—he'd never needed another person the way he needed Anna now. In fact, he couldn't keep needing her this way. It was entirely outside the bounds of what they'd agreed to, and no matter how many times she kissed him back, there was no guarantee that she might reciprocate his feelings.

Maybe it will be okay. The thought came paired with an image of Anna sitting close to him on the sofa, cuddled into his side. If she listened to what he had to say, and if she told him it would all be okay, if she laughed—then maybe it would be.

ANNA

Anna had told a small fib in her note to Gabe. She'd been to a ski hill once but hadn't done more than a couple of runs. Her parents had fought and cut the visit short, never mind that they'd driven up into the mountains just for the experience. And *wow*, had things changed since she was a kid. Her knees felt wobbly, and her butt burned after a single trip down the bunny slope.

"You're doing great," Tana called out as she made an excruciatingly slow snowplow move to stay close to Anna.

They'd gone down again and again, and Anna noticed it was getting smoother on the descent, even if it was slow. It wasn't enough to keep up with everybody else on the slope. Tiny kids whizzed by on either side of her, Tana cheering them on by name. More than a few of the children had jingle bells clipped to the zippers of their jackets, identifying the students so the ski staff would be there to offer extra cheer on the slopes.

The perfection of the scene in front of her made her want to shrink into her ski coat and disappear. Not because she thought Tana shouldn't cheer for them—she should. She was a *great* teacher, and the cheerleading was part of it. Anna simply couldn't fathom a childhood where she'd have had regular vacations like this, with enough ski lessons to be incredibly good at it. It embarrassed her.

If she and Gabe stayed together—which they wouldn't—she might be able to find that kind of time. She would have the

ease of all the skiers. Eventually, people wouldn't be able to tell her apart from the rest of the family, or the guests.

That was the dream, wasn't it? It hadn't been when they'd taken off from Vegas, but now that she was in the middle of it, it was tantalizing. A sense of belonging and home that was very different from her childhood.

It was like movie theater popcorn. She never thought about the wildly expensive treat until she was standing in line to buy a ticket. Then she found it nearly irresistible. Unlike the popcorn, obviously, she couldn't buy a little taste of being Gabe's wife. This was it. This was the taste, and it was all she would ever get.

Chase came down and cut by on the left, moving down the bunny slope in a slow, broad curve.

"Head up, Elkin," Tana hollered, causing him to throw back his head and laugh.

Ace Elkin. She still couldn't believe that he was Gabe's younger brother and that she was spending time with him. She'd thought again about telling Elena about it, but every time she reached for her phone, she stopped. She wasn't in the mood to listen to her friend's disappointment in her.

Anna's thoughts became darker as she wondered if she would always be someone on the other side of the window looking in instead of being a part of the happy family inside.

"What's on your mind?" Tana asked. She'd turned her full attention back to Anna and slowed down even more to match her speed. "You look distracted."

If anyone understood, it might be Tana. She and Chase were newly a couple, maybe she could provide some perspective. "They had a good childhood, didn't they? The Elkin brothers," she clarified, nodding her head in Chase's direction. "He looks happy."

Tana smiled. "He looks happy *now*, but there was a long while where happiness was in short supply and he never thought he'd ski again. In fact, he's only been skiing for a few days and only on the bunny slope."

“But he’s skiing now.” Anna watched him make a wide arc.

“He is and he’s already set goals to work his way up to some of the more difficult slopes, but he’s trying to be realistic even if he is eager to get back on the black diamond slopes.” Tana waved at a little girl who skied by while shouting her name and cheering her on. “The guys had a rough childhood. Losing both parents is a blow even if you’re wealthy. But they all managed to compensate for that loss in their own way and Elin—and her husband—worked hard to give them the best childhood they could have.” She gave Anna a sheepish grin. “I shouldn’t be speaking for the guys, but I’ve never heard Chase complain about his younger years.”

“Their grandmother loves them,” Anna said softly. No matter how high her standards were, she could see that love in Elin’s eyes whenever she looked at her grandsons.

“She does.” Tana sounded a little choked up, but when she spoke again, it was in her regular voice. “You know, I think their grandparents tried to make up for the loss of their parents by being close.”

“Strict, though.”

“They had high standards,” Tana conceded. “But there was a lot of love, too. There still is. It’s what matters here.”

Tana’s words were a blow to her heart. Love was not what had mattered when she was growing up, and as for high standards...that was a fat zero. Her past was rife with poverty and criminal activity. Anna had worked hard to leave the stigma of that behind, but she still felt like it clung to her no matter where she went. It would mean that she was always the odd one out at a place like Elk Lodge, and maybe everywhere, if her ex had been any indication of her place in the world.

Anna came to a stop at the bottom of the hill, cheeks burning.

“Are you calling it quits?” Tana asked, coming to a stop next to her, a wide smile on her face. “You did an awesome job. First lesson, too.”

“It was wonderful.” Anna smiled back. “I just need a few minutes to warm up inside the lodge.”

Tana offered to take her skis back to the rental building. Anna unclipped them and handed them to her, more than ready for a break. “They’ll be waiting for you at the rental building if you want to come out again,” Tana said with a wink as she folded them under her arm. “Any time, okay?”

“Perfect.” Anna clomped inside the building, her ski boots making it awkward. They were so heavy when she wasn’t actually in skis, dragging her down again and again. But she relished the struggle of picking up her feet every time. Her life had been like that once. She had fought for every step. Now, all she had to do was take off these boots...if she wanted. She was strong enough to make it back to the room.

It was good, in a way, because she had to walk slower and process her feelings about the ski hill conversation. Anna would never fit in at Elk Lodge. That was true. But that didn’t mean she had to feel bad about it. She could still hold her head up high. *Lift your chin, lovely.* She did.

Back in the suite, she found Gabe sitting on the sofa, one hand along the back. He’d gone completely still, but the air around him crackled with unreleased energy. It sent a shiver over her skin. He wasn’t in a good mood. Anna couldn’t describe how she knew, except that they’d worked closely together for weeks. It was the way he sat, she decided—it telegraphed everything.

Gabe turned his head to the side as she worked her ski boots off her feet and lined them up on the floor. “I’m glad you’re back from your lesson,” he said, sounding flat. The tone didn’t surprise her. She’d heard this one, too, and it was the tone he used when he was trying to hide his irritation. Better to get it out in the open now. The meeting—it had to do with the meeting. He’d been fine when they got out of the tub, and now he wasn’t.

“How was your meeting with Jonas?” Anna padded through the room and fell into the spot on the sofa next to him. She didn’t miss the way he inched closer, or the way his shoulders dropped a little. Gabe still wore an expression that was somewhere between anger and resignation. Anna followed his gaze out toward the slopes and traced the path of a figure in a

purple coat coming down in a series of lazy curves. It looked good. She probably hadn't looked that good, but at least she'd tried.

"My brother has other ideas about what I should be doing with my life."

Anna blinked. Jonas seemed like the type to have lots of thoughts about what other people should do, but it had clearly gotten Gabe's goat at this meeting. For a horrible moment, she thought Jonas might be talking about her—maybe he'd discovered the truth about the two of them. That would be bad. That was not something she wanted for Elin or Gabe. Any of them. "Really?" Her tongue felt dry. "He wanted you to—what, to do something else?" She should be straightforward—*is this about me?* But it felt wrong to ask. Selfish.

"Yes. Jonas's expectations are as high as they ever were in my family, and now..." He let out a huff. "I thought if I showed them I was happy, they would realize that I'm in a good place and stop judging me for the choices I've made. Clearly, that's not going to happen. I'm still a disappointment."

Anna reached out and took his hand, and he squeezed tight. It kept her grounded, though the rest of her seemed unsettled. Unmoored. "I don't think that's true," she finally managed. "Chase looks up to you. He spent a good chunk of our lesson talking about how smart you are." She rolled her eyes. "You're not the outsider. You just have a different outlook on life. They want to be here at the lodge, and you want something else. It doesn't mean your family thinks less of you."

He stiffened, cutting a glance at her out of the corner of his eye. "How can you be sure of that? You don't really even know my family." That hurt. It was true, yeah, but that was probably why it hurt so much. "My career has never been good enough because it's not here. My girlfriends have *never* measured up to my grandmother's high standards." Gabe stared straight ahead, and Anna's heart threatened to break for him.

The comment stung because it lumped her in with all the other girlfriends Gabe had brought here. How could Anna ever

begin to fit in here? She could barely ski. And she definitely couldn't pretend to be from a wealthy, stable family. Okay—she could pretend that, but eventually, the truth would come out.

Or maybe it wouldn't because they wouldn't be together. They would return home and go back to being business associates. After they left Elk Lodge, he'd have no further use for her and all she would have is happy memories of a family she didn't belong to and whole bunch of pictures.

The trick was to stay focused.

What she *would* do was work extra hard to win the family over tonight. It wouldn't be the first time she'd felt like a complete imposter while doing a job, but no matter what she felt, she'd do the job to the best of her ability. *Beyond* the best of her ability. That was how she'd positioned herself for this moment, hadn't she?

Anna took a deep breath and reached for Gabe. She held him close and kissed his cheek.

He laughed. "What's that for?"

"I know what I know," she told him. "You're good enough for your family. More than good enough. If you want to do something different, then that's up to you." His muscular shoulders felt good in her arms. "But in the meantime, you know what we're going to do?"

"What?"

"Be the best-engaged couple at this resort."

Gabe's hand came up, and he stroked the side of her face, his eyes finally landing on hers. They flicked down over her lips and lingered there. "How should we do that?"

"Oh, I'm not sure," she said primly. "Do you think we should practice first? Do some exercises to get closer together before our next public appearance?"

He made a low noise in the back of his throat. "I can think of a few exercises for that." His blue eyes warmed. "I have to warn you, though—they involve significantly less clothing."

“Try me,” she said, all too happy when he took her up on the offer.

GABE

When they climbed out of bed an hour later, Gabe felt closer to Anna. *Much* closer. It still stung, the way she'd brushed over his worry about not belonging with his family, but it stung a lot less. He'd take that for now.

They stepped into the shower together, and he tried to put his heart back inside his body as he ran the washcloth over her curves, circling her breasts and tickling her hips. She leaned back against him, her head on his chest. "No more," she said. "Or I'll be too tired to go to dinner with you."

"With me, Jonas, and Chase," he said, clearly not entirely over her earlier defection to his family's way of thinking.

She stiffened. She hadn't been prepared for this extra performance. "I didn't know we were going to dinner with them tonight."

He worked the shampoo through her hair and helped rinse it out again. "Well, that's what we're here for—family dinners." Gabe turned her to face him, but her dark eyes slipped away from his. He put a finger under her chin and tilted her face toward his. "You've been amazing at the dinners. What's wrong?"

"It's nothing." She smiled, the nervousness disappearing from her face but not her body. Her shoulders remained tense as she dried her hair and put on her makeup. If she didn't want to talk about it, he wouldn't press. Not when they were about to walk out the door.

The hotel's restaurant was on the opposite side of the building, a five-star affair with low lighting and white tablecloths.

"Is your grandmother going to eat with us tonight?" Anna murmured as they breezed by the hostess.

"No. Jonas sent a message saying she was still too tired. Her cancer treatments take a lot out of her." Gabe squeezed her hand. "I thought you had a good time with Chase and Tana today."

"Of course," she said as if she was trying to convince herself, too. "It was a great lesson, and they're good teachers."

"Then—" It was too late to finish the question, so he stopped himself. They had come to the round table where Tana, Chase, and Jonas were waiting. Jonas and Chase stood up to shake hands with him. It was all very formal. Tana came around to embrace Anna, and then they all took their seats. "Lindsey's at a friend's house," Tana said, explaining her absence.

"Now that the lovebirds are here, we can order," Chase said, shooting Anna a wink.

She laughed, the sound too loud and bright for the moment, and an intense awkwardness flooded over Gabe. "What are you going to have, Jonas?"

"Steak," his brother's answer came without a second's hesitation. "It's my favorite thing on the menu."

"You don't want to broaden your horizons?" Chase needled him. "Anna did. She's basically never been skiing before, and she spent a good two hours on the slopes today."

"Will I lose all my credibility if I *also* order steak?" Anna asked, her smile too full. Almost forced.

Chase and Jonas chuckled, seeming not to notice.

"Because it sounds good after all that exercise." She glanced at Gabe as she said it, her cheeks going pink, and for the life of him, he couldn't figure out what she was trying to do. Could his brothers tell? That was the key at this moment.

Tana said something about roast chicken, and the rest of them chattered about it until the server came back and took their

orders.

“Now that that’s done,” Chase said, folding his hands on the table, “what do you two have in mind for the wedding? Because I have some ideas.”

This earned him a look from Tana. “*You* have ideas? About weddings?”

“Yeah.” Chase grinned. “But I want to hear what the plans are first before I jump in with suggestions.”

“Oh, we—” Anna glanced at Gabe. “We haven’t had time to talk about plans for the big event yet, what with the holidays and wanting to be here for Elin.”

“What’s your dream wedding?” Tana asked, reaching for a roll in the basket at the center of the table. Those rolls were one of Gabe’s favorite things in the restaurant, but he didn’t want one now.

Something had gone horribly wrong, and the direction the conversation was headed left him reeling. He should get up and make some excuse. But then his brothers would know something was wrong, and their questions would only intensify.

“I always thought I’d like a summer wedding,” Tana mused, stealing a glance at Chase. “But winter weddings can be beautiful, too. All those warm wraps...”

“I can’t see us getting married before the summer. Right, Gabe?” Anna’s gaze landed on him, looking for confirmation, her eyes wide with panic. Gabe grabbed her hand.

They hadn’t come up with a fake wedding plan, but the conversation shouldn’t send her into a tailspin. Unless there was something else about wedding planning that he was missing completely. “That’s right. Not before summer at the earliest.”

The server stepped in with their salad course. He’d never seen Anna look so relieved. She seemed to be intently focused on dressing her salad, and he was grateful for the lull in conversation while everyone else did the same. Except for Jonas, who didn’t like dressing.

“What about your family, Anna?” Jonas asked.

Anna’s eyes snapped back up to meet Jonas’s, her fork freezing in midair over her salad. The smile flickered away from her face and then reappeared seconds later. But Gabe noticed the slip. “What about them?”

“I don’t think we’ve really had the chance to get to know you.” Jonas popped a cherry tomato into his mouth. “All of our gatherings have been pretty Elkin-focused. Where does your family come from?”

“Las Vegas. Born and raised.” Anna shrugged, with a light laugh. “It’s not a very interesting story.”

Gabe worried about her response. Everything Anna did took the form of an interesting story, even when it wasn’t. That was why she was so good at her job—why she could make an inspiring narrative out of just about anything and get people to want to buy whatever she was selling.

Gabe knew she’d had an unhappy childhood and that her parents didn’t get along. But the way she was hedging, was there more? What was she hiding? Suddenly, all he could think about were the ways she shifted away from questions about who her parents were, or changed the subject. Jonas nodded slowly, suspicion creeping into his eyes. “So, you grew up in Vegas then. That sounds exciting.”

“We lived in the eastern portion, in the suburbs,” Anna said. “But honestly, I don’t like to talk about my childhood. It was an uncomfortable time.”

Chase straightened up in his seat, looking down at his salad, and Tana’s expression shifted toward sympathy.

“What’s important,” she continued brightly, “is that I’ve managed to make it on my own, and I’m happy where I am now. *Very* happy.”

Anna looked back at her salad and stabbed at a piece of lettuce with her fork.

Gabe could see that Jonas wanted to ask more questions. He could see it in the intense look on his brother’s face. “You’ll be

the first to know when we've decided about the wedding," he said pointedly, ending the conversation.

The brothers let it drop, talking about attendance on the slopes until the main course came. But Anna didn't relax. She spoke up every so often, usually to agree with Tana or ask Chase about his PT. Tension wound its way up the back of Gabe's neck until it was too tight to bear. When the server came to clear away the dinner plates, he took Anna's hand and brushed a kiss across her knuckles. "I think we're going to head out," he announced to everyone else at the table.

Anna put on one more smile, and the two of them left. It wasn't until they got off the elevator at their floor that her shoulders sagged. She leaned against him, trembling a little.

"I'm sorry," he said. "Jonas doesn't know when to stop sometimes. I think he missed the class on sensitivity."

"I don't understand why he's so determined to find out more," she said through gritted teeth. Her arm went around his waist, and she held tight while he opened the door and entered their suite. Anna brushed past him to push the door shut and slam the locks into place. "My family has nothing to do with the wedding, or with me, and—"

"He's just trying to look out for me. My family doesn't love that I don't live here, where they can keep an eye on everything I'm doing. The fact that I split my time between Silicon Valley and Vegas and have two homes is an absolute waste of money, as far as they're concerned."

She rolled her eyes. "So which is worse for them?"

He shrugged. "Both are equally as bad since neither of them are in Colorado. I know their concern is out of love. I know it is." It irritated him, too, all the questions. Anna clearly hadn't wanted to talk about it, and Jonas had pressed on anyway. "That doesn't excuse the way he kept pressing for answers."

She let out a breath, some of the color receding from her face. "I get it. It's nice you have someone who cares one way or the other." Her gaze flicked down to the floor, and the corner of her mouth turned down. This time, he reached up to brush his

thumb over that hint of a frown. Anna met his eyes again, and he was struck by the depth he found there, and the warmth, even when she was sad.

“Tell me what’s happening with you,” he coaxed. “You’ve been tense since you knew about this dinner with my brothers. Did something happen out on the ski hill?”

“No,” she said quickly. “No, I just—I found out more about how it was for you guys—growing up. It wasn’t anything like my childhood, and I felt...I felt like a puzzle piece that had fallen into the wrong box. Like I would never fit in here, even if I tried. And I know it doesn’t matter, but...I guess it does matter. To me.”

She bit her lip, and a rush of affection as clean and pure as mountain water hit him. She had the same worry he did. But how? Anna was the perfect woman. She’d been successful in everything she’d worked for, and all she needed now was a bit of an investment on his part to be an enormous success.

He swallowed, taking his face in her hands. If he asked this next question, it would change things between them. Gabe knew it would. But she’d danced around this issue for so long, and it seemed to be at the heart of all her worries. “I know you don’t want to talk about your family. At least not with my brothers—and I understand that. But I feel like there’s more you’re not telling me.”

“You don’t want to know. I promise you don’t.”

“I do.” Gabe looked her square in the eye as he said it. “I want to know everything about you.” *I want to kiss you, too.* “But you don’t have to tell me if it’s something you’d rather keep to yourself. I’m only saying...” This was not the kind of conversation Gabe was used to having, but he wasn’t going to give up on this now. Anna was worth it. “I’m only saying that I’m here, and I’d like to know because I care about you. That is if you’re willing to tell me.”

ANNA

Anna knew it would be so easy to give in to Gabe.

With his hands on her face and his stormy eyes locked on hers, she wanted nothing more than to tell him everything. Every last, awful detail. She'd barely scratched the surface when she'd told him that her parents hated each other.

But she didn't come to Elk Lodge to unburden herself about her past, and tension between them was the last thing she wanted. Tiredness pressed down on her shoulders, a bone-weary feeling that had dogged her for years. It was easier to give him the edited version of the past than to convince him that he didn't need to know.

Because he did need to know. Anna's stomach churned as though she was standing at the edge of a high cliff, waiting to fall, knowing it was inevitable. If she was going to live with the way she felt about him, then he deserved to know more. Better now than later when her past could only do more damage.

"My parents went through a bitter divorce when I was young," she said, finding it the easiest way to begin. They'd divorced because it was the first time her father had been in prison for longer than a year. The information rose to the tip of her tongue, but just as quickly died away. It was one fact that didn't come under the *share* category. "I had to take care of myself because my mother was working nonstop to provide for us, and my older brother was always busy."

She could still remember the stepstool in the kitchen that she would pull up to the stove to cook macaroni and cheese before she grew tall enough to do it unaided. The extra food from school had come home in a plastic bag that was painfully obvious—all those packages of oatmeal and granola bars and things to tide her over through the weekend. Anna had tried her best to stuff the food deep into her backpack, so nobody else would see, but those telltale bags were handed out in the lunchroom. There was no hiding it.

And her mother hadn't just been working. She'd been bringing lots of different men home. Those men would stay the night, leaving early without being quiet. "I was on my own a lot."

Gabe studied her, compassion in his eyes. It wasn't pity, no—she'd seen plenty of that. It was empathy. But how long would that last? Gabe would never really understand what it had been like to grow up the way she had. He would never know what it was like to watch her older brother follow in their father's footsteps with one stint after another in prison. All those facts simmered beneath the surface, never far away, but she couldn't let them free.

Not to Gabe. Not to anyone.

"I'm sorry," he murmured. "You shouldn't have had to be alone." Hearing that from him made her feel painfully vulnerable, like he could see inside her mind to all her roiling thoughts. *No*. Letting people in like that was a recipe for disaster.

Anna straightened, hooking her hands around his wrists and feeling the warmth of his skin through her palms. "But I was, and I made it through. I—I finished high school without their support, put myself through college, and none of my family showed up for graduation. For either of them. Not that I expected them to. I've been on my own a long time and prefer it that way."

Gabe closed his eyes as if she'd told him something too awful to bear. It had merely been her life. There were other things she could imagine that were worse, and she'd done what she

had to do to survive. “And Jonas wouldn’t stop bothering you about them,” he said, his voice pained. “I’m sorry about that.”

His eyes met hers again, and she wanted to fall into his gaze. Fall into that simmering blue heat and roll herself up in it until there was nothing except Gabe. “It’s all right.”

“It’s not all right, but it’s nothing to be ashamed of, either.” His brow furrowed. “Was there anything else that happened?”

My father’s a criminal, she wanted to say. Gabe had accepted everything else she’d told him, but that—that was the worst thing. It could be the tipping point between seeing her as a person and seeing her as a charity case—someone to help for the sake of helping. Or worse, he could judge her unworthy to be around his family.

“There was more with my ex-boyfriend, Freddie.” She bit her lip. “I’d thought he was going to propose to me, before I’d realized that I was some sort of guilty secret. Or indulgence. When I’d asked him why he never invited me out to LA, he laughed. The realization that I meant nothing to him hit me hard. It’s made me wary of relationships. But you know that,” she said quickly. “We don’t have to have this conversation, you know. We could keep things simple.” Anna slid her hands down the front of his shirt. “Simple, like it was earlier.”

He caught her wrists in his hands. “When you’re this on edge? I don’t think so. By the way, he was wrong.”

“Was he?”

“Yes.”

Anna allowed herself a tiny grin. “Exercise is a good stress reliever.”

A smile broke over Gabe’s face, so handsome she wanted a painting of it. “I have another idea.” He took her hand, led her to the sofa, guided her to a seat in the middle, and sat next to her. “Do you like it hard or soft?”

She burst out laughing. “What are you talking about?”

His hands on her shoulders should have answered the question. “A massage, silly.” His voice lit up something

sensuous inside of her, but Gabe was serious. His hands kneaded her shoulders.

“Medium,” she allowed, sinking into his touch. “I like it medium.”

Gabe lingered over her shoulders, releasing the tension there, working down her back until she had to lie forward on the sofa.

It was actually the first massage she’d ever had.

Anna had never thought of massages as something available to her. Her mom certainly hadn’t had the money for such a non-essential. And when Anna was out on her own and starting her career, the essentials were things like an apartment and professional work clothes—not massages. Tears pricked at the corners of her eyes. No one she’d ever been with had touched her like this. Not as a way to remove the tension from her muscles and help her relax.

Which, of course, had the side effect of sparking a new desire in her, low down where there had only been nerves and dread. Gabe had worked his way down to her calves and was gently kneading the muscles there. Anna couldn’t stay on the sofa anymore. She pushed herself up and into his arms, sliding her palms over his shoulders and to the back of his neck.

“Thank you,” Anna whispered. Suddenly they were kissing. It happened so fast it was impossible to tell which one of them started it. She only knew that his lips were on hers, reassuring and possessive. She climbed into his lap, straddling him, letting him spread his hands out along her back.

The dinner fell away. Elk Lodge fell away. The *world* fell away, and there were only their bodies pressed close together. Gabe was hard against her and her own body lit up in response, nipples tightening, skin coming alive at his touch through her dress.

He slowed the kiss, his hands running over her hair and her neck. “We don’t have to,” he said against her mouth.

It made her feel fragile in a way that she hadn’t ever allowed herself to feel. Not since childhood. Not for a long, long time.

“I want to,” she whispered back.

He lifted her off the sofa and took her to the bedroom, where he lingered over the undressing process. Gabe slowly pulled her dress over her head and inched her tights down her legs. He traced the lace on her bra, tugged the straps down her shoulders one by one, and then unclipped it with infinite patience. He drew his fingers across the matching pattern on her panties before taking them off, eyes shining like he was unwrapping a Christmas present.

Gabe bent his head and kissed her an inch below her belly button. Anna was so ready for him that she arched upward, getting caught up in another demanding kiss. He kept kissing her in between his efforts to undo his pants, rid himself of his shirt, and roll on a condom. Then he was nudging between her legs. Oh, she wanted more of *that*. He let out a low groan at the way she tilted her hips up, begging with her body, and pushed inside.

It felt like coming home.

All the air went out of her lungs and flooded back in with a hundred times the oxygen, making everything seem bright and fresh. Gabe filled her in all the ways she needed. He drove out everything but him, and when he moved into a slow, patient rhythm, it was like being rocked by the ocean. Inevitable and sexy and so much bigger than she was. Bigger than her past, bigger than the future—the moment surrounded her.

Something broke within her as desire wound tighter and tighter at her core. A slow progression that nearly drove her crazy with how deliberate he was. Gabe was completely focused on her—a master in control who constantly adjusted so that her clit got maximum attention. Tears slipped out from the corners of her eyes.

This was the closest they’d ever been.

She’d thought it had been earlier when they’d made the bed a tangle of sheets and shut the world out with pure physical frenzy. This was different. There was no looking away from Gabe. No feeling anything but him.

And he *saw* her.

Her!

His eyes raked over her again and again. “Yes,” he murmured. “That’s it.” Anna knew he’d been watching her so intently that he knew when the pleasure had built to a peak and was about to crest.

Her orgasm tumbled over her in a tidal wave of sensation. Gabe kept moving, and before she’d even come down from the high, another one was building. Anna dug her nails into his shoulders, and only then did he pick up the pace. Only then did his expression shift, becoming fiercer and almost elemental somehow.

Her second orgasm came quicker, like it was moving at a dead sprint, and Gabe tensed above her, driving in deep. Deeper. She could hardly breathe and didn’t want to. She just wanted him. She wanted more of him, until her shuddering finally stopped, and he dropped his head onto her shoulder.

She wasn’t sure how much longer it was when they lay back against the pillows and pulled up the blanket. Delicious tiredness enveloped her along with Gabe’s arm. She could drift off right now if it weren’t for one thought.

Borrowed time.

This moment with him, in bed, his warm, hard body next to hers—it was all on borrowed time. It was easy enough for him to say that Anna didn’t have to be ashamed of her past and that Freddie had been wrong, but that didn’t mean his family would ever agree. And Gabe seemed to dance along the edges of communication with them. He didn’t want to let them in, just like she hadn’t wanted to let him in on this, either.

Stay with me, she wanted to say, breaking apart the agreement they’d made and putting it out there that she wanted more from him. But what would the outcome be? If he had the choice between a relationship with her and maintaining a relationship with his family, he might choose them. Gabe had admitted he didn’t fit in and admitted he’d had to buck their

pressure to start his own career, but the pull of family was strong. A man couldn't stand up to it forever.

She wouldn't risk it now.

Gabe's breathing evened out. Her muscles were so tired from skiing and pleasure still clung to her making it difficult to stay awake. Just as she was about to fall asleep, a voice in her head reminded her that it was too late, anyway.

ANNA

The knock at the door of the suite the next morning startled Anna awake. She threw back the covers on instinct, but Gabe's arm was still around her, holding her close. She let out a little groan that was half excitement and half disappointment that someone wanted their attention. Anna blinked a few times. She couldn't answer the door naked, that was for sure. She rubbed a hand up and down Gabe's arm, coaxing him awake. Goosebumps rose on his skin at her touch.

The knock sounded again.

"There's somebody at the door," she whispered, feeling suddenly like they'd been caught doing something illicit. It was a thrill, in a way—her heart raced, and adrenaline rushed in, making her breath come quickly. That was the fun kind of thrill. They were *supposed* to be doing this. Gabe's phone buzzed on the bedside table. Another knock.

Gabe sat up next to her, his face red from the pillow where he slept. He made a small noise of protest as he registered her words. "Who's there?"

"Your brother."

Irritation flashed across his face, and then he was out of bed, grabbing for his pajama bottoms. Anna admired how they displayed his body to utter perfection, forgetting she needed to get dressed as well. She only started moving when Gabe pulled his shirt over his head and went for the door. Ooh, he looked *good*.

Anna would much rather think about how good he looked than the fact that she hadn't been entirely honest with him last night. Everything she said was true, but she *had* left things out.

That didn't matter now. Anna moved down the hall to listen. "What's going on?"

"There's a storm," she heard Chase say, his voice muffled by the space between the bedroom and the door. "We're short-handed because some of our staff got stuck at home, and we've got people who showed up right before the storm hit."

"Okay?" Gabe sounded confused and still sleepy. Anna slowed down the pace of getting dressed. Maybe he'd come back to bed. That would be the ideal situation. Gabe back in bed, and the rest of the world far away. She hadn't heard anything about a storm coming to the area, either. How bad could it be?

"The booking system's also down. And nobody knows how to fix it. Except you."

Okay, so they weren't going back to bed.

"We'll be there in twenty minutes. Just let us get dressed."

"Get *dressed*? What have you been doing in here? You weren't sleeping, were you..." Gabe shut the door, cutting off Chase's joke. His footsteps came quickly back to the bedroom.

Gabe's eyes were filled with a determined light when he came back into the room. "It's all hands on deck downstairs. Jump in the shower—we've got to get ready."



Twenty minutes later, they descended into the lobby.

"Chase *really* undersold this," Anna said, taking Gabe's hand. "I thought he meant a couple of families." There were at least thirty people in the lobby, all milling around at the front desk while the staff clicked at their computers. A general grumbling filled the space, none of the guests happy with the delay.

The mood in the air was familiar to her—and not a welcome one. It was the mood of a group of people who were

inconvenienced, and they were not going to be happy unless something was done. Right now.

“Jonas is up there,” Gabe said, pointing out his brother at the reception desk. “But he looks like he’s in over his head.”

They made a beeline for the desk. If Anna knew anything about people with reservations and commitments, it was that the unhappiest of them would look for anyone to unload on.

“Jonas,” she said, moving to stand next to him. “Let me help.”

He looked at her, eyebrows raised, and it seemed as though he was on the verge of saying no. At that moment, the volume in the room rose a notch.

“Trust me.” She put on her most professional, welcoming smile. “I know what to do.”

“Go ahead.” Jonas ceded her some space, and Anna went out in front of the counter and waved her arms, aiming for silence. The guests quieted down, silence spreading like a ripple in a pond outward from her.

“Welcome to Elk Lodge,” she began, keeping her smile in place, but an empathetic look in her eyes. At least—that’s how she hoped she looked. “We’re so glad you arrived safely, despite the storm outside. Unfortunately, we’re experiencing some technical difficulties that are making our check-in process frustrating. We have a person here to fix the system, and it should be up and running shortly. In the meantime, we’d like to invite you all to the hotel’s restaurant for a complimentary breakfast.”

“Where are we supposed to keep our things?” someone fretted from the front of the crowd.

Anna waved one of the reception staff members forward. “We’ll watch over any luggage you’d like to leave here while you have some breakfast. It will be looked after the entire time you’re eating until the last piece is picked up. If you’ll all follow me, I’ll lead the way.”

She held her breath but tried not to let it show.

Then the first members of the crowd came toward her, and the rest followed.

Anna got everyone settled in the restaurant, which was open for breakfast but not expecting a crowd of that size. She made quick friends with the hostess, and once everyone was seated, Anna went around to each table to speak with the guests personally.

Yes, a very sudden storm, she repeated so many times she lost count. Completely unexpected glitches with the system. We're working hard on it right now. No, of course there won't be any problem with your reservation.

By the time she'd made the rounds, it had been almost forty-five minutes.

She found Gabe and his brothers, along with Elin, in a large office behind the front desk. Gabe tapped quickly at a computer, windows popping up and closing again faster than she could keep track. Elin came up to her and took her hands. "Thank you for your quick thinking," she said with a tired smile that squeezed at Anna's heart. "I should have offered breakfast right away, but my nerves got the better of me."

"It was nothing," she assured the older woman. "It'sIt's second nature to me."

Elin's eyes glistened with tears. "I'm so glad Gabe has someone like you." Another flicker of guilt. If Elin only knew. "Gabe," she said, louder. "This woman is a walking miracle. I hope you know that."

"I do," Gabe said, stopping what he was doing for a moment to look up. Too bad the expression on his face didn't match his words.

Anna went to his side and put a hand on his shoulder, feeling the engagement ring's weight on her finger. It felt heavy, but it was still fake. It didn't really mean anything, no matter how wonderful Elin thought she was. "Is everything okay?"

"The booking system is a mess. I don't know why Jonas didn't upgrade years ago." He let out a short breath. "But it's no problem—you're the star of the show here. Great job with

crowd control. If you keep it up, nobody will even remember this happened.”

You're the star of the show. Anna stood stock still. He was obviously frustrated. Why?

Jealousy?

Anna knew Gabe didn't need accolades from his family. Was he jealous of the way Elin had accepted her just now, and for the way she'd found a place for herself when he thought he didn't have one? How could he *still* be hung up on this? They'd talked about it, and she'd agreed to be the best fiancée he could hope for. That meant impressing his family. That meant stepping in during an emergency like this one.

“I'll stay out of your way,” she said, trying not to let the pain echo in her voice. She started to move away, but he grabbed her hand in midair and pulled it to his lips, pressing a kiss against her skin.

“I meant it,” Gabe said, his voice low and urgent. “You're doing a great job.”

Some of her irritation dissolved. This was all becoming more complicated than she'd counted on. Anna leaned down and kissed him on the lips, which earned them a whistle from Chase.

Jonas came over then, and she left to chat with Elin about the storm.

“I knew there were bookings for the weekend, obviously, but I didn't think they'd all show up early to beat the storm.” Elin shook her head. “I should know better after all these years.”

“It sounded like the storm took a surprise turn—wasn't it supposed to hit south of us?”

“That's what I thought.”

This was the kind of conversation that Anna craved—simple and without any hidden meanings. They were just discussing the weather. Was that what other families could count on? She could be totally sure it wouldn't turn into a commentary on her

father's failings or a diatribe about the men her mother brought home or any of that. Longing hit hard.

If she were really Gabe's fiancée, she could put up with the high standards and the little tiffs between brothers if it meant being part of this family.

"Almost done, Gabe?" Jonas brushed by, putting a hand on Anna's arm to step around her. "People will be done eating soon. We can't keep them waiting."

"I *am* almost done," Gabe answered, not looking up from the screen. "But I wouldn't have had to do this if you used better software. All this could have been avoided."

"If you were working at the resort, you could have designed software specifically for us."

"You couldn't afford me," Gabe shot back.

Tana appeared at her side. "Let's leave them to it. Don't you think?"

Anna was about to say yes. The front desk staff would be able to run reservations in a few minutes. It would be nice to unwind with tea or coffee or any number of things, especially with her new friend. There were lots of options at Elk Lodge.

A voice rang out in the lobby—angry and loud. It was a blustery tone that sent a twist of anxiety through Anna's gut.

"Uh oh," Tana said, shaking her head.

Elin closed her eyes, trying to shut the sound out.

"I've got it," Anna said. "I'll let them know about breakfast. With the snow coming down the way it is, we shouldn't have to worry about any more arrivals."

Anna straightened her shoulders and calmed her mind. That spike of anxiety had been nothing but residual adrenaline, she decided. One more set of guests on edge wouldn't do her in. But as she prepared to step back out into the reception area, the noise got louder. This wasn't just one angry guy—he'd come with quite a few guests, by the sounds of it.

Waiting wouldn't make it any better.

Welcome to Elk Lodge, she thought. Hopefully, from there on out, the conversation would be fine.

Three steps and she was back to the reception desk. “Welcome to Elk Lodge,” Anna said, but then all the words she’d planned to say fled from her mind.

She’d prepared herself for an angry man. She’d prepared herself for a moderately large group. But she hadn’t prepared herself for her ex-boyfriend Freddie, his parents, some people she didn’t recognize, and a woman clinging to his arm—his new girlfriend.

Freddie’s lip curled with disgust. “I can’t believe this. What are *you* doing here?”

GABE

“**T**his really would all be better if you were here,” Jonas said, leaning on the desk where Gabe was still working on fixing the system. “Haven’t you ever considered it? Would you consider it now?” Jonas wouldn’t stop needling him about working at Elk Lodge.

“No. And no, I have no desire to be your glorified tech support.” Gabe put the final keystrokes into the program and set the reservation system back to rights. It would at least function well enough to get them through the day, giving Jonas time to decide what he wanted to do about the software. Gabe would be back home by the time that was all said and done. “And I wish you’d stop—”

“You can’t afford to be here. Why would anyone even let you onto the grounds?” A loud, male voice coming from the direction of the reception desk interrupted their conversation.

Gabe got up out of his seat before he could process what he’d heard and rushed out to the reception area, close on Jonas’s heels. What he hadn’t expected was to find Anna the object of the man’s attention. She stood behind the desk with another one of the reception staff members next to her. But it was Anna’s demeanor that caught and held his gaze. *Lost* and *terrified* were the two words that came to mind.

“Who *is* this woman?” demanded the woman on the man’s arm, her fingers locked tight around his bicep, her face drawn up into an expression of disgust.

A jolt of anger shot down Gabe’s spine.

“She’s an ex.” The man rolled his eyes. “Don’t worry about her. I’m just not thrilled to see someone working here who doesn’t belong. Given her family’s business, she probably got a job here so she can siphon money from the resort.”

“That’s not true,” Gabe said, glancing around to address his family. He turned his attention back to the man. “You’re speaking about my fiancée,” Gabe said, stepping up to Anna’s side. “That’s why she’s here at our *family-owned* resort. Is there something *we* can help you with?”

“It’s Freddie,” Anna whispered, and Gabe’s heart broke for her. The ex who hadn’t thought she was good enough. This was supposed to be a holiday getaway with nothing but snow and family dinners and charm, not a chance for some jerk to confront her at Elk Lodge.

Freddie’s mouth dropped open, and furious red splotches blotted his cheeks. His eyes swung wildly between Anna and Gabe. He took a step back as if to take in the entire scene again and make sure he was in the right place. “How the hell are you engaged? I just dumped you two months ago.”

A gasp came from behind him, and Gabe recognized it instantly as belonging to his grandmother.

No. The meaning of Freddie’s words hit him next like a clap of thunder. *Just dumped you two months ago.* They’d told everyone a far different story.

“How can that be?” Jonas joined in the conversation.

Gabe glanced over his shoulder to discover his entire family standing there, shocked expressions on their faces.

“I thought you two had been engaged for a few months,” Chase asked while maintaining a look of casual indifference, hands in his pockets and leaning against the doorjamb.

Anna didn’t lower her head, but Gabe could tell she wanted to. Heck, he felt the same way. The whole house of cards was tumbling down around them, and Anna’s cheeks went pink, then red. Tears gathered in the corners of her eyes.

He took her arm, gently moved her back behind him, and then took her place at the reception desk. “We won’t be able to

process your reservation for today.”

Freddie’s girlfriend—whoever she was—glared at him. “What are you saying? We booked here weeks ago, and your staff told us your system would be up and running in a few minutes.”

“It’s up and running now, but not for you.” Anger threatened to choke him, but he swallowed it back. Losing control of his emotions now wouldn’t help anyone—only action could do that. “I won’t tolerate you treating my fiancée this way. I wouldn’t tolerate you treating one of the *staff* this way. We’ll note your names for future reference. All of you are now officially banned from the resort.”

“Where are we supposed to go?” an older woman howled. He assumed it was Freddie’s mother but didn’t care since she’d stood by and watched her son mistreat Anna. “There’s a storm.”

“You can sit in the lobby until it passes. You won’t be welcome anywhere else on the resort grounds.” He turned to the woman on shift at the reception desk—Lizzie, by her name tag. “Lizzie, run down to the restaurant and let the hostess know that this party is not to be seated under any circumstances. You might want to call security and let them know, too.”

“Yes, sir.” Lizzie’s eyes were bright, and Gabe had a flash of pride. Maybe he didn’t work at Elk Lodge, but that hadn’t removed him from the family. He had every right to protect Anna here and anywhere else she went. Something shifted inside him—*wait, let me think about this*—but there was no time to think because he could feel his family staring at the back of his neck.

“You can’t do this,” blustered Freddie. “We’ve paid good money to be here, and—”

Gabe held up a hand. “I absolutely can do this.” If Jonas wanted to disagree, now was his chance. “You’re not welcome here anymore. If you do anything other than sit in the lobby, I’ll alert the authorities that you’re trespassing. Cancel the

reservation,” he said to the other staff member, who hurried to do it with a few hasty clicks.

“It’s canceled, sir, and the money has been refunded.”

Freddie stood there with his mouth hanging open, stunned, and then his eyes narrowed.

“Not another word,” warned Gabe. “Not one single word.”

The other man turned and stalked off, mumbling furiously to his girlfriend. Good. Let him. A man like that deserved to be put in his place occasionally. Arrogant jerk.

Gabe turned to Anna and reached for her, but she ducked away at the last moment, wiping at her eyes.

“Gabe,” she choked out. Gabe felt a sick dread wash over him, unlike anything he’d ever felt before. “Your family.”

“Are you all right?” he asked.

“No, I’m obviously not all right.” She took a shuddering breath in and let it out again, then turned around to face them.

No one had moved. Jonas glared at them; his eyes narrowed in suspicion. “Let’s step into the back office, okay?” Her voice shook, but she put on a determined smile anyway. “We can talk about what happened.”

They filed into the back office, his grandmother easing into a chair, and putting a hand to her eyes. Seconds later, she sat up and stared straight at him, the confused look on her face making Gabe falter. He’d hurt her with his lies.

He’d misled them all—and it had been his idea, not Anna’s. He took her hand in his, and this time she didn’t look away. His heart beat fast, pumping adrenaline through his veins that left him with a sick feeling in his gut.

“First…” Gabe tried to imagine himself at the head of a table at one of his company meetings, aiming for a note of confidence. Something that didn’t exist. He squared his shoulders and began again. “First, please don’t blame Anna for the scene that just happened in the lobby. It wasn’t her fault.”

“Were you two having an affair?” The words came high and thin, his grandmother’s eyes glistening with tears. “Did that man have any reason to be angry?”

“No, of course not,” Anna said firmly. “We—” She put a hand to her throat. “We weren’t truthful about our engagement.”

“It happened suddenly, didn’t it?” Tana asked, a hopeful expression on her face. “If it happened suddenly and that’s why you didn’t want to tell us—”

“It didn’t happen at all.” The words were forced from between his lips. This was it—this was Gabe’s worst nightmare. “We’re not really engaged.”

Jonas’s eyes darkened, and Chase looked up toward the ceiling.

“*What?*” his grandmother exclaimed. Her eyes traced a path to Anna’s hand, where she still wore her engagement ring. Her eyes came back to Gabe’s. “Not engaged?”

“The relationship was a setup. I got the call from Jonas about the holidays, and I couldn’t—I couldn’t come home alone. I wanted you to know that I would be okay no matter what happened with your illness. I’m so sorry, Gran.” He couldn’t stop the words from spilling out, and now that it was happening, he didn’t want to stop them. As painful as it was, it was also a relief. “I asked Anna if she would agree to pose as my fiancée for the holidays, and she said yes. It was a spur-of-the-moment decision that happened just before we left town.”

“What were you thinking?” Jonas shouted. “That’s the sickest thing I’ve ever heard. You honestly thought it would be better to lie to us all? Then what, Gabe? What were you going to do later? Fake a breakup, too?”

“Yes.” Gabe wanted to shout back but he didn’t. “That *was* what I was going to do. Because at least for a little while, Gran would be happy. That’s what was most important to me.”

“Well, *that’s* not going to happen,” Jonas thundered. He turned away, putting his hand to his forehead.

Chase still hadn’t said anything. He looked at Tana and shook his head ever so slightly.

Gabe squeezed Anna's hand, and it seemed to shake her out of her shock—at least a little. Her eyes met his, dark and powerfully sad, and she brushed a hand against his wrist. Then she let go and stepped away.

He could see her gathering herself for what had to be the biggest effort of her life. In her line of work, she'd dealt with stressful situations many times—even in front of him. She took a deep breath, straightened and lifted her chin.

"I'm so sorry." Anna's voice shook, but she clasped her hands together in front of her and kept going. "It was wrong to deceive you. Of course it was. And there's no excuse for it. I just wanted to—I wanted to thank all of you for being so welcoming, despite everything that happened." A tear slipped from her eye and glistened on her cheek. "I've never had a chance to experience a holiday like this before. It was wonderful," she said, her voice breaking on the last word.

Except they hadn't had a holiday together—Christmas hadn't come yet. "I'll be going now." Anna dipped her head, and then she ran for the door, but not before he caught what sounded like a sob.

Wait, he wanted to shout. *Don't do this. We can figure this out.* But he couldn't force the words from his mouth, and she was gone. He looked around the room at his family. Elin's eyes were red, her mouth pinched, and Jonas wasn't looking at him at all.

"Gabe," Chase said quietly. "We can talk about this, if—"

"No," he snapped. Part of him did want to stay and work this out. To confess all the fear he'd had about his place in the family for as long as he could remember. But Anna had to come first. He knew she was hurt and would think they all hated her. But she'd be wrong. Gabe didn't hate her, and neither should his family. It was his doing, after all. "This wasn't her fault." He pointed a finger at the door Anna had disappeared through. "Don't you dare blame her for this. If you blame anyone, blame me."

"No problem," Jonas said, his acid tone sending a clear message.

“Jonas,” his grandmother warned.

Gabe had to fix things. With his family, yes. But first with Anna, who hadn't done anything but try to help him. To make him happy. Gabe turned on his heel and went after her, his heart squeezing painfully in his chest. He couldn't lose her.

ANNA

Anna wanted to sink into the earth. It was only a matter of time before someone picked up on Freddie's comment about the family business. Someone like Gabe, who'd want to know more. She had to get out. What should she bring with her?

They'd bought so many clothes at that boutique before they boarded the plane and none of them seemed like hers anymore. She couldn't very well fill her suitcases with winter things she would never use again, especially given they technically belonged to Gabe. Props for the play they performed. Miserably.

Anna threw open the closet in their suite and looked blindly at the clothes hung in neat rows. She then ran to the window and wrenched back the curtain with a lump in her throat. Snow was coming down in a light flurry—that had to be a sign the storm was ending. But it didn't really matter. Anna couldn't remain at Elk Lodge anymore. She'd been caught out in a terrible lie, and she didn't deserve to stay in the family suite any longer. She wasn't family and never would be, and they all knew it now.

Anna went back to the closet, pulled out one of the smaller suitcases at the bottom, and placed it on the bed. She grabbed a comfortable pair of pants that would be good for travel—the forest-green top was an excellent choice. And, of course, the coat she'd worn off the plane. At the dresser, she opened the top drawer and swept her underthings into a ball, tossing them into the suitcase in a haphazard mess. It wasn't like it

mattered. Once she got home, Anna vowed to return the clothes she was wearing and the outfit she'd taken. The suitcase, too. Yes. That would only be right.

The front door of the suite slammed just as she was tipping her toiletries from the bathroom into a plastic bag.

“Anna?” God, his voice sounded so desperate. “Where are you?” Why would he be desperate to find her?

“In here.” Somehow, she managed to make her voice sound even and relaxed, not at all how she felt. Her emotions rolled through her like waves on the ocean, and Anna had nothing but a rowboat to navigate them. A dinghy-size vessel, and all the ways she'd learned to keep her calm through her job. Good thing she'd practiced for so long.

Gabe appeared in the doorway to the bedroom as she unzipped the outer pocket on the suitcase and put the toiletry bag inside. “You don't have to go.”

“I absolutely do.” It was the hardest thing in the world, standing to face him, but she did it anyway. “There's no way I can stay here after what just happened.”

Gabe raised both hands in the air. “Now that they know, we don't have to pretend. We can take some time and figure things out.”

“What is there to figure out?” Heat rushed to her cheeks and she tried to will it away. It clung stubbornly to her skin. She must be red as a strawberry. “I didn't belong here in the first place, and now it's obvious.”

“That's not—you don't have to worry about that. They're not going to care if your parents got divorced or didn't have much money. They're not going to care if you had an ex-boyfriend who turned out to be a jerk. Those things happen all the time.”

It was too much and the veneer of calm shattered. “Really, Gabe? None of that stuff is a big deal in a place like this?” He looked wounded, but it was too late to stop, much too late. “Your family prides itself on perfection. On high standards. My ex just showed up in the lobby of your luxury resort and

made a huge scene. Do you think they want scenes around here? I can promise you they don't."

"Anna—"

"And aside from that, you don't know the half of it. My family wasn't just poor. The family business Freddie so casually mentioned? Sooner or later someone will get around to asking, so you might as well know everything. My father's been in and out of prison for as long as I can remember. I just found out that my brother is back in prison and he'd only been out a few months. They are convicted felons who seem to pride themselves on being repeat offenders. And my mother has been married *four times*. I'm not from a respectable family. Freddie knew about it and pretended it was no big deal, just like you're doing now. But he lied to me, over and over. He kept me hidden from his family and friends and when they found out?" Anna had to pause. The memory of it threatened to overwhelm her. Then she pushed forward. "He laughed, telling them I was only useful for one thing."

"He was *wrong*," Gabe insisted, his face reflecting the horror. "You're not like your family."

"Look—they haven't even found out about the Waters family and all the sordid details yet. All your family knows is that I'm the kind of person who makes bad decisions. Your family assumes I'm a cheater and a liar. Don't tell me they didn't. I saw their faces when Freddie made his announcement."

"I'll smooth things over." Gabe stepped toward her. "I'll talk to them. I'll figure all of this out." But he didn't sound nearly as confident as he had before, the realization was enough to send her over the edge.

"Why?" Tears burned at the corners of her eyes, but she refused to let them fall. "You brought me here for one reason and one reason only—to impress your family. Because *you* were tired of them making you feel like you weren't good enough. Do you really think that's going to happen now?" Her throat tightened painfully. "If they were disappointed by you, a billionaire tech mogul who dates Oscar-winning actresses, just how thrilled do you think they're going to be that you've

brought home a potential gold-digging daughter of an ex-convict?”

Gabe took a half-step back, and she could see his thoughts flying through his eyes, making them more a dark gray than blue. He had to be desperate to win their approval. With the Elkin family, there would be no greater prize than earning a spot in their ranks. Gabe would want their good opinion of him far more than he'd want to spend his life trying to convince them that she was *also* worthy. Lines of tension deepened across his forehead. He'd come to the same conclusion and knew she was right.

“Why would you go to bat for me in the face of all that?” she asked when he remained silent. Anna braced for the final blow now that the question hung in the air between them. She knew it was coming. On some level, she'd known all along this was how it would end. Eventually, there came a point when people could no longer ignore all that her family represented. It was the end of the line for her.

But it didn't stop Gabe's hesitation from hurting. Painfully so. Like a knife in her heart. She put a hand to her chest before she could stop herself. “I'm leaving, Gabe. Please step out of the way.” He stepped back, but the movement was stiff. Her skin ached for him to touch her, or to reach out and stop her—but he didn't. She twisted off her ring and handed it to him. “We won't be seeing each other again.”

The walk down to the lobby was the longest walk of her life. Her heart thudded wildly, as she waited for him to run after her, to shout after her, but nothing of the sort happened and the holiday cheer of the reception area continued all around her. The huge tree in the middle of the lobby twinkled and shone with all its decorations. Soft Christmas carols played over the in-house sound system, moving into all the empty spaces like water. She barely noticed Freddie and his family on a set of low sofas at the opposite end of the room, mumbling to each other and exchanging dark looks.

Anna had pushed open the door by the time she realized she hadn't put on her coat. She shrugged it on, snowflakes landing on her eyelashes, and looked around. Okay, so she hadn't

thought this part through. It would have been smarter to call for a car before she started packing. It was cold outside, but she wouldn't let that stop her. The last thing she wanted was to feel Elk Lodge's warmth wiping away the chill that was already settling on her cheeks and into her feet. And asking the front desk for help getting a ride to the airport was entirely out of the question.

Luckily, one lone taxicab idled at the far end of the building under the last of the covered entrance. Anna hoisted her purse higher on her shoulder, curled a hand around the handle of the suitcase, and marched toward it.

This was it. This was the last chance. If Gabe came running out after her now, she might not be able to tell him no. Out in the snow and cold, the bitter flakes freezing her skin, she desperately wanted to be back in that suite with him, preferably tucked under the covers. One step at a time, each one taking her closer to the cab. The driver rolled down the window before she could knock.

"Are you waiting for someone?" she asked.

"Just waiting for the snow to taper off. Some guy called, but my car wasn't big enough for his group." The driver peered out the window. "It looks light enough to drive now, I think."

"Could you take me to the airport?"

"Sure thing."

He got out and helped her get her things into the trunk, and then Anna collapsed into the backseat. The heat was on full blast and it felt like falling into a warm cocoon. Tears threatened again, but she fought them back. She could break down when she got back to Las Vegas, in the privacy of her own apartment.

The driver hopped in and put the car into gear, and they rumbled past the resort. Anna wanted to be stoic and keep her gaze straight ahead, but she couldn't help looking one last time at the massive building with all the warm light spilling from its windows, beckoning guests inside.

Just not her.

She'd proven herself more than unworthy of visiting Elk Lodge.

The driver made a turn, and she craned her neck to keep looking back. Elk Lodge was big and solid, like Gabe's family. A family that had managed to stick together for years and years, unlike her own. Anna's family home was nothing but a constantly changing apartment according to her mother's latest husband's whims and had standards that were too low, rather than too high.

The lodge finally disappeared behind a thick stand of pine trees, and a few minutes later, they burst out onto the highway. It was a slow escape. She wished for frenzy and speed and longed to tell the driver to step on it, but enough snow had fallen to make driving a little dicey and he was rightfully cautious all the way to the airport.

They finally arrived at the airport, the driver casting a questioning look in her direction. "You sure you want to get dropped here?" He hefted her suitcase onto the sidewalk. "There might not be any flights out for a while on account of the storm."

"I'm sure." She thanked him, paid with an extra-large tip, and headed inside.

The woman at the ticket counter gave her an apologetic frown when she asked about the next flight to Vegas. It had been scheduled to depart in two hours, but on account of the snow, there was a delay. Which meant she would be forced to camp out at Gate 11 for eight hours before being able to board the plane.

It wasn't like she had a choice. Anna paid for the ticket and made her way to the gate for the long wait. Eight hours became nine, and then ten, and the day fell into a dark winter evening. Anna put her head back on the chair she'd claimed as her own and closed her eyes. At least with it dark outside, she couldn't see the snow and the road back to Elk Lodge. Small blessings.

It had been twelve hours by the time the screen at the gate lit up and the agent announced they would begin boarding the

flight to Las Vegas in fifteen minutes. Anna pulled herself out of her slump and checked to make sure she had everything. Waiting in the airport didn't break her. Freddie didn't break her. And Gabe Elkin wouldn't break her, no matter what.

GABE

Gabe replayed a livestream of every memory he had with Anna. The highlight reel started at their first meeting together after he'd hired her to work with him. She'd laughed so hard at something he'd said that her can of Diet Coke had fallen from her hand and splashed on the floor of his office, and he hadn't cared. Not at *all*. Memory after memory assailed him.

"You still with us, Gabe?" Chase's voice cut into Gabe's trip down memory lane, slamming him back into his present body. The one that ached with missing her.

"I'm right here," he said, trying to keep the edge out of his voice. This was not how he'd planned for the holiday to go. Anna was gone and his family royally ticked off at him.

They'd gathered in his grandmother's apartment after Anna had gone, the hours passing like years. Shame swept across his face in a hot burn, and then it was gone in a flash of shock. She'd left.

Gabe rubbed a thumb across his forehead and thought about leaving and going back to Vegas or maybe he'd take it one state farther and go to his place in San Jose. The snow had stopped coming down. If he wanted, he could have the private plane prepared for departure. But if he did that, he'd be turning his back on his sick grandmother—something he couldn't do even though he was falling apart inside.

The silence grew heavy in the living area of the apartment. The place was decorated in shades of burgundy, its upholstered

furniture and cozy rug arranged to perfection. She kept no clutter on any of the surfaces and it reminded Gabe of a pristine museum with its recreated rooms from the past in full detail, and this room was from *his* past. And he couldn't see any part of his future here. None. His future had taken a taxi to the airport and presumably flown back to Nevada. Gabe hadn't sent her a message yet. His phone felt almost radioactive in his pocket. Soon it would swallow him whole, and then where would he be?

"I just don't get how you could have done something so crazy," Jonas said. He leaned back on the sofa across from Gabe and stared at him with a searching glare. "Getting a woman to pose as your fiancée is worse than abandoning us."

Gabe let out a bitter laugh. "Nothing I do has been the right decision for this family." Anna's voice whispered in his ear again, talking him down and reminding him that this was the Elkin way of expressing affection. "I love all of you, and I'm lucky to have been raised here, but it's been difficult." Some of the anger went out of him at the uncomfortable movement Chase made as he glanced at Tana. Jonas looked at the floor. His grandmother patted her hands on the arms of her chair.

"I think it's time for me and Gabe to talk privately for a few minutes," she said, her tone brooking no opposition.

"I agree," Jonas said, quickly rising to his feet. He kissed their grandmother on the cheek, and then he was gone, heading for the door at top speed.

Chase took more time as he and Tana each bent to embrace their grandmother and then left the room together.

A pang of envy shot through Gabe. It would be better if Anna were here to hold *his* hand, but it hadn't panned out that way. Alone with his grandmother, he was wildly uncomfortable. His skin felt raw, and so did his heart. It had been displayed for his family without a single thing to hide behind, and it wasn't a sensation Gabe ever wanted to get used to.

His grandmother gazed directly at him. "I'm sorry, Gabe."

“What?” He’d expected her to have lots to say on the subject, but *not* that. “I should be the one apologizing for what I did to you.” Another wave of emotion crashed into him, shameful and awful. “I lied to all of you.”

She held up a hand. “I know I was hard on you when you were growing up. On your brothers, too. Your granddad was too, but that’s also on me.” She put her fingertips to her lips, her eyes momentarily glazed over as if deep in thought. “I wanted to do right by you, and at the time, that meant making sure you were the best you could possibly be. Obviously, that backfired.”

“It didn’t.” Gabe didn’t want her to think she’d done a lousy job of parenting them—far from it. “It didn’t backfire, Gran. You set us all up to be highly successful. And we are. I am.”

“That may be true, but it also resulted in one of my grandsons moving far away.” He opened his mouth to protest. To tell her that neither Vegas nor San Jose was that far away, but she continued. “I don’t judge you for it, Gabe. It’s only natural to want to get out in the world and make your own life. I should have been more accepting of your choices years ago, before they had so much time to wound you like this.”

I’m not wounded, he tried to say, but the words wouldn’t come out. “It’s not that I didn’t want to be here,” he said gruffly. “I did. But I also needed to find my own way.”

“And you did.” His grandmother’s eyes misted over. “It’s me who wanted something different. I wanted you home for the holidays—all of you—because when you’re here, I feel like I’m keeping you safe. You and your brothers are everything to me. Sometimes, an old woman lets her feelings get the better of her.”

“Nobody can possibly blame you for that.” Gabe reached over and took her hand. “After the way we lost Mom and Dad, it’s perfectly understandable.”

Gran shook her head. “What’s not understandable is how blind I was to your unhappiness. I did this to you. I’m at least partially responsible because I didn’t understand the real you. And all those years and all those girlfriends, I thought they didn’t understand you, either. That’s why I disapproved of

them. Not because I thought they weren't good enough for you —any of them could have been your wife. But I didn't get the sense they loved you for who you really were. But all along, I didn't understand either."

"What about Anna?"

She let out a short laugh. "I *like* Anna. She made you happy, and you've been so desperately unhappy since she left. She seemed to genuinely care about you, flaws and all."

"I'm in love with her," he said wretchedly. "But I don't know what to do."

"What would she tell you to do?"

Anna had her own issues with family, but she hadn't let that stop her from moving on with her life. She'd risen from the ashes of a family that had sorely disappointed her, to become a success. And more than that, she understood what it was like to have that nagging sense she didn't fit in.

But she hadn't let that stop her, had she? Not in her job, where she approached every meeting with the confidence of a CEO. And not in life, where she was always up for an adventure. Anna had come here with him and jumped into their little game with both feet.

"What are you thinking, Gabe?" His grandmother squeezed his hand.

"I'm thinking of the time we made you those cookies. They were so strange looking, but they tasted so good. But all I could focus on was how weird they looked."

"They *were* delicious," his grandmother agreed.

"We were happy," he admitted. "While we made them. Everything with Anna was like embarking on a mission. Getting the ingredients turned into a major trip into town, and then she took me through all the steps of making the cookies. She knew you would like them, and she just—she was so enthusiastic. It was impossible not to be excited when I was with her, no matter what happened afterward."

"Would she tell you to get back in the kitchen?"

“I don’t know about that.” Heartache slashed across his chest. “She knew I wasn’t very good at baking.”

“And yet she also knew how determined you can be.” He met his grandmother’s eyes, and she smiled at him—a soft, tired smile. “She knew how determined we *all* can be, and she put her own twist on it. That’s the thing about women like Anna. They’re kind, but they forge ahead and make changes.”

She *had* made changes. In Gabe. In the Elkin family. Anna had stood her ground when it came to her own boundaries, and she’d stepped up to help them in a crisis, and she had *been there*, every time he asked her to be.

She’d held his hand.

She’d *kissed* him.

They’d done so much more.

Even if they’d intended it to be fake, it had taken on its own reality. But Gabe hadn’t been able to step into it. Not entirely anyway, because he’d been too concerned with what his family might think. He’d been waiting for disapproval and it hadn’t come. His grandmother was sitting here right now, telling him she liked Anna.

What did it matter if they disapproved? Gabe had spent so many years bracing for that uncomfortable feeling of not being a real part of the family—bracing for it, and then letting it take him over. He hadn’t been able to see what was right in front of his face because of his fixation on what he wasn’t within the Elkin family.

Anna had seen it. Seen all the love between them, even with the ridiculous standards and the way they tiptoed around talking about deep things. Of all people, Anna had had a clear-eyed view of what really mattered in his family, and it wasn’t the luxury resort or the fact they had lots of money. It was the way they showed up for one another.

He couldn’t keep her on the outside anymore, couldn’t hold her at arm’s length.

“She would tell me to take action,” he finally answered the question his grandmother asked. “And she would tell me to

stop sitting here and *do* something to show how I felt.”

His grandmother smiled and patted his hand. “Go do it, Gabe. Whatever it is, go do it.”

He stood and then bent down to pull her into a hug. Oh, his grandmother seemed so much smaller than he remembered, her shoulders delicate and almost fragile under his touch.

“Bring her back,” she said into his shoulder.

“I will,” he said. “If I can bring Anna back, I will.”

ANNA

Forty-eight hours of nothing but bingeing Netflix hadn't done a thing to cure the ache in Anna's heart. After returning home, she'd showered and dropped into bed, exhausted. And once there, she hadn't wanted to leave. Instead, she opted to take the blanket off the bed and drag it to the sofa, where she'd camped out. She hadn't even bothered getting dressed. Pajamas were good enough for staring blindly at the TV. Two days, and still she missed Gabe.

And not just him. Anna missed Elk Lodge, and even the way Gabe bickered with his brothers. She missed baking cookies with him. She missed sitting down with Elin in her beautiful apartment. And she missed—

A knock at the front door of Anna's one-bedroom apartment was the first thing to jar her from the routine she'd fallen into. But she wasn't ready to return to the real world. Better to ignore it.

Another knock, this one louder and more insistent. "Anna? I know you're in there. I can hear the TV."

Elena. "I'm coming," she hollered, but didn't lift her head off the pillow. It was so far from here to the door, and her limbs felt tired and achy like she'd recently finished running a marathon. Anna had run a marathon once, just because it had seemed like something she should try. Something she could make conversation about with clients. This was worse.

But after a few more heartbeats, she took a deep breath, hauled herself out from under the cocoon of blankets and headed for

the front door. Even the lock seemed to resist her, sticking a few times before it finally came open.

The doorknob turned before she could open it. Anna stepped back as her friend barged in the way she always did. Elena stepped into the kitchen, separated from the living room only by one countertop, and set an armful of bags from her restaurant on the counter.

Turning back to face her, Elena gave her a once-over look from top to bottom. “You look terrible,” she announced. “I thought you might be dead.”

“I’m not dead.” Anna shrugged.

“Your phone hasn’t been on in days.”

“Yeah, well—” She gazed off into the distance. Leaving the phone off had seemed like a far better idea. If her phone stayed off, she wouldn’t be forced to acknowledge Gabe hadn’t called to make things right. The flip side was she couldn’t see if anybody else called, but that was a small price to pay. “I didn’t feel like talking.”

“You can’t send a single text that says, ‘flying back sooner than expected, lots of work’ and then go off the radar for two days,” Elena scolded. “People worry about you. Namely me.”

Anna pushed a hand through her hair.

Elena seemed to read her mind. “You smell. Go take a shower and change into some fresh clothes. I’ll be here when you get out, and we’re going to talk.”

Anna did as she was told, knowing it was useless to argue with Elena once she started down the motherly path. The hot water felt good. Even the steady draw of the brush through her hair felt good. She twisted the locks into a neat bun and pulled on a pair of yoga pants and a top. Her suitcase sat glaring at her from the corner of the room, a painful reminder of what happened. “I’ll return you soon enough,” she muttered. “Wow. I must be losing it. I’m talking to a suitcase and myself.”

She headed back to the living room, only to discover Elena had cleaned up the place. Her stackable washer rumbled in the background, Elena obviously washing the blanket since it was

nowhere in sight. She'd also swept the minimal food wrappers away and lit a candle. But best of all were the plates on Anna's coffee table.

Two enormous burgers with all the condiments and a generous stack of fries greeted her like a long-lost friend. Two containers with slices of cake decorated the corners of the table. The smell filled the apartment, and for the first time since she'd gotten home, Anna's stomach growled with a genuine hunger.

Elena bustled out of the kitchen with a wine glass in each hand, put them carefully on the table, and dropped onto the sofa. She patted the seat next to her. "Have something to eat. You're so pale." It didn't matter that she and her friend had disagreed during their last phone call, Elena's voice still held raw concern.

Anna sat down next to her and reached for a plate.

"TV or talk?" Elena asked.

Anna bit into the burger. It was perfect—medium-well with sweet onions and the homemade ketchup that Elena made in huge batches at the restaurant. It flooded her mouth with something like comfort. "Talk," she said around the food. Of course Elena would wait patiently until she was ready to explain, but waiting seemed worse than getting it out in the open. Far worse. "Obviously, I'm back in town."

"Obviously." Elena ate a few bites of her own burger. "What happened?"

Anna's chest squeezed. "Well, I didn't tell you the whole story about the holiday vacation."

Elena made a noise. "I figured as much."

"The reason I went is that Gabe asked me to pose as his fiancée."

"He asked you to do *what*?" Elena exclaimed, the burger only making it halfway to her mouth as she froze, her eyes wide in surprise.

“We’ve been working together for a while and he took me out to celebrate the success of his product launch.” That night at the Top of the World restaurant seemed like a million years ago now, but it hadn’t been. “While we were there, he got some bad news about his grandmother—who raised him. Cancer. She wanted everybody home for the holidays, and he didn’t want to show up without proof that he would be all right in the future. That he was happy and in love, something his grandmother desperately wanted for him. So, he asked me to pretend to be engaged to him for the holidays.”

“And you said yes?” Elena shook her head.

“I *did* say yes. I like Gabe and his family owns a luxury ski resort that goes all-out for Christmas.” This earned her a smile from Elena.

“What, my little fake tree doesn’t do it for you?”

“I wanted to see what it was like.” Anna swirled a fry in a pool of ketchup and popped it in her mouth. “It was gorgeous. I mean—really, absolutely gorgeous. The winter isn’t like anything we have here in the desert. It was like something out of a movie. Even the way I... started to fall for Gabe.”

“Oh, Anna.” Elena bit her lip. “You didn’t.”

“I did. And Gabe fell for me, too. It was so easy because we had to do all these things to make it look right—we had to hold hands, pretend to be in love, and then behind closed doors —”

“He was good behind closed doors, too?” Elena asked, seizing on the comment.

“Very good.” Anna’s face heated. He’d been better than any other man she’d ever been with. Gabe was on another level and she craved more time with him even as she sank into the sadness of never being able to see him again. “But then Freddie showed up.”

Elena did a double-take. “What? At the resort?”

“Yeah. For a vacation with his family and his new girlfriend. Everything blew up in my face.” Anna took Elena through the reception desk scene, feeling like she was living through it all

again. It wasn't any better now. "Gabe asked me to stay, but I left. It was too embarrassing.."

"But if he asked you to stay..."

"We spent the whole time working on things with *his* family." Anna's throat went tight, but she thought it through. "Gabe had spent all his life thinking he wasn't good enough, and nothing he did would be good enough, but while we were there, I think he...he came to see that wasn't right."

"What about you?" Elena said pointedly.

"What *about* me?"

"Did you figure out that you belonged there, too?"

Anna shot her friend a look. "I don't belong there. Never will. My dad—"

Elena shot her a sharp gaze, her brow furrowing with intensity. "Your dad *what*? What your dad did doesn't have to define everything for you," she ground out.

She put the burger down. After Gabe had found out about her dad, he'd hesitated. Hadn't followed her out when she left. Hadn't spoken to her since. Gabe might have had issues with his family. Who didn't? Not even money could buy your way out of some family drama. But he'd tried to help her and show her he cared. And he'd protected her.

Anna had been so aware that their arrangement came with an expiration date that she hadn't been able to see the situation clearly. Gabe's painful expression when he found her packing made her believe he cared, but it didn't change anything. He'd let her go.

"Yeah," Elena said softly. "See?"

"I'm a little annoyed at you for pointing it out," Anna said, but it wasn't Elena she was irritated with—it was herself. How long was she going to fixate on the things her dad had done? She needed to leave those things in the past, where they belonged, and keep living the life she'd built for herself. In fact, that was her only option.

The one thing she couldn't do was turn back time and fix things with Gabe.

"You can be mad at me." Elena popped a fry in her mouth. "I know you'll get over it when you taste the cake."

"Speaking of cake..." Anna held out a hand, and Elena passed her one of the containers. Chocolate cake—her favorite. The thin layer of white icing on the top would burst on her tongue with so much sweetness it brought tears to her eyes. Anna scooped up a fork from the table and stabbed it into the dessert. Cake, unlike herself, never let her down. Cake was always there for her. "What am I going to do?"

"What do you want to do?" Elena blew out a breath. "I'm behind you, no matter what. I know I was...maybe unnecessarily harsh during our phone call, and I hope you know I'm sorry for that, and I'll support you with whatever you want to do."

Anna reached out and patted her friend's hand. "I do know that. You were worried, and you had every right to be. It *did* turn out to be a disaster."

"Disasters can be fixed," Elena said briskly. "You can clean up and start again. Starting with the icing on your face."

Anna used her finger to wipe off the icing and then licked it off her finger, not wanting to miss a single drop. Somehow, half the cake had disappeared without Anna realizing it. "Even with people, though?"

"Oh, please. You work with disasters all the time. I've never heard of a situation you couldn't fix."

Anna thought of all the times there'd been sticky problems dealing with clients, negotiations with vendors, that one time she'd managed to turn a client's viral avalanche into sales. Over the years, she'd come to think of those things as part of the job and not anything to be especially shaken by. What would she say to a client who'd had a curveball thrown at them? *Things happen. We'll get through this.* Well, things had happened. And she would get through it. But the next thing she did after reassuring her clients was to take action.

“You’re right,” she said softly. “I can at least try to fix this.”

“In the meantime, are you going to come over on Tuesday?”

Anna blinked at her. “Come over for what? And when’s Tuesday?”

Elena sighed. “You’ve really been out of it, haven’t you? It’s Sunday now. Tomorrow’s Christmas Eve. You’re invited to my family’s Christmas dinner, just like you always are.”

The dinner at Elena’s house would be a family affair, and a crumbling feeling in her chest told her she’d never get through it. Not unless—and until—things with Gabe were all patched up. Everything felt too sensitive and raw. Showering for a burger was one thing; getting dressed up for a Christmas dinner while she was supposed to be at Elk Lodge was quite another. *Not this year.*

“I—I don’t think so,” she admitted. “You know I love you and your family. I just don’t think—”

“It’s okay,” Elena said quickly. “There’s always next year, or really any year. I just need you to know that you’re welcome. No matter what happened in your past.”

Anna reached out and hugged her.

“I know you’ll figure things out,” Elena said into her hair. “You always do.”

“I think that’s what I’ll do on Christmas,” she said, letting a small smile escape. “Figure things out.”

“A gift to yourself.”

“Yes.” Anna laughed. “You didn’t just come for burgers, did you?”

“No way.” Elena released her and tucked her feet up under her on the sofa. “I came for movies, too. As long as you didn’t watch everything available on Netflix already.”

“Not everything,” Anna said. It would work out, she told herself as Elena browsed through Netflix, finally choosing a sci-fi movie with lots of aliens and no romance.

Before she hit play, she tilted her head to look at Elena. “You should know that your chocolate cake is way better than Chef Chris’s.”

“Wait. What? Does he have a restaurant there?”

Anna shook her head, feeling the tension in her shoulders lighten. “No, he’s good friends with Gabe’s younger brother and helped design their menus.” Elena seemed to glow at the compliment. “Oh, and did I mention that Gabe’s younger brother is Ace Elkin?”

Elena’s head whipped around so hard, Anna heard her neck crack. “Ace Elkin. *The* Ace Elkin?” Reaching for her wine glass, she took a sip, hiding her smirk behind the rim as her friend started and stopped multiple sentences before she finally shouted, “Oh my god, why didn’t you tell me this sooner? Please tell me you took pictures.”

Hitting play, Anna sat back to watch the movie while Elena continued to sputter.

Yes, it would all work out.

GABE

The cake looked ridiculous.

After his first attempt, he'd given up and called Chris Denton, asking him for help. After Chris finished laughing, he texted him a link to one of his videos that provides step-by-step instructions for making his chocolate cake. This was Gabe's third version, and it still looked lopsided and fallen in.

He could still hear Chris's voice talking about the different reasons why a cake might sink in the middle. Too much baking powder or baking soda? He had no idea. The oven was too hot? Possibly. Undermixing the cake batter? That couldn't be it. If anything, he might have overmixed it. Throwing up his hands, he gave in. It wasn't going to get better than this. At least, not in his current headspace.

This was the first one he'd bothered to frost, and the frosting wasn't anywhere near perfect. His hands itched to make it exactly right—with perfectly straight edges and a flat top and impeccable piping on the sides, but perfection wasn't what mattered. What mattered was showing that he'd listened. It was about showing Anna that he didn't have to live within the old constraints of his family. Constraints that had fallen away after his grandmother's conversation with him.

He turned the cake around on the makeshift stand one more time. "If you wait until it's perfect, you'll never leave," he told himself aloud, feeling more than a little silly. But it was true. If he waited until he became a master baker to fly to Vegas, then

he wouldn't make it, and Anna would think she didn't mean the world to him.

Gabe took his phone out of his pocket and dialed a familiar number. "Ready the plane." It was Christmas Eve, and there wasn't much time left before all the family traditions began. He hated activating the crew on Christmas Eve, but it couldn't be helped. Hopefully, what he had to do wouldn't take long, and they could be back with their families soon. He didn't want Anna to miss the lodge's festivities if he could help it. *He* wouldn't miss them if he could help it. But he would if that was what it took to get Anna back.

The cake felt like the most precious object he'd ever carried out of Elk Lodge. His one concession had been to borrow a cardboard box from the kitchen—they had lots of them for sending leftovers home from lodge weddings, and the bright red box was perfect for this time of year. Gabe held it on his lap all the way to the airport, where his private jet waited for him. The driver got out and opened the door, reaching for the box, but Gabe put his hands over it. "I've got it," he said, not wanting anyone to take it.

All the way to Vegas he tried to keep his thoughts positive regarding the outcome of the meeting with Anna. He couldn't let her walk out of his life, and he'd do everything in his power to convince her, but the scary part was not knowing if she'd agree.

Anna left Elk Lodge believing a person could never overcome their mistakes. And the fake engagement had been *his* mistake, not hers. And her family? No. A person's family wasn't what mattered. Anna's family was a part of her, but they weren't all of her.

Gabe's heart beat hard with all the love he felt for her. And that was what mattered the most.

The plane landed and he instructed the crew to remain on standby and then hustled into the waiting car. He gave the driver the address to her apartment. The closer they got, the more he wished he'd been able to get through to her by phone. Was she even going to be home when he got there?

Gabe's heart was in his throat by the time the car pulled up in front of the building. "Wait here," he told the driver. The afternoon sunshine in Vegas belied the cold temperature this time of year, but it was a far cry from the snow and chill of the resort in Colorado, and the breeze stroked his face as he made his way to the main entrance. A list of names and numbers decorated the call box, and he used a knuckle to press the one next to Anna's name. The deep buzz came from far away. Sweat pricked at the back of his neck as he waited. Gabe Elkin was nervous about talking to a woman. A first.

"Hello?" Anna's cautious voice made him wince, but just knowing she was home helped calm his nerves.

"Anna," he said. "It's me. Can I come in?"

He thought he heard a sharp intake of breath, and then the door buzzed, letting him in. He breathed a sigh of relief. She was going to talk to him. Gabe took the stairs two at a time to the second floor, not bothering to wait for the elevator. At the top of the landing, he spotted her in the doorway of her apartment. Hope and fear were reflected in her dark eyes. Her hair had been pulled back in an elegant twist at the back of her head, and though she wore soft pants and a loose top, she still looked like she could take on the world.

"Gabe," she said. "You're here," her voice low and breathless. Gabe closed the distance between them like nothing existed except Anna, his name on her lips the best sound he'd ever heard.

"Hi," he smiled, hoping to earn one back from Anna. Anything to put them on even ground.

She looked up at him and folded her bottom lip between her teeth. "Hi."

His heart squeezed, then thundered, heat whispering across his skin. "I made you something."

"What is it?" Her eyes flicked down to the box in his hands, then came back up to his, surprise dancing there. "Did you *bake*?"

"I did." He lifted the top of the box and held it out to her.

Anna took it, wonder shining in her eyes. “You made me a cake?” A little laugh escaped her. “All by yourself?” And that was when he saw it. A smile. A beautiful smile from the woman he loved.

“Yes.”

She moved into her condo and set the box on the counter, pausing to gaze down at it with a pose that made him want to pull her in close. Anna turned to him as he stepped closer. “Explain,” she said, her voice a little wobbly with confusion.

“I love you.”

Anna gasped, a hand flying to her mouth.

“I love you,” he went on, “and I will do anything you want, give you as much space as you need, but I want this fake relationship to be real because I’ve fallen in love with you. All of you. Even the parts of your past you’d rather not think about. I want you with me and I baked you a cake to show you that I don’t care about being perfect. All I care about is loving you.”



Anna couldn’t believe this was happening.

Gabe had *shown up* at her condo with the ugliest cake she’d ever seen. Anna burst out laughing, joy flooding through her like sunlight after a long night. Tears gathered at the corners of her eyes and spilled out. “I love you too,” she said. “I can’t believe you did this.”

She could not believe that he’d spent so much time doing something he didn’t like—and all for her. Gabe was the kind of man who’d prefer to show up with jewelry glittering in a box than a cake that looked like it had been decorated by a child. But she knew he’d tried. And more than that, she could see the faint embarrassment on his cheeks. Gabe didn’t do embarrassing things for just anyone. It meant the world. It was the most personal, caring thing she could imagine him doing.

Anna flew into his arms, wrapping her own around him and holding him tight. His arms tightened around her, and she felt the tension drain out of him. Gabe's hand slid down to her jaw and he tugged her face up to his, kissing her as though each kiss were priceless.

"I'm sorry," she said against his mouth. "I'm sorry I ran out like that. I shouldn't have done it."

"I don't care." He kissed her again, firm and unyielding, and her lips parted for him instinctively. Their tongues met and danced together, warmth shooting down her body to her knees, making them weak. Gabe held her tighter. "I love you no matter how you react. You put up with my antics, after all. It's what makes us so good together."

She ran her fingertips down the lines of his body, feeling like he'd lit her soul aflame in the best possible way. "We *are* good together," she agreed, and some of the weight of her past fell away. Anna had been carrying it for so long that she felt a strange emptiness for a heartbeat, but the emptiness was soon replaced by another kiss from Gabe and a low sound in the back of his throat that spoke of relief and desire all at the same time. She was no longer empty but filled with Gabe's love.

"I missed you," she whispered.

"I missed you so much I baked," he whispered back, and she laughed through her happy tears. Gabe pulled her in for another hug, then lifted her higher, and then he was walking through her apartment to the sofa. He sat down and arranged her in his lap, arms around his neck, the two of them as close as possible. Her pulse felt fluttery and delicious joy moved through her again and again. "I wanted to ask you something," he said, a careful note in his tone.

"Anything." Anna breathed him in, the leather and soap smell of him, and let her head rest against his shoulder. Soon they'd have to get up, but for now, she just wanted this.

"I want you to fly back to Colorado with me and spend Christmas with my family." He stroked a hand over her hair. "Unless it would make you uncomfortable. If it did, I could spend it here with you if you let me."

Anna thought her heart might fly out of her chest. There could be no greater sacrifice than offering to miss this holiday with his family. She sat up in his lap and put a hand on his face, studying his eyes. They met hers with humble honesty, and she ran a thumb over the line of his jaw, drinking him in. If he could make this sacrifice with everything going on in the Elkin family—with his grandmother’s health—she could make one too.

“I want to spend Christmas with you,” she said. “And I want to spend it with your family.”

Relief brought color to his cheeks, his eyes wide and echoing the sentiment. “Really?”

“Yes. If you can offer this to me, then I can face your family even after that whole big scene. I love you, Gabe, and I care enough about you to go for it even if they judge me.”

“They won’t judge you,” he said fiercely. “They can judge me all they want, but never you.”

“Oh, they can.” Anna laughed. “I stormed out of the family resort because I got caught in a lie. If that’s not judge-worthy, what is?”

“Anybody can be forgiven for what they do under duress,” Gabe pointed out. “My entire family saw your ex show up in the lobby. Plus, the entire scheme was my idea. You were only along for the ride. They can’t judge you without judging me.”

“Don’t remind me,” she grumbled, but then his hand was around the back of her neck and Gabe pulled her in for a tender kiss. A slow, searching kiss that soothed every part of her that was embarrassed or ashamed. She could do anything for this man, and she *would*. She’d make a grand apology to his family. She’d spend Christmas with them, knowing what they’d seen. Anything. “When do we leave?”

His other hand tightened on her waist. “The plane is waiting at the airport and the driver’s outside.” A smile lifted the corner of his mouth. “All of your things are still at the resort, so we could walk out the door right now.”

“There’s just one thing I want to do first.”

“What’s that?”

She stood up and took his hand, pulling him up to stand. “Just a quick visit.”

Confusion furrowed his brow. “To where?”

“To the bedroom.”

ANNA

They emerged from Anna's bedroom a hot fifteen minutes later, her sheets newly messed up by the most gorgeous man she'd ever met in her life. "There," she said. "That should tide me over."

Gabe laughed. "Tide you over until when?"

"Until the family meeting is over," she said briskly. "That's first on the agenda, right?"

He put a hand on the small of her back. "We don't have to do that right away if you don't want."

"Oh, no. We do." Anna moved around her condo, gathering up the necessities. She grabbed her suitcase, which was still mostly packed and knocked all her bathroom things back into the outside pocket and went out for the cake, putting the box carefully in Gabe's hands. "I'm already nervous."

"How can you be nervous after what we just did?" He murmured the words against her temple, then punctuated them with a kiss. "I would have thought that would cure you."

She turned her head and kissed him, running her tongue along his bottom lip. "It cured me *for the moment*. That's why we'll have this meeting and then go directly back to our suite."

"Our suite," he repeated. "I like the sound of that. You know what else I like the sound of? Our house."

"Don't ask me to move in with you until your family has a chance to give their blessing," she said, that nervous pressure intensifying.

Gabe swept her into his arms again, her purse falling to the floor. “Move in with me. In my home at the resort,” he insisted. “No matter what they say. All of my homes for that matter. I have three. You knew that, right?”

He kept talking on the way to the car and onto the private jet and through the flight. Telling her about his condos and what he liked about them and how they would be better with her. Anna held the cake box in her lap and tried to match his enthusiasm while she prepared. This would be like any other awkward meeting, she decided. She’d get through it. And if they didn’t approve, then they didn’t approve. Worse things had happened.

Gabe made a quick call as they approached the resort. “Are you all waiting?” He took her hand and squeezed. “Good. We’re almost there.”

“Waiting for what?” asked Anna.

“Wouldn’t you like to know,” he teased.

They pulled up in front of the lodge a moment later. Anna had the strangest feeling of homecoming—a relief, in a way. However, the conversation they were about to have probably wouldn’t be the most fun experience of her life. Gabe got out first and pulled her against his side on the way through the big double doors.

The lobby was just the way they’d left it—in full swing for the Christmas season. A pianist played carols at the grand piano, and decorations made to look like gifts had appeared under the tree.

“Those are real,” Gabe said in a low voice.

“You’re kidding.”

“No. They’ll be packed up tonight and taken to families in town who need them. Every guest here will wake up with a similar package outside their door.”

It gave her hope. If the Elkin family did things like *this* at Christmas, they could surely find it in their hearts to forgive her. They had to forgive Gabe—he was family. But it was important to her that they forgive her too. Anna took a deep

breath. Even if they didn't, it would be okay, so long as Gabe still loved her.

"Stop at the suite?" Gabe asked.

"Suite afterward." She led him resolutely to the elevator. "They're all waiting at your grandmother's, right?"

"That's right."

He seemed totally at ease as they rode up to her floor and stepped out into the hall. Anna's heart felt too big for her body. Her pulse pounded, a drumbeat of nerves, and she took another deep breath to calm herself. Then another.

The door to Elin's apartment opened before they could knock. Tana and Chase stood there, arms wide open. "Welcome back," Tana said, and she grabbed them both and practically dragged them inside. She pulled Anna into a hug. "We're so glad you're here."

"Are you really?" She didn't want to let go of Tana and face the rest of the family, but that was what they'd come here to do.

Tana stepped aside, and Anna saw Elin, Jonas, and Lindsey sitting in the living room. Elin and Jonas both stood, and she couldn't remember what she was going to say for the life of her. Gabe took her hand and led her into the living room, everyone standing as if things might go haywire at any second.

"I wanted to say that I'm so sorry," Anna heard herself say. "For any pain that I might have caused. It was wrong of us to lie to all of you, and I wish we hadn't done that. There's one thing that is true—through all of this we fell in love."

"Yes," chimed in Gabe. "We're together now. For real."

Jonas cleared his throat, and Anna braced herself. "I shouldn't have been so overbearing. I only wanted everyone to be okay and I was pushing too hard."

"I get it," Anna said, stepping into Jonas's waiting arms for a brotherly bear hug.

And soon they were all gathered around, chatting and talking about their trip from the airport like it had been any other trip.

Like they were two members of the family arriving for a holiday.

“I’m just happy you’re together,” Chase said, bending down for a hug of his own. “Gabe was insufferable without you.” Chase ruffled her hair and Tana knocked his hand away playfully.

As if by silent agreement, they all took seats in the living room. Anna sat next to Elin, who put an arm around her. “I’m thrilled you’re back. Gabe needed you,” she said softly. “And I have to apologize, too, if I gave you the impression that you didn’t belong here.” Elin met her eyes unflinchingly. “You do belong here, Anna. I would be honored to have you as my granddaughter.”

Her throat closed, tight with tears, and she leaned forward to draw the older woman into a hug. “You have no idea how much that means.”

A knock at the door interrupted the new flow of conversation, and Anna stood up without thinking, wiping at her eyes. “I’ll get it.”

“She’s already settled in,” Chase said, and the spill of their laughter—kind and familiar—warmed her from the inside out. She was accepted here. Loved. It was the most comforting feeling she could have dreamed of.

At the door, a bellboy waited with a red box in his hands. “Oh! We must have forgotten this in the car.” Anna took the cake and reached into her pocket for a tip. All she had was a twenty, but she pressed it into his hand. It was Christmas, after all.

She returned to the living room and cleared her throat. “I have an announcement.”

Elin’s hand went to her throat.

“It’s not that I’m pregnant,” she said, shooting Elin a grin.

Tana let out a huge breath.

“It’s that Gabe baked me a cake.”

“That’s almost a bigger deal,” said Jonas, and then they were all looking at him and the cake as she unveiled his creation.

“Who wants a slice?” Anna called out. “I’m cutting it right now.” She was met with silence. “Oh, come on. He did a good job!”

The brothers laughed again, and Anna even forgave Jonas for his wariness about Gabe’s first baked dessert. He genuinely loved his family and he wanted what was best for them, even if he could be a little pigheaded about what was best. When she returned from the kitchen a few minutes later, with a tray laden with pieces of sliced cake on plates, he was the first to step up and take one.

The family took their seats in the living room again, each one turning their cake over for inspection and then looking to one another, as if for reassurance.

“Who’s going to go first?” Gabe asked. “Oh, never mind. I made it, so I’ll take the plunge.” He cut off a piece with his fork and popped it into his mouth without hesitation. Anna held her breath. She had never wanted someone to be successful more in her life. Gabe’s eyes went wide. “Oh my god,” he said. “It’s good. I’m not even kidding—it looks weird, but it tastes delicious.”

Everybody followed suit after that, and Anna took a bite. Oh, it was *delicious*. Soft and wonderful, with a hint of vanilla. Gabe had done an excellent job. Anna leaned over and kissed him on the cheek.

“Save it for when you’re alone,” Chase teased.

“No way,” Gabe said, leaning over to kiss her in return.



Gabe crawled into bed beside her at the end of the longest, happiest day of Anna’s life. Christmas Eve with the Elkin family had run late and Elin had retired much earlier, exhausted from the fun and her treatments taking its toll. Jonas and Chase had stayed to talk by the fire, while Tana and Lindsey had slipped out together over her protests.

It was only when Anna finally whispered to Gabe that she was ready for bed that he'd made a move to leave. The truth was Anna wanted to be alone with him. And now he was here, stretching out beside her and running a hand over her face. "I love you," he said.

"I want you," she said, a huge grin keeping her from making it a seductive invitation.

His eyebrows rose. "Yeah?"

Anna reached over and tugged down his boxers, revealing the thick, hard length of him. "You want me, too."

"I don't deny it."

She climbed on top of him, and Gabe slid his hands up underneath her big, soft sleep shirt. The higher his hands went, the wider his eyes got. Anna wasn't wearing anything underneath.

He finally gripped her waist and pulled her down over his chest to kiss her, deep and hard and fierce, and she pressed herself down on the hard ridge of him and rocked her hips back and forth. Anna was already slick, already wanting. There was a time for elaborate foreplay and lingering between her legs, but this wasn't it.

Gabe groaned into her mouth, his hands digging into her hips. He stuck a hand out, and it collided with the bedside table, almost knocking the lamp over. His low growl showed his impatience as he wrenched the drawer open and dug inside for a foil packet. Gabe ripped it open with his teeth, and in one swift move, rolled it on, his knuckles teasing at the soft, slick parts of her.

Anna lifted herself up, feeling on top of the world, and worked herself down over his shaft with a breathy moan that she couldn't have stopped if she wanted to.

Gabe swore. "You're a beautiful sight to see like this," he said, voice strained, eyes sweeping over her.

"I'd rather—focus—on feeling." She rocked her hips over him, grinding into the stretch and the pleasure, and as she touched his base, he thrust up into her with startling power. It

didn't matter if she was on top. He was still in control, always there for her. Anna bent down and kissed the exposed flesh of his neck where it rose from the collar of his shirt, and his arms came around her, caging her there.

There was nowhere else she'd rather be in the world.

Gabe pumped into her, and she met him thrust for thrust, the bodies rocking together, the pleasure winding and curling low in her belly until the next graze of his skin on her clit set her off like a Christmas firecracker, and she came, shuddering, digging into Gabe's shirt with her fingers and holding on for dear life.

Then she pushed herself upright and leaned into the wash of sensation. Each breath was a new miracle, and the steady back and forth of him inside her, a perfect fit. It brought her slowly up into another wave of pleasure.

Anna tipped her chin down and met his eyes, loving how they burned with intensity for her. His whole body was a picture of longing—all tight muscles, a freshly bitten lip, and restless hands that caressed every inch of her skin.

Gabe held her gaze as he came, gritting his teeth and sucking in a short, sharp breath, and Anna collapsed on top of him. They rolled together over the sheets, Gabe landing on top of her.

Her handsome billionaire.

Her dream come true.

Gabe bent to kiss her lips, and a pleasant tiredness descended along with him. "You did good today," he said softly. "We did good. Now sleep. Tomorrow's Christmas."

Turning over, she snuggled in his arms and drifted off to sleep.

This is what it must be like to be excited for Christmas.

GABE

It was, without a doubt, the best Christmas morning of Gabe's life.

He came awake all at once, his arm still slung over Anna, and breathed in her essence. Definitely the best Christmas ever.

She stirred underneath his arm and swiped her hair out of her face, then turned and stretched. "Merry Christmas," she whispered.

"Merry Christmas," he said. This was the best Christmas in his memory. Her body next to his was the most incredible gift. They lay together, savoring the silence for several minutes.

"What do we do now?"

"It's still early," he murmured, preferring to stay in bed with Anna. Thirty minutes later, they headed for the bathroom. A long, leisurely shower with Anna was the perfect way to start the morning. He washed her hair and soaped every inch of her skin like it was another gift. In fact, it was his third gift of the morning. First had been waking up next to her, second had been what they did after, and third...the shower.

They walked hand-in-hand to the elevator, and Anna took a deep breath. "How's my hair?"

"Perfect." He kissed her on the temple.

"You didn't look."

"I don't have to look to know it's perfect." The elevator whisked them upward and he took both Anna's hands and

spun her around. “There—now I’ve looked, and you’re gorgeous.”

She pressed a kiss to his jawline and then it was time to go in. Anna’s wide smile sparked something like childhood excitement in him—pure and fresh.

Tana and Chase were there along with Lindsey. Jonas and his grandmother sat opposite, and they all got up to greet one another. For once, Gabe didn’t have to focus on whether they were judging him. He just settled next to Anna until it was time to head into the dining room for breakfast. Gabe might have moved away from home, but these old habits hadn’t left. He knew the rhythm of the holiday with his family, and it was comforting in a way it hadn’t been in years.

The staff came out with serving platters piled high with fluffy pancakes and sausages and crispy bacon. Another tray was decorated with a fan of fruits. Fresh-made muffins. Gravy. It was an embarrassment of riches, and Gabe saw it through Anna’s eyes for the first time. This was when all the high standards and expectations came together to make something lovely—a breakfast table with laughter and helpfulness and rules for everyone to follow. Those weren’t always a bad thing, he realized. They were meant to give everyone a framework so they could relax.

And the framework had relaxed, too. Grandmother didn’t lean forward as often to scan everyone’s plates and guide the conversation. She enjoyed it while they served to the left, passed to the right, and waited for everyone’s plate to be filled before they started. Gabe caught himself watching his grandmother carefully, appreciating the matriarch of the family with a deeper understanding.

After breakfast, they took turns freshening up and then gathered in the living room for a Christmas photograph.

Gabe put his hand on the small of Anna’s back as the photographer set up her tripod and helped everyone into what she considered the proper placement. She was a tall woman with jet-black hair and a full smile. Gabe liked her instantly, especially when she took the time to compliment the silver-

and-white decorations used to turn the room into a winter wonderland. His grandmother beamed with pride. Gabe looked around and finally understood so much about his life and his family. For so many years, it had faded into the background for him. But not today. Never again.

“Are you sure I should be here?” Anna whispered, her eyes darting up to his. “I can step out if you’d rather have the photos without me.”

“I’m completely sure. If I’m supposed to be here, then so are you.” It hit him like a flash, like a bolt of lightning. He wanted her by his side forever. Not a single thing in the world could keep him away from her now that he had her back.

The photographer raised a hand. “And let’s all look this way, natural smiles, no need to overdo it. Just imagine you’re enjoying a relaxing Christmas morning with your family.”

All of them laughed, all except Jonas. His brother was acting odd, and Gabe made a mental note to ask him what was wrong when they had a chance.

The shutter clicked away, capturing family memories. Normally, Gabe would have been irritated with this kind of exercise and with Jonas’s insistence on making his gift take center stage. But Anna had shown him something different. She’d shown him that these kinds of gestures were meant to be thoughtful—and not in a competitive way. They were for the future versions of themselves who would have to take family photos with members missing. Gabe’s heart squeezed.

“And we’re good,” the photographer said, lowering her camera. “Would you like couple’s photos?”

“Yes,” Jonas said, his voice firm, brooking no opposition. Was it for the benefit of those in the room who might object, or the benefit of the photographer and issuing orders in Jonas’s typical abrupt fashion?

“Anna and Gabe first,” Tana said, pushing them front and center.

Whatever was wrong with Jonas would have to wait.

It was Christmas and Gabe had every reason to be joyful. Pulling Anna into his arms, as easily as he'd done anything in his life, he kissed her. Chase *whooped* at the sight, the clicking of the camera alerting him that the kiss would be solidly documented. Anna put her arms around his waist and posed again. It was so *easy*. He'd suffered through a hundred corporate photoshoots, but this was *nothing* like that. He couldn't keep the smile off his face, and he couldn't keep his eyes off Anna. She was his kind of lovely.

"Would you like to see a few of the shots?" the photographer asked.

"Yes!" Anna grabbed Gabe's hand and they went to stand next to the woman.

The images took his breath away. Anna's eyes shone up at him, and it was clear from the way they touched each other that it was love. Real, deep love. He put a hand to his chest and caught the photographer's eye. "Do you do wedding photography?"

Anna gasped.

"I mean it," he said, the knowledge breaking over him like a wave. "I want to be with you. I want to marry you."

Everything fell away except for Anna and the happy tears in her dark eyes. Gabe was dimly aware of the photographer hustling to detach her camera from the tripod and whisk it away. He took both of Anna's hands and was surprised to find that his own were trembling. This seemed way more momentous than his first throwaway proposal at the Top of the World. This was probably the most important thing he'd ever do. The significance of it settled over his shoulders and made his heart beat hard, and Anna bit at her lip, smiling through her own surprise.

He didn't have a new ring—but he did have the old one in his pocket. Anna had handed it back to him when she left, and he'd kept it in his pocket ever since. It was a testament to his love and kept him close to her even when they were apart.

Gabe sank down onto one knee and put his hand into his pocket. The room went silent, all eyes on him. For one heart-stopping instant, he couldn't find the ring. Relief filled him when his fingers closed over it, Gabe eager to ask the biggest question of his life. "Anna, you've changed everything about my life for the better," he told her. The click of the camera's shutter was the only sound that could be heard. "I want you to be by my side forever, and I want to be by yours. Will you marry me?"

He held up the ring, and Anna burst out in delighted laughter, tears streaming down her face. The pictures would be priceless—something to remember and talk about for generations to come. "And I know," he went on, "that this is our fake engagement ring, but we picked it out together. I'd like it to be a real one now."

"I love it," she cried. "It's my dream ring." She dissolved into happy laughter again, and someone started clapping, the others joining in just as he slid the ring onto Anna's finger.

Back where it belonged.

She bent down to kiss him, her hands on either side of his face. He stood, taking her in his arms to deepen the kiss. "We don't have to do this until you're ready," he said so only she could hear. "There's no rush."

"But there is," she whispered, a hand stroking down the back of his neck. "I want your grandmother to see us get married. And *I* don't want to wait. If we could do it right now, I would."

"Me too," he answered. "Me too."

Excitement hummed through him as Chase and Tana took their photos with Lindsey, and then Jonas and their grandmother. And finally, his grandmother posed for a portrait in her favorite seat in the house—the left-hand corner of one of her upholstered sofas. Happiness and grief tightened Gabe's throat as he watched. He was going to miss her. They were *all* going to miss her, but they'd have the memory of this day and this photo. That was more than some people got.

And they didn't have to miss her yet.

The photographer spoke with Jonas and then disappeared. There were more rounds of family portraits scheduled for later this afternoon, but they had enough for one session. Now it was time for some good old-fashioned Christmas fun.

His grandmother rose from the sofa, holding her hands up high. "Who's ready for presents?"

Lindsey whooped, and then there was a rush for seats around the tree, and Gabe settled back into their spot on the sofa with Anna tucked under his arm.

Anna's my gift and all I need.

"Merry Christmas," he told her, kissing her hair. "I love you."

"I love you, too. Let's always make Christmas special."

He drew her in, savoring the feeling of her body close to his. "Deal. But only if I can unwrap you every year. I'll never need another present."

EPILOGUE

ANNA

February

“**T**he movers have taken the last of the boxes downstairs. Are you ready to go?” Gabe asked her from the doorway to her bedroom. Well, former bedroom. She stood in the now empty room feeling overwhelmed at how quickly her life seemed to be coming together. “Hey, are you okay? If you feel like it’s too soon and you want to keep your apartment, I can tell them you changed your mind.”

Anna lifted her head to see Gabe’s concerned look, worry creasing his brow. She walked to him and he opened his arms to pull her into a hug. “It’s not too soon.” She reached up to rub her thumb across his brow, bringing a smile to his lips. “It’s just a lot to take in. New business. New client. New state. I needed a minute.”

He tightened his arms around her and kissed her forehead. She tilted her head up and he placed featherlight kisses down her face before reaching her lips. “Elk Lodge is just another client, and you already know everyone there. And if Jonas gives you any grief—”

Anna reached up to silence him with a finger against his lips. “I know. But Elk Lodge is my first client since I started my own business and I’m feeling nervous.”

After the holidays, Gabe insisted on completing his end of the deal and helped her to set up her own PR firm. And Jonas had insisted that Elk Lodge be her first client. Of course, it helped

that she'd sent him a proposal detailing the different ways they could expand their offerings, especially during the off season.

Since Anna was spending all her time either at the lodge or with Gabe, it didn't make sense to keep her apartment, so they'd decided to move in together. When Anna was on property, she would stay in their private residence, which Gabe had insisted that she help him redecorate to *their* tastes, and they'd turned his suite in the main lodge into offices for the both of them.

While Gabe was insistent that he had no intention of working for Elk Lodge, he was definitely spending more time in Colorado—working remotely—so he could be closer to his family. Especially Elin who was struggling with her cancer treatments. Most days, she was exhausted but felt well enough to scold her grandsons and inform them that they needed to stop hovering as if she might drop dead at any second. Much to Jonas's annoyance, she'd hired two fulltime caregivers to assist her without consulting him, and the women were both godsend.

Gabe's phone pinged and he ignored it.

"Oh no. You need to check that message," she told him. Elin had an appointment with her oncologist and everyone had been holding their collective breaths. Pulling his phone from his pocket, he handed it to her.

"You do it."

Taking his phone and holding gingerly as if it might explode, she checked the message, which was from Chase. "It's good news. The targeted therapy appears to be working, and the oncologist wants to wait to try anything else."

Gabe grabbed his phone, reading the message for himself and then reading it again. Tears glistened at the corners of his eyes and he blew out a breath. Another message pinged. "Gran wants to know if we'll be back in time for dinner."

"Oh, tell him yes."

"Are you sure? If you want to spend more time here, I would understand. They would understand."

Anna took his hand and pulled him through the apartment. “No. There’s nothing left here for me. Let’s go home.”

Gabe lifted her hand to his lips, kissing it. “I like the sound of that. Home.”

He took her keys and locked the apartment and they made a quick stop to give the keys to the property manager before getting in the car waiting to take them to the airport. Since Gabe had three fully furnished residences, most of Anna’s furniture had been donated, although she’d given Elena the option of taking anything she wanted. Everything else had been boxed up to bring to Elk Lodge.

Sitting back in the car, she leaned in to Gabe’s side. When she’d dreamt about her future life, getting engaged to a billionaire hadn’t even been on her radar. Now, they were embarking on even more adventures. Ones that would continue to bring Gabe closer to his family, a family that Anna had grown to love as they welcomed her into the Elkin fold.

At the airport, Gabe helped her out of the car and they walked toward his private jet. “Are you sure you want to do this? We don’t have to go to Colorado. I can instruct the pilot to take us anywhere you want to go.”

Anna smiled at his concern. “No, I’m sure. Although I might take you up on that later. I have a huge list of places I want to visit and I can’t think of anyone I’d rather be with than you.”

Getting settled in their seats, he kissed her hand as the pilot readied them for takeoff. “Have I told you today that I love you, Ms. Anna Waters?”

Anna pretended to think about it. “Yes, but only twice. You’re behind on your daily quota, Mr. Gabe Elkin.” Gabe had made a point of complimenting her and telling her how much he loved her regularly, and Anna didn’t think it would ever get old.

He squeezed her hand. “That’s not good. What can I do?”

As the plane took off, Anna had an idea. “Well...I wouldn’t mind becoming a member of the Mile High Club.” Gabe

choked out a laugh before readily promising to help make her a member.

Anna's life was looking up. She had a new family who loved her as much as she loved them and she was engaged to the man of her dreams. For real, this time. Once the plane hit cruising altitude and the seatbelt light turned off, she got out of her seat to straddle Gabe. Wrapping her arms around his neck, she kissed him before telling him, "I love you too, Gabe Elkin. Now about that membership."

**END OF THE BILLIONAIRE'S
FAKE CHRISTMAS
ENGAGEMENT**

CHRISTMAS WITH THE ELKIN BILLIONAIRES BOOK TWO

THE
BILLIONAIRE'S
Christmas Son

CHRISTMAS WITH THE ELKIN BILLIONAIRES: BOOK THREE

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

BLURB

One night of passion. A second chance at love...

Rachel Alexander has never gotten over a rare one-night stand with a sexy stranger that left her pregnant. Now she's back at the resort where they met. This time, as the resort's holiday photographer. But when she sees Jonas Elkin, the billionaire CEO who hired her, she instantly recognizes him as her one-time lover...and the father of her son. To her surprise, she's still wildly attracted to him. Too bad he wants to keep her... and their son...a secret.

Jonas is shocked to learn he's a father and he's determined to make things right. He's equally determined to make sure his ailing grandmother doesn't find out how badly he's messed up. So, for now, he'll have to hide his growing love for his little boy...and his desire for the gorgeous Rachel. But it's not easy. With the magic of Christmas all around, it's hard not to imagine a life with the two of them. If only Rachel feels the same way...

JONAS

The Christmas Day photo session with the family had been excruciating.

Jonas hoped that the rest of his family hadn't noticed how unbelievably tense he was—how sweat prickled at his hairline. How he couldn't stop looking at the photographer he'd hired. She was utterly professional and charming, and everyone loved her. The problem was that Jonas had loved her, too.

Well. He'd *made* love to her, almost three years ago. An unforgettable one-night stand, showing up today as his last-minute photographer. How did something like this happen? He knew the broad outlines of how—the man he'd hired bowed out because of a family emergency, and he'd suggested Rachel Alexander. Someone local enough to make the trip to the resort at the last minute. Jonas had been relieved when a replacement was found, so much so that he'd asked her to stay through the New Year to photograph the family events over what could end up being his grandmother's last Christmas.

He hadn't recognized her name.

But he would never forget her face, or her eyes, or her body. They'd never told each other their names, which was something so out of character for Jonas that he'd been delighted at the idea of it. Elk Resort had been through a precarious year, and the primary reason they pulled through was due to sheer force of will and a heavy influx of his own money. Neither of which he shared with the rest of his family. His brothers were off living their best lives and he didn't want

to stress out his grandmother. Jonas wanted, needed one night for himself. When he wasn't Jonas Elkin, hotelier.

They'd shared one night of bliss and the next morning, she was gone. He'd thought of her. Often. He'd even checked reservations, in the hope of learning her name, but she'd only been there for the New Year's Eve party. He told himself that chasing down one-night stands wasn't his role as the oldest Elkin brother and the one in charge of the resort.

Until now.

The rest of his family was ensconced in the living room of his grandmother's apartment, a fire crackling merrily in the fireplace, and the room staged to perfection by the interior decorators they hired every year to assist with the holiday decorating, when Jonas reached the end of his patience.

Rachel—her name was Rachel—stood quietly at the side of the room, capturing the memories of this Christmas day. He approached her in what he hoped looked like a relaxed manner, but the muscles across his shoulders were tight as could be.

"Mr. Elkin," she said, shifting to put space between them and looking down at her camera. "Was there another photo you wanted? I can—"

"Stop pretending," he said in a low voice.

Her head snapped up to look at him, her smile faltered, and her eyes widened.

"You never told me your name," Jonas ground out.

Rachel blushed a deep scarlet and pulled her camera close to her body. "And you never told me yours," she said quietly. "I thought you wouldn't recognize me. It was a few years ago." Her glance cut down to the side. "Maybe it's best if I leave."

"Can we talk about this? Because I don't think—"

"I didn't know it was you when I agreed to take this job." She waved him off. "You don't have to worry. Your family is lovely, and the photos will be wonderful. I'll have them to you as soon as I can." She gathered up her camera bag, waved at

his family, and hurried for the door, only stopping briefly to glance back at him. “Thank you for hiring me for the job.” The front door of his grandmother’s apartment opened and shut, hiding her from him again.

Jonas’s heart wouldn’t settle down. This was how the one-night stand had ended—with a door opening and closing and Rachel disappearing. Wait—had she just ended the job? He’d hired her through the New Year.

“Do you like the new sweater?” Chase’s hand came down on Jonas’s arm, causing him to jump. “Wow. Tense, much?” his brother asked, frowning.

“The sweater is great,” Jonas said. “I can’t wait to wear it.”

Chase looked him in the eye. “Is something wrong? You look like you’ve seen a ghost.”

“You know what, no. No.” *No, I can’t let her walk out of here. Not again and not like this.* “There were other photos I wanted. I’ll talk to the photographer about it before she calls it quits for the day.”

“It’s Christmas,” chided Chase. “Aren’t you going to let her have a little time with her son?”

He’d forgotten about her son. Rachel had needed to bring him along for the job since it would be over the holiday, and Jonas had agreed, not thinking twice about it. Well, he’d catch her before she and the boy took off. There was plenty for a kid to do at Elk Lodge.

“Of course I am,” Jonas said. “I’ll be back in a minute.”

He felt Chase’s eyes on his back as he went out into the hall. The expanse of plush carpet was empty, the elevator humming at one end, and he stabbed at the button impatiently. It was too slow. He couldn’t bear the wait. After fifteen seconds, he hustled for the stairwell, taking them down two at a time. There was a separate elevator for the guest rooms, and she was more than likely headed there.

He burst into the vaulted lobby a few moments later, into the swirl of elegant Christmas decorations and soft music. Glancing around, he caught sight of Rachel by the enormous

Christmas tree, tucking a length of jet-black hair behind her ear. She was grinning down at something he couldn't see because of a huge leather sofa blocking his view.

Another woman stood close by, her red hair piled on top of her head in a loose bun. Lisa, the resort's in-house nanny, who was on call for any family who needed childcare. He blinked, moving closer without thinking.

And then he came to an abrupt halt.

The little boy had come into view, and—he was a miniature version of Jonas. Rachel had black hair and blue eyes, but this little boy had Jonas's dark blond hair and his chin, too.

Her son. The little boy couldn't have been much more than two, and he pulled gently at Lisa's hand as they stood, swaying toward the tree and back again.

Oh, God. No wonder she wanted to leave. If what he suspected was true—if this was *his* son.

"Rachel," he called out, before he'd thought about what to say.

She straightened, turning to meet his gaze.

"Mr. Elkin." Lisa gave him a nod and said something he couldn't hear to Rachel, and then turned to leave. "Merry Christmas," she told them all, waving until she was out of sight around the corridor.

Jonas had wanted to talk to Rachel about the one-night stand, but that seemed insignificant now. Laughably so. He went to where she stood with the little boy, irresistibly drawn to them both. It was an awkward moment and he stuck his hands in his pockets to cover any sign of nervousness.

Rachel bit her lip.

The little boy stared up at them, small lips pursed.

Outside, the Colorado snow came down in gentle flakes, the cool light tempering the golden glow from the hundreds of lights inside the lobby. It was as though time stood still.

"I was going to tell you—" Jonas racked his brain for what he'd come to tell her. "I was going to say that I didn't want

you to leave on account of what happened between us. Before.” He dragged his eyes from the boy’s and back to Rachel’s, which were a lighter blue than his own. “But I think there’s something else we need to talk about. Something more important.”

The rest of the room disappeared. It was only the three of them and the Christmas tree. Everything else—the music and the chatter of the other people in the lobby—they were gone, and Jonas braced for the words that would change his life. One way or the other, things would be different.

“He’s yours,” Rachel said, her voice calm and matter-of-fact.

Yours. The word echoed in his mind until it was big enough to fill the entire lobby of Elk Lodge, bouncing around in a thousand echoes of itself. “Mine.”

“Yes.” Rachel was at ease with her son, letting him step from side to side, but her shoulders were tensed up to her ears. Her cheeks went a deeper red. “When I met you at the party, I thought you were another guest. I didn’t know you were Jonas Elkin.”

“And I never told you.” It had seemed like such a good idea at the time. The night had lifted the weight from his shoulders long enough for him to catch his breath. Jonas wasn’t in the habit of asking—he was used to telling people what to do as part of his job as CEO. Nobody wanted a CEO without leadership ability. But Rachel didn’t technically work for him, not for Elk Lodge, anyway. “You don’t need to leave.”

She raised her eyebrows. “Are you sure? Because this is a huge thing to find out, and I’m sure you’re...” Her voice softened, the sentence petering out. “I’d understand if you didn’t want me here at a time like this, given your grandmother’s health.”

His emotions were so huge he thought he might burst. Guilt. A flash of anger. A lightning bolt of fear. Over it all, a layer of shock. He had a son, and the son was this boy, and his mother was Rachel. “What’s his name?”

“Scott,” Rachel offered. “Scott Alexander.”

There was too much to decide at that moment. He hadn't been there to take care of his own child. Neglected his responsibility. It didn't matter that there was no way he could have known. Jonas felt like he was falling. It was a terrifying sensation. But he wasn't going to let her walk away—no way.

At the same time, the photography job she was working on was his gift to his grandmother *and* his brothers. The last time they'd had photos taken of the whole family, his grandfather had been alive, and this could be the last time they'd all be together. He swallowed hard, attempting to squash the continual grief and worry over Elin Elkin's cancer diagnosis, and took control of his emotions. If he sent Rachel away now, there would be no replacement photographer. And then he'd have to explain to his grandmother why she left, and he wasn't prepared to make that announcement yet.

Decide.

"Let me take you back to your suite."

"Are you sure you don't want us to leave?"

"I'm sure." There. Decision made. "Let's walk together."

He could almost feel time ticking by. Up in his grandmother's apartment, his family would be wondering where he'd gone. They might try to call down to the front desk to see if something happened at the resort that demanded his attention. They might try any number of things if he didn't return to the Christmas celebration soon.

In the elevator, Rachel lifted Scott up to push the buttons, guiding his small finger with her hand. "Floor number three," she told him.

"Tree," Scott repeated, his son's baby voice striking straight to Jonas's heart.

They rode the elevator up, questions crowding Jonas's mind. How was he going to fix this situation? Scott looked happy, oblivious to the fact that he was seeing his father for the first time. It didn't change the problem they faced.

Rachel slipped the key card into her door, and the lock clicked, driving home the reality of the situation.

What had he been thinking? That he'd go back to her room with her and they'd hash everything out while his family waited upstairs? It would have to wait a little longer. He didn't want his family to come looking for him. And he didn't want his son to disappear while his back was turned.

Before they did anything, he needed to get his thoughts in order. There were so many variables in this situation. So many people to consider. So many factors. He'd always been proud of the way he could make decisions, keep things moving. Now Jonas felt like he was treading water in the middle of the ocean.

Scott toddled into the suite, and Rachel turned back. "Thank you for letting us stay." It sounded hopeful, like a question—one last chance for him to change his mind.

"I'm glad you're staying." He cleared his throat. "I have to head back upstairs—my family will have wondered why I disappeared—but will you meet me in my office later to talk? It's on the fourth floor." She was willowy and gorgeous, and he felt a certain desperation rise in him: *don't let her get away*. And a competing pull: *don't let this holiday become a disaster*.

Rachel took a deep breath. "If you're sure."

"I'm *very* sure," Jonas said. "Meet me there in an hour."

She searched his eyes one more time, then gave a small nod. "We will."

RACHEL

Rachel pressed her forehead to the picture window in the guest suite and tried to cool down her feverish skin. It had been an endless morning of holding it together. She had been *so close* to getting away, too, and then, no. The awkwardness had descended. The father of her child hadn't been just another guest—he owned the place.

Rachel had fallen in love with Elk Lodge as a little girl when she came here with her parents—the glittering snow on the hills, the hot cocoa and cider they kept in ready supply for guests along with the most amazing sweet treats. There was a certain magic to it, and for a child, eager to enjoy the Christmas holidays, walking into the lodge felt like stepping into a winter wonderland.

Her most recent trip had been three years ago, right after she caught her fiancé cheating on her. Her best friend, Annabeth, had invited her to come to the party with her, and Rachel had readily accepted. She'd never anticipated meeting anyone, much less sleeping with them. But her night with Jonas had been amazing. He'd been an incredible lover and made her feel cherished, something she could never say about Daniel. They'd fallen asleep wrapped around each other, but when she'd woken to a text from Annabeth, asking where she was, she'd skulked out of his suite as if she'd done something wrong instead of having experienced a few hours of absolute bliss.

Six weeks later, she was staring at a positive pregnancy test having no idea who the father was or how to reach him. Then

eight months later, her greatest joy was placed into her arms.

When she was offered the chance to come back here to stay for a week, she'd jumped on the job offer. The room rates were too high for a photographer with a business one couldn't describe as successful by any stretch of the imagination. The opportunity to work here was like a Christmas gift for her and Scott—and with what Jonas was paying for the job, the money would see them through the first quarter of the following year, and there was no way she could turn that down. Especially with a toddler who was continually outgrowing his clothes.

Now there was Jonas to contend with. Rachel had never expected to come across the father of her child again, and why would she have? He could have been from anywhere. Instead, he was an hour away from the town she'd made her home and lived at the resort she'd fallen in love with as a child.

“Okay.” She straightened up and checked her watch. They were set to meet in fifteen minutes and Rachel always left extra time. Those were the rules when you had a two-year-old. Scott was busily tugging at the blankets on the king-size bed. “Come on, buddy. Let's ride the elevator.”

“Elevator!” he squealed, rushing to pull on his shoes. Rachel tucked a toy truck under her arm and helped him with his shoes, one after the other.

They headed down the hall toward the elevator. The alpine theme was understated here, with polished trim that gleamed and snow-white walls. Plush, blue carpet boasted a silvery pattern that reminded her of winter, but that would look equally good in the summer.

Less than a minute later, she passed through the lobby area and headed to the private elevator that would give her access to the family suites and offices, something off-limits to guests.

Elk Lodge was a massive building, and it had space for *two family suites*—one for Elin, their grandmother, and one for visiting family when they preferred to use the penthouse rather than their own homes situated around the property. Jonas's offices were on the same floor next to his grandmother's suite.

He opened the door before she could knock, ushering them in and shutting it tightly behind them. Scott's non-stop chatter had more than likely alerted him to their arrival.

"Hi," Scott said, using one of the few words he'd learned early on.

"Hi, there." Jonas's face softened. He pushed a hand through his hair and blew out a breath, meeting Rachel's eyes. "I was hoping we could talk about our situation."

"Okay. Do you have a room that's safe for Scott to play in where we can keep an eye on him?"

"The sitting room should be good. We'll both be in there with him and I don't think there's anything dangerous. The fireplace has a grate on it." Jonas led the way from the reception area to the sitting room attached to his actual office.

Rachel loved the panoramic view of the ski hills, the afternoon light golden on the snow. Her hands itched for a camera, except now wasn't the time for photographs.

"How's this?"

"It's good." She let go of Scott's hand, and he made a beeline for a leather sofa, squeezing one of the arms to test it before crawling up to investigate.

Jonas hadn't acted this flustered the first time she'd met him. He'd been in control in a way that soothed her. Rachel's life had felt very *out* of control at the time, what with the called-off wedding and her mother's response to everything. That party at Elk Lodge was supposed to help her get out of her head and have some fun. And it'd worked.

Rachel edged closer, sitting down on the sofa so she could be close to Scott. She also wanted to be close to Jonas. It was hard keeping her eyes off his tall, muscular frame, dressed impeccably in charcoal pants and a button-down with the neck open enough for her to see a hint of flesh. A shiver of desire moved down her spine, as she remembered more than the hint.

With his breathtaking blue eyes and model-handsome face, no wonder she was still attracted to him. No wonder she still felt like she might catch fire. Rachel hadn't been with anyone

since Jonas. Not out of a sense of obligation, but more because no one could compare to the memory of a time she considered perfection.

More deep breaths. Now wasn't the time to develop a massive crush on the father of her child—or admit that the crush had existed all this time, in an abstract way. She'd thought about him often at night. But that didn't mean this visit changed anything. Scott was her priority in life, and she wasn't going to get distracted by a relationship. Period.

No one has said anything about a relationship, a small voice warned. "So," she said, doing her best to bat the thoughts away. "Let's talk."

Jonas sat down on a loveseat across from her. There was plenty of open carpet space, and Rachel bent to put the toy truck she'd brought with her on the floor. It would hopefully keep Scott occupied as soon as he was bored with the creases on the sofa.

"We have to make some decisions." Jonas leaned forward, elbows balanced on his knees. "This will come as a shock to my family, and it will be best if we can contain the damage."

Defensiveness roared to life in her. "You're talking about my son," she said, more sharply than she intended. "He's not damage, whatever your relatives might think of him. And I won't let you refer to him that way." She should stop, but she couldn't. "I won't let anyone talk about him like that, especially his father."

Jonas cleared his throat. "That's not what I meant. I think it would be best if we made any further decisions together."

Heat skimmed along her back, and she couldn't tell if it was from anger or desire or both. Why did it have to feel so complicated? "Nobody makes decisions for me. If you're worried about people finding out."

"I'm not worried about people finding out," he insisted, an edge in his voice. "I don't think he's a mistake." Jonas's eyes dropped to his son, who had crouched down to play with the truck on the carpet. "I feel terrible that I didn't know." He

looked into her eyes again, and she saw confirmation of all the guilt that must be twisting him up inside.

She hadn't known who he was, but now she wondered if she should have worked harder to find out. It was only that having Scott felt like a joyous miracle, and she hadn't wanted to bring the real world crashing in to tarnish it. "I didn't tell you because I didn't know who you were." Her throat went tight. "But now we do, and we can go forward from here." She swiped at her eyes, wiping away the press of feelings in her chest. "I'm assuming your family won't be happy?"

"It's not that," he said.

Scott made zooming sounds with the truck, rolling it back and forth on the rug, Jonas following the action.

"My grandmother is quite ill." His eyes landed back on her, and Rachel saw the pain—something raw and real. "That's why I was so insistent on getting the photos this year. She might not have another Christmas. Our grandparents raised us after our parents died and, well, to say we had a rigid upbringing is an understatement. My grandmother has high expectations for all of us and given her condition, I don't want to upset her. Or give her reason not to trust that the lodge is in excellent hands. Responsible hands."

"And having a child destroys that trust?"

"Because of the accident part. And the not knowing part, and for letting you struggle by yourself without any help from me. How old is he?"

"He turned two in October." She had the urge to go and fold herself into Jonas's lap, wanting to be held. But that was out of the question. They weren't together. He was the sexiest man she'd ever seen, yes. And he was the father of her child. But none of that changed anything. He was more off-limits now than ever before.

"I'm worried about my grandmother," Jonas said. It was clear from his expression that he was struggling to find the way forward.

Her heart squeezed for him. “You don’t have to tell me what’s wrong, but—”

“Cancer.” The word sounded insidious, which of course it was. “Aggressive.” He rubbed both hands over his face. “I wasn’t prepared.” Rachel got the feeling he wasn’t only talking about cancer. “My only concern is that the shock would create a physical reaction for her. That is my *only* concern,” Jonas said, a hint of authority returning to his voice. It was one of the things she’d admired about him the first time they met. “I have to protect her. But I don’t want you to go.”

“You don’t have to protect me, you know. I’ve done a surprisingly good job of that myself the past couple of years.” It wasn’t always true, but she got an A for effort.

He looked at her, gaze steady. “Don’t I?”

“No.”

Jonas nodded slowly. “I’m making a mess of this.”

“Life is a mess.” She shrugged. The defensiveness had fallen away, and now she saw Jonas exactly as he was—a man in charge of everything, who couldn’t take charge of this. Not yet. “It’s always a mess.”

“You don’t make it look that way in your photos. Always so neat and clean.” A smile flickered onto his face and disappeared.

“It’s my talent.” Rachel took a deep breath. She felt a pull toward him, the same pull as before, only this time she wanted to kiss him, not just be held. Would the same spark ignite between them as it had once before? Energy already thrummed beneath her skin, making her heart beat fast. Even looking at Jonas was an adrenaline rush. “I have a proposal.”

His eyebrows shot up, a questioning expression on his face.

“Not that kind of proposal.” She laughed, her cheeks heating. Scott stopped pushing the truck and grinned up at her, giggling too. It was infectious, irresistible, and Jonas joined in the laughter. “I’m being serious.”

Jonas put on a straight face. “Tell me what’s on your mind.”

Rachel wanted to tell him everything, absolutely everything that had happened over the last two years, but it was Christmas Day, and they'd lose the light soon. That wouldn't make for the best pictures. And now she knew the stakes were high for them both.

"You can't afford to miss any more of Christmas Day with your family," she said briskly. "And neither can I, if you want more lifestyle shots, which you know you do. So, I'm going to get to work."

Jonas stood, and she followed him to his feet. He was so *tall*, almost imposing, and Rachel was torn—she didn't feel on guard, exactly, but not relaxed, either. It was a delicious tension. Why did she *like* it so much? "And the rest?"

"We'll figure out what we need to do when it's not the biggest holiday season of the year," she told him. "There's time."

"There's not much time," he countered.

"Enough to make a plan. You hired me to do a job and that's what I'm going to do."

Jonas nodded. "Consider me out of your way."

Yeah, right. He'd be in her way with every step she took at the resort and Rachel didn't hate the thought. She stepped forward and reached for Scott, scooping him up into her arms.

Jonas walked the two of them to the door and opened it.

Rachel crossed in front of him, her arm brushing the front of his shirt, and she paused, her face mere inches from his. Blue eyes heated her from the inside out, and her breath hitched. He was close enough to kiss.

Scott wriggled his legs, kicking against her. "Go, Mama." He reached out one chubby hand and pointed into the hallway. "Go, go, go."

Her exit cue.

RACHEL

The sunlight was perfect, filtering down through the trees at the ski resort, and Rachel snapped photo after photo, trying to make magic. Jonas didn't *just* want her to capture the family at Christmas. He wanted a time capsule of the entire resort and all their favorite places in it. That included the trees and the ski hills and the buildings, all of which resembled a compact Alpine village in the heart of Cardinal Mountain.

"Mama." Scott barreled into her legs, knocking her off balance. Her lens cap fell out of her pocket, disappearing into the snow. "Mama. Pway."

"Oh, buddy," she hissed under her breath, pulling off a glove to dig in the snow, hoping to retrieve the lens cap. This job was only slightly impossible. Why she ever thought it was a clever idea to take a toddler with her for landscape shots was beyond her. It would be so much easier to quit, aside from the complications with Jonas. She tipped her face to the sky and let the winter air cool her cheeks.

The problem was the text message she'd received this morning.

Her next big gig had been a wedding in February, and the couple had to cancel their wedding plans in order to fly to India to be with a sick relative and didn't know when they would return. They apologized and when Rachel offered to return their deposit, they declined.

"Sit. Sit," Scott said, tugging on her jacket.

Her heart ached for them—it did. But it also ached for herself. Losing the money from the wedding made it impossible to leave Elk Lodge and give up her income from this job. She couldn't quit no matter how awkward things got between her and Jonas.

Rachel was kicking her past self for not asking more questions about Jonas, the man she'd slept with, and her present self for thinking she could just waltz back into Elk Lodge as if nothing had ever happened. She should have at least recognized his voice on the phone.

She lifted the camera to her face and snapped a few more photos.

Scott suddenly started to cry, and she turned to find he'd fallen in the snow on his side. Perfectly capable of getting up but unwilling to do it, not without mama's help. She scooped him up, tickling his chin to make him laugh. A two-year-old did not make a photography gig easy, but they'd have to make the best of it. It wasn't like any of her problems were Scott's fault.

They made their way back down to the main lodge, where Rachel half-managed to get some exterior shots. Scott ran toward every flake of falling snow, this way and that, and though no cars were driving on the road, it made her nervous.

Holding his hand and shooting photos was impossible, and she didn't want to take the risk of the chairlift. She managed to get photos of the ski shed, the bottom of the chairlift, and the hill from the only vantage point she had. Stopping every few minutes to take deep breaths, she tried to find a way to quell her frustration.

It wasn't working.

"Buddy." Scott ran around in a tight circle at her feet, making it less and less possible to get any shots. She tried for a few more, then looked down to find her son burying his hat in the snow. "Scott, it goes on your head."

He looked up at her and shook his head. "No."

"And where's your other glove?"

“No,” he said, then delicately put several fistfuls of snow on top of the hat.

“Okay.” Rachel snapped her lens cap back into place and dug his hat out, which made Scott royally furious. His screams echoed over the ski hill, attracting the attention of other guests. Perfect. This could not be going any better. “Maybe we should go back inside and try for some photos there, buddy.”

He wailed, letting himself become a wet noodle at the end of her hand, and finally, Rachel picked him up and took him into the lobby. Jonas wanted photos of the lodge with its holiday decorations, too. But once they were inside, Rachel saw it for the minefield that it was.

Scott wouldn't be able to leave the decorative gifts under the tree alone, and as they walked past the enormous Christmas tree, he writhed in her arms until she put him down on the floor. “Please, buddy. We'll go back to the room. We'll do something fun in just a bit. I promise,” she said, whispering in his ear.

Scott lay there on the floor.

“Just perfect,” Rachel said to no one. The last thing she needed was for him to go into a full-fledged temper tantrum. Not in here. She stood close by, using the attentive but calm expression she'd learned from one of her prenatal parenting classes, and waited.

“What's going on?” Jonas's voice broke into her attentive waiting, and she wanted to sink down onto the floor next to her son. Everything was already fraught with tension, and the last thing she needed was Jonas, wearing a worried expression on his face, and slightly out of breath. “Are you having trouble with the landscape photos?”

“No,” she lied, then thought better of it. “Yes.” It was always a fine balancing act, talking about her son with people who hired her. Usually, things weren't so last-minute. Usually, she didn't take jobs that required overnight stays, let alone a week. And usually, she wasn't trying to wade through the supreme awkwardness of having just revealed her son's parentage to his

father and sticking around to deal with the emotional aftermath.

Jonas's eyebrows knitted together. "You are?"

"I am," she admitted, glancing down at Scott to make sure he was all right. Looking like a snow-suited starfish lying in the middle of the carpet in the lobby, he made her wish she was anywhere but here. "Lisa was an absolute godsend yesterday, but she wasn't available this morning, and it's too hard to keep Scott entertained while I get the shots. I don't feel like I've gotten more than a couple that do this place justice."

Rachel braced for his response, fully expecting him to fire her.

Instead, Jonas stepped around so that the two of them were forming a protective barrier around Scott. "I can help," he said, his words surprising her speechless.



Jonas

The frustration was clear on her face, obvious to him from all the way across the lobby. Jonas hadn't been able to see Scott lying on the floor until he was closer, but it made perfect sense. She looked as tense as he felt. When he woke this morning, he'd every intention of speaking with his grandmother about Rachel and Scott, until he saw the text from Gabe, letting him know that she was overtired from the Christmas Day festivities and needed to rest. So, he decided to wait, which wasn't helping his own stress level. In a way, it was perfect that Rachel hadn't been able to get the shots. It would give them more time to figure things out.

"Let me take you on a tour," he said, registering her surprised expression. Was this the first time she'd asked a client for help? "I'll go with you to help keep Scott entertained, and you can get some good photos. And we can spend some time together *with* Scott."

"If you're sure," Rachel said, leaning down to brush a lock of hair off Scott's forehead. "I don't want to take up too much of

your time.”

“I’m completely sure. I can go right now if you still want to do the photos.”

She straightened up, fire in her eyes. “Of course I do. Why wouldn’t I?”

Jonas waved at Helen, who was at the check-in desk, signaling for her to bring his coat out from the back room. He kept coats in several places around the resort in case he needed them. His brothers called it overkill. They were both wrong. “You really don’t have to do the photos,” he offered in a quiet voice. He was trying to do the right thing by her.

Rachel lifted her chin. “No, I *do* need to do the photos,” she said, her voice tight. “I signed a contract, and I need the money.”

“I’ll pay you anyway. Name the amount. It’s no object, Rachel.”

She blinked, and Scott stood up from the floor. Crouched down. Stood up again. He toddled toward the tree and plopped himself down in front of one of the wrapped boxes, patting gently at the gold ribbon wrapped around it.

Rachel moved toward him, taking her eyes off Jonas at the last moment. She bent down close to Scott, not touching him, just ready, he realized, to stop the boy from ripping open the gift.

Jonas wouldn’t mind if he did. At this moment, he wouldn’t mind if the little boy opened every one of the remaining gifts under the tree. Rachel’s shoulders were tense, but it couldn’t be because of Scott—she was used to this, she was prepared.

It could only be because of *him*. Maybe she thought his offer was a bribe. It might have come off as an offer to keep her quiet about Scott, and once he thought that, he knew it was true by the set of her jaw and the thin line of her lips.

“Forget I said that. You’re right,” Jonas said, trying to backtrack a bit.

Rachel’s eyes met his, wary still. She put one hand down on Scott’s chubby one, guiding him away from the edges of the

wrapping paper. “Am I?”

“I hired you to do a job. Let’s focus on getting it done right, which means I’ll help entertain Scott while you take the pictures. Deal?”

She let out a visible breath. “Deal.” She scooped Scott up into her arms, and he put his arms around her neck, burying his face in her shoulder. “About that tour...”

“How about a sleigh ride? With horses?”

Scott perked up at that. Jonas got a thrill from his excitement, something he’d never experienced before. Some of the tension in the air dissipated as Rachel smiled, sending a wave of heat through his body and his heart racing. Jonas tried to ignore it as he put his coat on and told Scott about the horses, leading them both outside to a spot near the ski shed.

While Jonas held Scott in his lap for the ride, the sleigh took them down the trails near the resort. Rachel marveled at the decorations on the trees and leaned forward to get photo after photo. Jonas found himself at the opposite end of the lens more than once, and the thought of the photos squeezed at his heart. His first memories with his son.

By the time they returned to the lodge, Rachel was breathless and pink-cheeked, excited about her photos, and Scott was more than ready for a nap. But Jonas didn’t want to watch them walk away.

He escorted them up to her suite and held Scott while Rachel put away her gear and got herself settled.

“Are you comfortable here?” He kept his voice low because at some point between the lobby and here, Scott had fallen asleep on his shoulder. “Do you have everything you need?” he added.

She put a hand on his elbow. “I do.”

“I know your restaurant meals are part of your contract, but if you need anything else,” Jonas said. “Room service, supplies, a spa service—anything—it’s all on the house. Don’t hesitate.”

Rachel cracked a smile, and he felt like punching a fist in the air and cheering. “I love room service fries.”

“Our chef has a great selection of dipping sauces to go with our steak fries, and don’t forget to try our chocolate cake. It’s fantastic.”

“Now that does sound decadent.”

Scott made a small snuffling noise against his shoulder. “I think this guy might be out for a while.” He transferred Scott over to her arms, managing the fine art of not waking the child. “Enjoy your dinner.” *And ask me to stay, and then, and then—* “Get some time to yourself.”

“I’ll do that.” Rachel leaned in and kissed him on the cheek. “We’ll see you tomorrow for the candid shots, right?”

Tomorrow seemed like a thousand years away.

“Of course.” Jonas left, closing the door behind him, wishing he could stay. Tomorrow. He would do better tomorrow. No mistakes. No tension. Only family photos in his grandmother’s apartment. He laughed to himself on the way back to his office. A man could dream.

JONAS

Jonas fell asleep with high hopes that the next day would go well and he'd figure out a way to share the news about Scott, but his night was plagued with one bad dream after another. His grandmother disappointed with him over having unprotected sex. Her anger over shirking his parental responsibilities, even though he'd only just found out about Scott. His grandmother's health taking a disastrous turn after being hit with this emotional bombshell after everything else that'd happened with his brothers. When he finally dragged himself out of bed, there was a pit in his stomach and a weight across his shoulders he couldn't shake off. An hour in the gym didn't alleviate it.

The fact was, the longer Rachel stayed at the lodge and near his family, the more opportunities there would be for them to find out about Scott in a way, and at a time, he couldn't control. As CEO of Elk Lodge, Jonas had always prided himself on his ability to create a lifetime of memories for all their guests, and he was determined to do that for his grandmother and brothers. They needed to get through another day, and then they'd be in a better position to sit down and figure out what to do. Right?

Decision made, he showered and changed. With several hours available before the designated meeting time for portraits, he planned to take advantage of the time by working in his office. The short distance to the lodge from his private residence didn't make up for the cold, crisp air chilling him as he made

his way to his office, choosing to use the stairs for the exercise.

Once there, he pulled up the file on Blue Diamond Ski Resort. When they first found out that Colin Forest had signed a contract to buy the nearby resort, Jonas knew that the potential impact on Elk Lodge could be devastating. He was relieved when the McIntyre family began proceedings to terminate the contract, and his grandmother immediately offered to buy the resort. It would be weeks before they had any news about the contract, but Jonas had already started drawing up plans to integrate the two resorts, which had been a dream of his grandparents long before Jonas was born.

His phone rang and when he saw who was calling, he grinned. Answering the phone, he tried to sound gruff. “We’re still not selling, no matter how much you offer,” he told his old friend, Mitch Denton. Mitch laughed, which turned into a wheezing cough. “Damn, you okay?”

“Fine. Getting over a cold. Hey, Josh told me about Elin, how is everyone doing?”

Jonas sat back in his chair, the tension in his shoulders pulling tight. “I don’t know. We’re all still in shock and treating this holiday as if it may be our last with her.”

His phone alerted him to a new text.

Gabe: Gran’s feeling a bit better this morning and wants photos in the fireplace lounge.

“Did you call for a reason? I hired a photographer to take family photos and Gabe just texted me about a change in venue.”

Mitch chuckled. “Uh oh. Are they messing with your carefully constructed plans?”

His phone pinged again with another text.

Gabe: We’re waiting on you.

“You don’t know the half of it and I don’t have time to get into it now. Can I call you later and we can talk about why you called?”

“Absolutely. How about after the New Year?”

“Done.” Disconnecting the call, Jonas gritted his teeth when a third text came in.

Chase: Dude! Where are you?

Pushing his chair back with more force than necessary, he grabbed the armrest before it tipped over. He had to hurry so Rachel wouldn't have to face the rest of the Elkin family alone.

Walking into the lounge, he realized his grandmother had a good instinct for what would look good for the photoshoot. The fireplace lounge had two walls of windows, and the mid-morning light cast the room in a pretty glow. It gave the whole scene a magazine layout vibe, something he needed to consider for future advertising campaigns. He made a note to talk to Anna about it, since she'd already approached him with ideas to enhance the resort's offerings for day visitors.

He found Rachel standing in one corner, adjusting the settings on her camera. Scott was nowhere to be seen. More than likely with Lisa, which was the best possible solution given how rambunctious he was yesterday.

Time to get started.

“Brothers first,” Jonas announced, loud enough for Rachel to hear. Her head snapped up, her gaze seeking him out. Her surprise quickly turned into a smile, making his heart beat faster.

One by one, they each took turns in separate groups, sitting by the window and pretending to have conversations. Jonas laughed at Chase's jokes, the knot in his chest loosening with every moment that passed. Maybe it would all be fine.

No sooner had he started to relax than two figures appeared in the doorway. No one else noticed the new additions as the family worked on rearranging themselves, his grandmother sitting down, and everyone falling in beside her.

Except for Jonas. He noticed.

Lisa had arrived, Scott in her arms. The moment he saw his mother, his son brightened, pushing away from the nanny and trying to get down. Rachel went over and had a hushed conversation with her. The words *no big deal* drifted his way as he listened intently.

Except it was a big deal.

Lisa put Scott down, and he clung to Rachel's leg. Tana, Lindsey, and Anna made an *awww* noise at the side of the room, finding Scott's antic cute.

Rachel shook her head and laughed, waving them into the next group shot. "If you all sit down," she said, "we'll get a few more shots, and then we'll move to more group standing poses. Remember, this is what I call planned candid, so ignore me and be as comfortable as you can. You could tell a funny story from the boys' childhood, Mrs. Elkin."

His grandmother's smile lit up the room, and she reminded Rachel to call her Elin before launching into a story about the time Chase belly-flopped off the high dive at a campground they'd gone to out east and had ended up with a belly burn to rival any sunburn. It was the first vacation they'd taken after their parents died, and it had served as their first step in working through their grief. Granted, to hear his grandmother speak of the trip, the brothers had been in some sort of competition to see who would end up with the most injuries. Chase had won, hands down.

Jonas wanted to lose himself in the story, wanted to focus on the past, when things had been less complicated, but he couldn't. They were going to notice. Any second now, they were going to notice that the little boy in the room looked exactly like him. *Or* they were going to notice that Jonas couldn't stop stealing glances at Rachel.

Rachel, on the other hand, showed no sign of nervousness. No fear of discovery. It was up to him to keep them distracted.

So he did what he normally would do. He started directing the photos and making suggestions on sitting arrangements. When Scott started walking toward them, Jonas jumped up again. "What about some photos with just the women?" he said,

dragging his brothers with him to the side of the room. He felt Rachel's eyes on him all the way.

"You don't have to worry," she called out. "I'll get all the shots you need."

Don't worry. Well, he *was* worried. Scott made his way over to them, and Jonas met the boy halfway across the floor, waving at his brothers to make their way to the windows. "I'll join you all in a second."

He took Scott by the hand and led him back toward Rachel. "Hey, kiddo, let's go over here, by your mom. Rachel, why don't we move on to portraits of—"

"Let's take five," Rachel called. "Everybody get comfortable, and I'll be back in a few. Jonas, come with me—I need your help." The tone of her voice didn't bode well.



Rachel

Rachel snapped her lens cap back into place and took Scott from Jonas.

He glanced back, the lines of tension on his face deepening as he noticed his family watching them with an unbelievable amount of suspicion.

"Now would be good," she told him, keeping her smile in place.

Jonas followed her out to the hall. She set Scott down, letting him wander over to a nearby alcove he was intent on exploring. After double-checking to make sure everything was safe, she turned to Jonas, taking a deep, cleansing breath.

His eyes met hers, but then slipped away, glancing back toward the door. How could he look so strong, so powerful, and so worried at the same time?

"You're driving me insane," she declared. Shock filled his blue eyes, causing her heart to thump harder despite her irritation.

“I’m trying to help. There’s a lot on the line right now.”

“Okay, but—” she tempered her response, realizing Jonas was nervous. For that matter, *she* was nervous too. This was obviously a big deal for him—his son, mingling with his family. But he had to let go and trust her if it was going to work—both the photography gig and any kind of relationship between them. It didn’t necessarily have to be romantic, and he seemed like he wanted to get to know his son. But she wasn’t backing down.

He had to let her do her job. “I hate being micromanaged. And you’re micromanaging. I’ve got this, Jonas. Everybody in there is having a fun time, but you’re too focused on where Scott is in the room to enjoy yourself. It’s coming across in every picture with you in it.”

Jonas let out a short breath, then ran his hands over his face. For a split second, it looked as though he was going to argue, but then the look vanished “I’m sorry. I know I was over the top in there.”

She let out a burst of laughter, her own tension untwisting. “Yeah, you totally were. Is it just their reaction you’re afraid of?”

“I’m not afraid of it.” His eyes focused on a point far away, then came back to hers. “Not exactly. I wasn’t planning to tell them the news while we’re taking photos. If they’re not happy about it, then do you really want to be snapping pictures of *that*?”

“Yeesh.” She grimaced. Fine. He did have half of a point. Rachel didn’t necessarily want to be the one capturing the moment when he told his family that he’d had a child he hadn’t known about, that the child was hers, and that the child was *in the room*. There had to be a better way.

“I missed you,” Jonas’s admission startled her.

“What?” she asked, sure she’d heard him wrong.

“I missed you after you were gone. My job can be stressful on a good day and we’d had such a rough year. You were totally unexpected and amazing and then you were gone and I had no

idea who you were or how to reach you. So I pretended it was no big deal and went back to work. But it was a big deal, and I never forgot you.”

Heat sprinted up to her cheeks. Red wasn't her best look. “I was only here for the party.”

It was one of Rachel's deep, secret fears—that he would never be interested in her, not that way, because they'd only spent a few hours together. She'd been trying not to have feelings for him, trying not to think about him. Surely, a man like Jonas Elkin would never give a one-night stand a second thought. But his words said differently.

“I remembered you for a lot longer than that.” His voice was low, genuine. He leaned toward her a little and put his hands in his pockets. She'd like to think it was to restrain himself from touching her. Not because she didn't want him to, because she did. More from the standpoint of a man trying to resist the attraction—to do the right thing. “I've been fixated on things at the resort. I'm used to being in control, and with you, I seem to be out of control.”

Rachel was used to being in control, too, but hearing it come from Jonas's mouth made it seem unbearably sexy. Three years later, and she'd make the same choice and give him control behind closed doors. Let him take her to the stars once again. Just not now. Not when there were people watching, and she had a job to do. She shoved down her desire and her irritation, which had become confusingly close to one another, placing her hands on the camera to help ground her.

“Okay. Here's the plan.” *Take me back to your place.* “If you want to be helpful, and you want to keep Scott a little farther from your family while I do the portraits of your grandmother and some of the others, then you can take him somewhere else and watch him.”

One blink, then two. “Really?”

“Yes. Let him explore while I work, and then I can get your portrait when we're done or another day. I'm sure we can get a similar light if you want them to match. How does that sound?”

“Candid portraits,” Jonas reminded her, eyes searching hers. It was like he wanted an excuse to keep talking to her. She knew him well enough to know he wouldn’t keep the others waiting for long, even if he wanted to.

She laughed. “You know that’s not really a thing, right? Everybody knows I’m taking the photos.”

“I just want to have a photo of her laughing,” he admitted. It squeezed at her heart. Oh, this family. This man. They were trying so hard to hold on to their grandmother.

“Got it. Hey, Scott,” she called out. Her son perked up, eyes delighted. “I’ve got a surprise for you. Jonas is going to take you exploring.”

The smile on her son’s face matched the one on Jonas exactly.

JONAS

Today was another first for Jonas. Babysitting.

His. Son.

Talk about weird and wonderful at the same time. He wished he had someone he could share this moment with instead of hiding.

Scott held his fingertips while they walked down the hall together, stopping to check out the thousands of small details that only a two-year-old would notice. He wanted to see the trim on the doorways. Touch the hinges. Pick at something invisible on the carpet. It took them several minutes to make it to the elevator, and once they were inside, Scott didn't want to get off. He just wanted to push the buttons. Jonas's one advantage was that he could scoop him up and make him laugh, and then the buttons were forgotten.

What were they going to do?

"Door," Scott pointed out as they left the elevator. "Nuffer door."

Doors fascinated him.

"Hi," Scott said, clear as day, catching Jonas's attention with a devilish grin. Scott giggled, and the sound made Jonas's heart swell. Rachel had done a wonderful job. He was obviously happy and smart, not to mention curious and active.

"Hi," Jonas repeated, earning him a leg hug.

They made their way to the lobby, where a fire burned and Christmas music drifted down from hidden speakers. Yesterday, Scott had wanted to play with the presents by the tree, but they were real gifts meant for the staff who hadn't come in for their next shift. The gift shop would be a much better place to take his son. He scooped Scott up just to be on the safe side.

"Mr. Elkin?" His front desk clerk's voice held a note of panic, and he turned to see what was wrong. "What can I do for you, Elsie?" She was one of their newer employees. He was excruciatingly aware of Scott on his hip as he made his way to the desk. "Problem with reservations?" he asked.

"Well, I—yeah. There is." Elsie clicked around on her computer, going through window after window. "It's one of the VIP reservations. They just called and wanted to change their booking dates to five days later in February. I said they could, but another VIP party has the Presidential Suite on one of those days," she said, her voice rising. "I don't know why it let me *do* that. Something in the system didn't work right, and now—" Poor woman was close to tears.

"It's all right." He watched over her shoulder. *Now* the calendar was blinking red, telling her that two reservations conflicted. "Tell you what. Get them on the phone for me."

She let out an audible sigh of relief and picked up her handset, dialing the number from the reservation record.

Jonas personally apologized to the guest for the confusion and offered them some extra perks while he explained that they'd have to stay in the Alpine Luxury suite. It was the same as the Presidential but with a corner view rather than a head-on view of the ski hills and was a one and a half-bath instead of two. Smoothed over in less than five minutes. He hung up the phone.

"All done. Change them to Alpine Luxury, and I'll let Gabe know that the system did something weird and ask him to check it out before he leaves."

"Thank you." A smile crept back over her face. He couldn't remember where she'd worked before, but it had obviously

been somewhere that made it harder to recover from mistakes like that. Jonas didn't want to run that kind of business.

He brought Scott out from behind the counter, and as he rounded the corner, Jonas spotted his grandmother. She was standing at the foot of the Christmas tree, the light gently reflected on her face. They'd have to cross in front of her to get to the gift shop.

Jonas took a deep breath and reminded himself not to hunch his shoulders. He wasn't hiding. As they approached, he noticed her eyes were closed as if deep in thought. She must have sensed his presence, her eyes opening, and going wide when she noticed Scott in his arms.

"Well, hello, you two," she said, her eyes flicking back and forth between his face and Scott's. She smiled, but her expression was one of confusion. "Is this where you snuck off to? Who is this sweet boy?"

What? Didn't she recognize him as the boy from the room upstairs? Clearly not, and in the next moment, he registered the dark circles under her eyes. His grandmother looked tired—more tired than she'd looked in recent weeks.

"His mother is staying at the hotel." A technical truth, though it felt wrong to say it. "She wanted to take some photos, so I offered to look after him for a while." He was hedging. The question was, why? It would have been the perfect opportunity to admit the truth. They were alone, but he couldn't bring himself to do it.

His grandmother laughed. "You'll do anything for the resort." She patted Scott's arm. "What's your name, honey?"

"Cott," he answered, looking up at Jonas for approval.

"Great job, Scott," he said, both correcting the name for his grandmother and sending a stamp of approval to his son. "His mother will be back soon."

"Lovely," his grandmother murmured absently. "I just came downstairs to see the tree for a few minutes. It's been a long few days with the holiday and everyone here. Not that I mind."

But your brothers do enjoy riling each other up. Perhaps it's a good thing you aren't up there too."

"Do you need to take a break? We could reschedule the rest of the photos for later, if you want to rest." Jonas looked around to see who wasn't busy and caught Helen's attention.

The older woman had worked at the resort for years and often helped out when his grandmother required additional assistance. "How can I help you, Mr. Elkin?"

Before he could answer, his grandmother spoke. "Oh, Helen, would you be a dear and walk with me back to the fireplace lounge, and then I would love a cup of tea and some of those cookies I know the chef is baking. I can smell them upstairs."

"Of course, Mrs. Elkin." Helen offered her arm to her.

"Thank you, dear."

"Are you sure you wouldn't rather postpone the photos?."

"No, dear," she told him and rose on tiptoe to kiss his cheek. "You're too good to me, Jonas."

I am not. "You've always been there for me. *Always.*" The conversation had turned heavy, but then Scott made a burbling sound.

They all laughed, lightening the mood all around. Leaning on Helen for support, his grandmother walked away, stopping to look at the decorations as she went.

When she was out of sight, Jonas let out a deep breath. "Okay, kiddo, I think we're done here. No more run-ins for now."

"Okay," Scott mimicked. "Okay. Okay." The kid had a new word, and Jonas couldn't wait for Rachel to hear him say it.

Chasing after Scott in a place this size was daunting. He sent a quick text message to Rachel to let her know he was taking Scott to his place and directions on how to find it, and then sent a message to the manager of the gift shop. Toys were definitely on the agenda and not something he'd have at his house.

By the time they arrived, Ruben was waiting with an armload of toys and a stuffed elk that was as big as Scott. Jonas went inside pointing out where to put everything in the living room. He dropped the diaper bag on the floor, setting Scott down on his feet.

“Okay, kiddo. It’s playtime.”

Scott crouched down among the toys, content with the plan. “Okay. Okay. Okay.”

Maybe novel words weren’t so great. A few of the toys were wrapped in crinkly cellophane, which attracted Scott’s attention. Score. “You see that? It’s called cellophane,” Jonas explained.

It had been awkward out in the lobby, without a doubt, but now? He felt a thousand times more awkward. Out of his depth. What was he supposed to *do* with a two-year-old? Jonas settled in on the carpet next to the things from the gift shop to watch his son play.

An odd feeling settled in his chest, a sense of satisfaction. Scott seemed content, especially after Jonas discovered a cookie sealed in a plastic bag in the side pouch of the diaper bag. His son ate it contentedly, leaving half of it in the form of crumbs on the carpet. Once finished, he started running around the room in circles.

Scott stopped running around the room and burst into tears, throwing his upper body onto the sofa. Instinct drove Jonas to pick him up, and Scott dropped his head onto Jonas’s shoulder, his hand up by his face. Jonas decided he liked having him around. It was the unpredictability that made him nervous.

Scott fidgeted a little, then relaxed, his little body melting into Jonas’s chest. One thing he hadn’t thought of was a crib, and by the looks of things, he needed one. And he didn’t want to call over to the lodge and have one delivered, afraid it might wake Scott when they arrived to set it up.

Jonas stood by the window, swaying back and forth while Scott’s breathing evened out and got deeper, his hand dropping away from his face. Jonas briefly wished he’d thought to

change out of his shirt and tie, but he hadn't expected him to fall asleep so readily.

His arms started to go numb. Jonas eased himself toward the sofa, still swaying. Was Scott deeply asleep enough to stay sleeping if he laid him on the sofa? He had no way of knowing what to expect with his zero experience with children. The one thing he did know was that his son was safe in his arms and that it would have to do for now—numb arms or not.

Scott stayed sleeping as he lowered himself onto the sofa, shifting his body a little to readjust to Jonas's new position.

Sitting there, Jonas started to drift off. He was tired. Had been for weeks. Months. Maybe years. It was all catching up to him now. Jonas put his legs up on the sofa, trying to stretch out a bit without waking his son. He couldn't keep his eyes open.

It was peaceful here, with the faint sound of air moving through his heater and the rest of the resort blocked out by the walls. In his own home, nobody was calling him for help with reservations. No fires to put out. There might be work that needed doing in his office, but it would have to wait because he was busy holding a sleeping toddler. Surely that was the most important job he could do right now.

Just a few minutes, he'd rest his eyes. Then he'd wait for Scott to wake or Rachel to show up. The sunlight on his face told him it was late afternoon. Perhaps if Rachel finished the day, they could take another tour of the property, and she could get more photos. It sounded nice. Just the three of them.

He pictured her laughing, stretching out on the bed beneath him, whispering something in his ear that didn't quite make sense. The image was from the past, and Jonas let himself drift into it. It was a warm and welcome memory as he drifted off to sleep, unable to fight the urge to give in any longer.

RACHEL

The candid photoshoot earlier today had slipped in and out of a posed session, with Rachel backing away as much as she could to capture the small moments between the family members. Portraits of Elin seemed especially important to everyone and she understood why.

After Elin had taken a break, they'd spent the next two hours visiting her favorite parts of the resort, and Rachel let her *be* in the places she loved. They would be priceless photos. She knew it already. Plus, anything she didn't get today, she'd be able to get at the more formal session tomorrow. Traditional portraits—one of Rachel's favorites.

The Elkin family had gradually gotten used to Rachel's quiet presence at the edge of the room and settled in to enjoy each other's company. She thanked her lucky stars that she'd invested early in her career in good camera lenses. It *also* helped that Elk Lodge was full of natural light, and the blue skies provided the rest.

Eventually, Elin had excused herself to rest, and they'd called it quits for the day. After putting away her equipment, she couldn't resist scrolling through the photos. Glancing at her watch, she realized another hour had slipped away, and so had the day. There were still landscape shots that needed to be taken. Jonas hadn't returned or called, and Rachel took it as a good sign.

She tamped down the temptation to go find him, knowing if he needed her, he'd find her. It gave her a sense of fulfillment to

think of Jonas and Scott spending time together. She headed outside, taking advantage of her freedom.

Not surprisingly, she missed having Scott with her, watching and listening to him play in the snow. She made her way through the woods, and up one of the trails next to the ski hills. At the top, she turned back to take a photo of the lodge, lovely in the afternoon light, making it look like something from a vacation brochure. She hoped her photos would end up on their advertising and possibly even souvenir postcards, even if people wouldn't pay much attention to the photographer's name.

Don't fall in love with the place. It's just a job. She snapped a few more frames. Don't fall in love with him, either.

It was one thing to let Jonas develop a relationship with Scott. It was another to let her feelings get away from her and start expecting life to suddenly go the happily-ever-after route. The holidays were always an emotional time. They reminded her of Christmases with her family before her parents arguing bled into what was supposed to be their happier moments.

Given the circumstances, it wouldn't do them any good to get into an entanglement, especially now, when Jonas's family was going through their own intense time.

Except Rachel wanted to be near him.

She took a deep breath and then let it out, before putting her lens cap back in place. Their relationship needed to remain professional. It was the only way.

She followed the instructions Jonas had texted earlier and made her way to his place. The brothers' private residences looked like something out of a magazine layout. With snow on the peaked roof and large windows that she was sure brought in incredible natural light and provided amazing views of the mountainside.

Rachel patted her camera at her side and as she climbed the steps, her heart lightened. An oversized wreath graced the front door, and Rachel paused to take in the pine scent. Time to get her son, go back to the lodge, and grab some dinner.

Then the evening would be hers to look through the photos more closely and get the photo album planned and assembled. She didn't often get orders that included full albums like this one, and she loved creating physical memories that families could cherish.

A peal of laughter met her at the door. Rachel stopped, her hand poised to knock as she listened.

"Giddy up," she heard Jonas call out. "Want to keep riding?"

Scott laughed again, and it lit her up from the inside out. She tried the door and found it unlocked. With a burst of courage, she entered in search of the fun and laughter just as they disappeared around the corner.

Jonas's modern bachelor living room had been transformed. Toys were scattered from one end to the other, and the two of them were playing together on the cream-colored rug. Was that a stuffed *elk*? It was big enough for Scott to ride, and Jonas was at the helm, supplying the power as he pulled him around. Complete with sound effects.

A pang shot through her like an arrow, so strong she put a hand over her heart. This wasn't Jonas, the perfect businessman she'd met years before and met again when they first arrived at the resort. There was no buttoned shirt, no crisp slacks. He wore jeans and a heather gray t-shirt, both of which set off his mussed hair, and he was crawling on the floor, playing with Scott.

Their son.

It took him a minute to notice her, and when he did, his face changed—brightened. "Hey," he said. "How did it go today?"

"It was perfect." Rachel had the strangest feeling of *déjà vu*, only they had never been together like this. It felt shockingly natural. Like a family. "I got so many impressive shots. The album should turn out really well."

Rachel searched for the perfect, casual way to ask Jonas to help pack up Scott's things so they could head out. There was no uncomplicated way to end the scene she'd walked into.

“One more time?” Jonas grinned down at Scott. Her son reached up to touch Jonas’s face, then whipped around and grabbed the neck of the elk. Jonas swept them both up in his arms and trotted the pair around the rug, Scott squealing the whole time. When they’d completed the round, Jonas looked up at her, a laugh on his lips. “Stay for dinner?”



Jonas

Jonas wanted to spend more time with his son. He wanted it despite feeling exhausted. Even the luxury of an afternoon nap hadn’t washed away his weariness. But still, he wanted his son to stay. And he wanted Rachel right there with them. It seemed like the natural progression of their day together. It would give him a chance to start over with her after they’d gotten off on the wrong foot earlier that morning.

She hesitated, and Jonas could practically see the thoughts whirling in her head. Rachel obviously had a plan that didn’t involve dinner with him, but she was already inside, looking like she belonged.

“Please,” he added. “I’d love it if you would stay.”

It felt odd to be so vulnerable. Admitting that he wanted her to stay—that wasn’t something he was in the habit of doing. Maybe he should have been, earlier on. Or made an effort to find her after their night together. Well, he could only start with the present. Jonas stood and picked Scott up in his arms. If Rachel didn’t want to join him for dinner, he wouldn’t press the issue, but if she did...

“I’d like that too.” Her shoulders relaxed, and a pleasant pink flush worked over her cheeks. Rachel laid her camera on the table nearby, shrugged out of her jacket and removed her boots, carrying them to the foyer. She returned seconds later looking right at home. “What are we having?”

“Well...” He went through his mental list of what he had in the fridge. He’d been spending a lot of extra time at the lodge for the holidays, so it wasn’t much, but there was enough to make

a decent meal. “I’ve got pasta sauce and ground beef for meatballs. Does Scott like spaghetti?”

“He *does*.” Rachel smiled, huge and genuine. “You have to see him covered in spaghetti. It’s priceless.”

He laughed. “Sounds like a winner.”

“Come here, snuggle bug.” Rachel reached for Scott, and he went to her happily, cuddling down on her shoulder. The three of them headed for the kitchen.

For the first time in a long time, Jonas felt relaxed. He knew his way around the kitchen, unlike the unfamiliar territory of fatherhood. He was good at cooking, too. Rachel and Scott looked over his shoulder as he rolled out the meatballs and coated them in breading, then stuck a tray’s worth in the oven while the noodles boiled.

“Who knew?” Rachel said, leaning in to place a kiss on Scott’s cheek.

“Who knew what?”

“Who knew that men like you could cook?”

Jonas huffed a laugh. “I admit to being spoiled. Our resort chef is amazing. But I like to go through the motions, as sometimes, it’s the only release I get from lodge business.”

“I know about that.” She gestured toward her camera. “There are times when I’m out there, and the rest of the world falls away.” Rachel met his eyes, and he saw a determination there that spoke to something at the core of him. She was tougher now than she had been when they first met.

Every part of him was in tune with Rachel, and with a curl of shock at the back of his neck, he registered how deeply attracted he was to her. It felt like fire. Like lightning. This latest version of Rachel—this independent, mature, tough Rachel—was intoxicating.

He shook his head, reminding himself that he was stirring the spaghetti.

“What was that?” Rachel swayed back and forth, Scott on her hip. “Did something cross your mind?”

“*You* crossed my mind,” he admitted. “Just in a general way.”

She laughed, flicking her eyes to the ceiling.

Jonas focused on the food, trying to push away his desirous thoughts. He couldn't ask her to move in with him. And he couldn't suggest that they explore this new configuration of their relationship. They didn't really have a relationship, for one thing, and for another, she was still on the defensive. And a few plates of spaghetti weren't going to get them past that. He had to take it slow. Like cooking. Food preparation couldn't be rushed. Neither could trust between two people.

The timer rang for the meatballs, and he grabbed an oven mitt, pulling them out. Jonas tipped them into a pot of sauce and stirred.

Rachel leaned in and took a deep breath. “It smells so good. Where did you learn to make meatballs like this? The chef?”

“Well, *a* chef. Just not ours. Don't suppose you've heard of Chef Chris?”

Rachel's eyebrows shot up. “Who hasn't. He's the hottest chef on TV right now. Don't tell me you binge-watch his shows?”

Jonas laughed at that. “Oh he'd love it if I ever told him that. No, he used to come here with his family and we all became friends. That friendship has continued through the years. His cousins are also in the hotel business, so it's good to have someone else to talk to at times.”

“Wait. *The Dentons*?” Jonas nodded and she shook her head laughing. “Of course, you know them. That's great. I stayed at their Seattle location. We had a suite that overlooked Puget Sound. It was gorgeous.”

“I've been to that one too and I agree.”

“So these meatballs are one of his recipes?”

“Well...” Jonas paused and gave her what he hoped was a conspiratorial look. “It started out that way, but a couple times, I didn't have all the ingredients, so I just winged it and decided I liked my way better. We'll be dining on a modified version of his recipe and if you ask me, it's better than his.”

She tipped her head back and laughed.

Their eyes caught and held and he wanted to breathe her in. She looked beautiful standing there in his kitchen and he wanted to remember this moment forever.

“All right, Scott.” Rachel looked away, breaking the spell. “Let’s set the table for daddy.”

Daddy.

One word that managed to hook his heart, tugging him as close as he could get to the two of them. Jonas cleared his throat. “Plates are next to the fridge,” he said, trying to regain composure.

Rachel reached the cupboard as easily as if she’d lived there for months. Or years. “Silverware down below. And cups—”

“Found them,” Rachel sang out, holding one up.

She and Scott went back and forth to the table until there were three place settings, one nudged closer to Rachel’s so she could feed Scott from her lap. A highchair and a crib would be the next items on his shopping list. But for tonight, they could take turns helping Scott, so they could both eat. It would be their first meal together, just the three of them.

“Sauce is ready.” Jonas was firmly resolved to live in *this* moment instead of fantasizing about the future. Rachel had agreed to stay for dinner, giving him a few extra hours with his son and her. And for this moment, he’d make it enough.

RACHEL

The dinner lasted longer than she expected, and Rachel loved it.

Scott had eaten so much that he'd been covered in sauce, in his hair, and in his ears, and everywhere. She'd given him a bath in Jonas's huge tub and put him in PJs from the diaper bag. Not long after, he'd fallen asleep on the sofa. The two of them stood over his sleeping form, watching the rise and fall of his chest as he took even breaths.

"I hate to move him," Rachel said in a low voice. It was cold outside, and she didn't love the thought of waking him so soon after he'd fallen asleep.

"Don't, then," Jonas said. "Have a glass of wine with me."

"I shouldn't," she whispered.

"But you want to. Admit it." Jonas kept his voice low, mindful of Scott. "If it's a matter of getting back to the lodge, I'll drive you when you're ready."

"After wine?" She reached out and pushed him lightly on the shoulder with her fingertips.

"It's a stone's throw away, but I'll wait until it's safe. Come choose your preference."

"Okay, give me a second." She grabbed a couple of pillows and laid them on the floor just in case Scott rolled.

"Good idea." Jonas nodded and took her by the hand. He led her into a large pantry behind his kitchen, which had shelves

full of baking supplies and shelf-stable items and a big wine rack.

“Oooh, there’s a good red.” Rachel pointed, and just like that, Jonas took the bottle, opened it, and poured two glasses. Back in the living room, they each took a seat on either side of the sleeping toddler.

An awkward silence fell. “What do you think of the holidays?” she asked. It was the first thing that came to mind.

Jonas laughed and took a sip of wine. “What do you mean?”

“Do you like them?” She was full of spaghetti, deliciously relaxed, and ready for some not-so-serious conversation. There would be plenty of the serious kind between them. “Given how heavily decorated the resort is, your place is decidedly... spartan.”

Jonas looked around, as if noticing his place for the first time. “My grandparents were always intent on providing a magical experience for the guests here, especially during the holidays. Every holiday required thematic decorations, music, changes to the menu. It would get overwhelming, so I limited the decorations allowed in my office and residences, and well...” He waved at the room. “I might have gone a bit too far to the opposite extreme,” he finished, still chuckling. “What about you?”

“Me? I’m fifty-fifty. I like the traditions, but I don’t like the pressure. When my parents divorced, Christmas lost that magical appeal and it became all about one upping each other.”

“What about Scott?”

Rachel looked down at her son. “We had a tree last year. A small one. Not that he’d remember that and this year, I’d been so busy, I didn’t have time to set one up. Then you called about this job, and I didn’t see the point of setting up a tree in my apartment when we were going to be here.”

Her phone rang and vibrated from the depths of her purse. Rachel jumped up, wine sloshing against the rim of the glass. “Oh! Nobody calls me this late, so it’s probably—”

She rushed to the foyer table and grabbed her phone. Her mother's name flashed on the screen. Rachel's stomach sank as she answered the call. "Hello, Mother. Is everything okay?"

"Of course it is," her mother said in clipped tones. "Why aren't you here, Rachel? Christmas came and went, and you never bothered to show up."

Rachel blinked, one hand tight around her wine glass. "We weren't there last Christmas either, and you already know why."

A pause. "I don't see how that's relevant to this year's celebration."

"It's relevant, Mother. It's all relevant." Anger flared, bright and hot. When Rachel had announced her pregnancy, her mother had launched into a high-pressure campaign to convince her daughter to get married to a "suitable" candidate, or really anyone in the vicinity of "acceptable." The last thing her Senator mother wanted was for her daughter to have a baby out of wedlock. When Rachel refused, she'd been banned from the house. Nothing had changed since then.

Her mother sighed as if it were Rachel who was being pushy. "It's in your best interests to at least visit for a few days."

Rachel let out a bitter laugh. "I don't think it is."

"It *is*," her mother insisted. "It's time for you to get over our past disagreements and look to the future. I know of some nice young men who would overlook the baby issue, and you could enter a stable relationship." The criticism still cut, even though Rachel tried to steel herself against it. "You could have more children, in time. And you could have a more serious job than that photography studio of yours." Her mother paused, seeming to muse over something. She was more than likely thinking of her political campaigns, during which she ran on family values. Rachel being a stay-at-home mom would work well as a photo-op for that, too. She was surprised her mother hadn't thought of it before.

"Thanks for sharing your thoughts," Rachel said, struggling to keep her voice even. "But I'm perfectly happy with my

studio.”

“Don’t be naïve, Rachel. Photography isn’t enough to sustain a family, and how are you supposed to care for Scott on such an unpredictable schedule? You can’t juggle it all. Parts of your life will start to slip through the cracks.” She’d heard the lecture before.

“I’m not marrying somebody you’ve hand-picked just to be respectable, and so that I can come back into the family fold and stop being an embarrassment to your senatorial campaign.” It was an old argument, and Rachel was tired of it. Too tired. She pushed away all her arguments and hurt feelings and the old cycles she found herself trapped in so often. “Merry Christmas, Mother.”

She ended the call and tossed the phone back in her purse, her hand trembling on her wine glass.

“Are you okay?”

Rachel turned to find Jonas standing behind her. How long had he been so close? From the expression on his face, he’d heard the entire conversation.



Jonas

Rachel flushed red as she looked down into her glass to avoid eye contact, her shoulders slumped. Jonas’s heart raced at the sight of her this way—almost resigned. What had she meant about marrying someone respectable? She drew in a deep breath and gazed up at him, forcing a smile to her lips. “I’ll be okay.”

“Your mother seems to have some strong opinions.”

“Ha. You could say that.” She shook her head, glancing over at the sofa to check on Scott, but not before he’d noticed the hurt reflected in her eyes. “I don’t know why I let her upset me so much. She’s been saying the same things for years.”

“About getting married?” He frowned, gesturing for her to move back into the living room.

“About everything.” This time she sat on the loveseat, and Jonas used the opportunity to sit next to her. He relished the heat of her body so close to his. It would be infinitely better if she wasn’t upset, but then again, he wanted to comfort her—somehow.

“She didn’t like my major in college. She didn’t like the one guy I dated in high school. Everything has always been about her ambitions.”

It was easy, Jonas knew, to go along with what your family wanted. The thought of her marrying someone else made his stomach churn. Which was ridiculous. He didn’t have any claim on her. It was only that he’d lost her once already. Tension soaked into his skin. Jonas could lose her again before he even had a chance to try. That was reality.

Rachel stared straight ahead. He watched as tears gathered at the corners of her eyes. She took in a deep, shuddering breath, then blinked them away. “I can’t believe I let her get to me. I only answered because I thought there might be some kind of emergency,” she said, agonizing over the decision.

“And there wasn’t?”

“The emergency was that I’m not married yet.” She let her head fall against the back of the sofa. “She wanted me home for Christmas to meet men. And more of the same. The photography studio isn’t good enough. It’s not enough for Scott. And we both know what she means by that.”

“I don’t,” he admitted.

“She means that *I’m* not good enough for Scott.”

He put his fingertips on her chin and turned her face toward his. “You *are* good enough for Scott. You are such a good mom.” It took the breath out of him to say it, but it was true. “You’re amazing and strong and resilient, and I believe in you.”

Rachel searched his eyes as if she could find proof there. “That means a lot to me.” Her voice was thick with emotion.

“It’s just that I know how quickly people can go from saying they believe in you, to saying that they don’t think you can handle a situation. Until *they* want to make the decisions for you.” She closed her eyes, and when she opened them again, there was no sign of her tears.

“You’re astonishing,” he said, blown away by her self-control.

This earned him a slow smile. “I am?”

“Yes.” In a hundred different ways. He’d seen it before, but only a glimpse of it, and now regret drilled into him. How had he let her walk away from that hotel room? What an incredible oversight. “The both of you are.”

This swung their attention back to Scott, who slept peacefully on his belly on the sofa, a light blanket curling around his waist. He had one fist tucked up by his face, and his chest rose and fell in a gentle rhythm that calmed Jonas. He’d missed a lot of moments like this with Scott—just watching him be in the world. Two years’ worth.

“He is amazing,” Rachel agreed.

Something shimmered in the air between them. Was it all the lost time, or a glimpse of a potential future? Jonas felt blinded by it, overtaken, and he took a deep breath to clear his mind.

“More wine?”

Rachel glanced over to him at the offer, pressing her lips together in a hint of a smile. “I *want* more wine, but I think I might want something more,” she said, pink gracing her cheeks.

“Oh? What would that be?” He suddenly felt like a teen on his first date, and he didn’t want to screw this up.

She set her wine glass on the table and then reached for his, setting it down next to hers before turning to face him and placing her hand on his chest. “Is it bad that I’ve been thinking about kissing you again from the moment I realized you were you?”

Jonas took her hand, lifting it to his lips to kiss the tips of her fingers. “I’ve had the same thoughts, I—”

Before he could finish, Rachel was leaning into him and they were kissing. He groaned quietly, not wanting to wake Scott, and wrapped his arms around her, holding her tightly against his side. She parted her lips, and he deepened the kiss pulling a moan from her.

This was better than he remembered, and even though a part of him knew they'd have to stop, he didn't want it to end. Rachel pressed her palm against his chest, and he was sure she could feel how fast his heart was racing. He wanted her to straddle his lap, to ride him, and just as he was about to suggest it, there was a small noise coming from the other sofa making them both freeze.

Looking over at Scott, they could see he was fast asleep, but the mood had shifted. Rachel pressed her head against his shoulder, chuckling. "Maybe it's time we called it a night. The little guy needs to go back to my suite and his own bed."

Kissing the top of her head, he gave her a quick hug.

"I'll start the car."

RACHEL

Rachel looked up as Jonas entered the suite, the late-morning chill still clinging to his jacket as he drew near. She tried not to think about what they almost did last night. Except that it'd been on her mind. Constantly. What would have happened if they hadn't stopped? She pushed the thoughts away as Jonas chuckled.

"The print shop is getting tired of me," he joked, putting the bag down on the sofa.

Scott was sleeping in the bedroom, his daily nap a good opportunity for her to work on the album. "Hopefully, they won't have to deal with you too many more times. I'm leaving room at the back for the rest of the photos, and we can be smarter about choosing them before they get printed for the next round."

Jonas had already been by three times this morning for more photos they'd decided to add to the book. Elk Lodge *had* a printer, of course, but the photo paper wasn't archival quality. Once Rachel had pointed that out, Jonas had volunteered to go into town. He wasn't going to give his grandmother anything less than the best.

"What do you think?" She held up the spread she'd been working on. Rachel had tapped into her years on her high school's yearbook staff as she heard her instructor's advice for page layouts in her head. As part of the present Jonas was masterminding, she would provide them with a printed book after the holidays—two versions, one handmade and one

bound. The shipping times on the coffee table photo book were too long to have it here by New Year's. Part of her was glad for the chance to have one final interaction with Jonas and his family.

But right now, she didn't want to think about this project ending.

Jonas kicked off his boots and moved to stand beside her at the desk where she was working. His hand came down on her shoulder, gentle and strong, and it took everything she had not to lean into it and lean into him. It must be the holidays getting to her head. Everyone wanted closeness and warmth this time of year, so it was only natural. It had nothing to do with how ridiculously attractive he was, or the hard fall of his muscles beneath his gray sweater that brought out his blue eyes, or how good the man could kiss. She cleared her throat, thankful he couldn't hear what she was thinking.

"It looks great," he commented, after a long look at the pages. "She's going to love it."

It seemed like Jonas wasn't saying everything he wanted to say. He went over to the sofa and sank down into it, and Rachel swiveled to face him. "What's on your mind?"

"There's been a change of plans for the photos tonight," he said lightly, but the way he watched her left her thinking it wasn't such an easy decision. "I thought we'd have the portraits taken at dinner instead of in the lounge."

"At dinner?" Her nerves fired up. Rachel had taken many pictures at formal meals before. So why the prickling sensation at the back of her neck? "I'm happy to take the photos wherever you want."

Jonas pushed a hand through his hair. "I'd actually like you to come to dinner with the family."

Oh. "How will I take photos if I'm eating?" This wasn't at all what she expected.

"We can take them beforehand, or after. Probably before, so everyone doesn't feel overfull while we're arranging ourselves for portraits." A smile flashed across his face, so intensely

beautiful that Rachel's knees went weak even though she was sitting. She had to get a grip. They hadn't spoken about the kiss and he'd been nothing but a gentleman all morning. She didn't want to spoil their time together if it turned out that he regretted it.

"Scott might have a tough time sitting through dinner," she pointed out. "And I thought you didn't want them to see much of him?"

"I thought he could stay with Lisa. There's no need to make a big announcement about Scott or us just yet. Don't you think?"

Rachel swallowed hard, emotion coming to grip her throat. But *which* emotion? Part of her was reassured—there wouldn't be any awkward discussions while she was working. And part of her was disappointed. The way things had gone last night had been wonderful. She loved spending time with him in his house. After she'd put Scott in his crib and crawled into bed, she'd been filled with a warmth she hadn't felt in a long time.

"We could do that," she agreed.

"You don't seem convinced." Jonas's eyes swept over hers. "If this plan doesn't work for you, then tell me, I'll change it."

That made her breath catch. Jonas was a client, but obviously, he was more than that—and obviously, it was complicated. Way more complicated. "There's nothing you need to change," she insisted. "Whatever works best for your family is what we'll do."

"You're my family, too, in a way."

Rachel's heart stopped, then stuttered to a start again. Of all the things she'd expected when she signed on for a rush holiday job like this, an intense conversation of this nature hadn't been one of them.

Jonas looked away. "Maybe that was going too far. What I meant is that I want what's comfortable for you, too. And Scott. We're still working on this project together and it won't be finished for a few days, right?" He was trying to back out of the unexpected admission.

“That’s right. We still haven’t taken all the photos. This is supposed to go through New Year’s. You wanted those too if I remember correctly.”

“Yes,” he said firmly. “I want all of them.”

“Okay,” she said, trying to regain some equilibrium. It was as if he were saying one thing and thinking another. “Okay. Photos at dinner tonight. More photos tomorrow, and I’ll keep working on the book until New Year’s.” Those words were tougher than others. “You’ll have the whole holiday season captured and in the album by the time I leave.”

“Perfect,” Jonas said.

“Perfect,” she echoed. *And we won’t mention that kiss again,* but she didn’t voice that out loud.

“Dadadada,” Scott called out from the bedroom, letting the grown-ups know he was awake.

“Oh,” Jonas started upright, joy bright in his eyes. “I know he’s not calling me, but it sure sounds like it.”

“Maybe he is,” she said, smiling. “Go and get him.” She waved Jonas off and turned back to the photos she was working on, her heart beating fast. If she wanted Jonas to make some announcement about Scott, would he do it? That was what it sounded like. But the last thing she wanted was to put fractures in the middle of what could be their last family holiday together.

She closed her eyes against the sunlight streaming through the windows, and took another deep breath, then another. Nothing had to be decided right now. They still had time.

“Mama,” Scott said when they came into the room.

Rachel opened her eyes. Jonas stood there, cradling his son in his arms. Scott had his fists in Jonas’s shirt and was playing with his collar, looking as relaxed as she’d ever seen him.

Comfortable. Could their lives really go on without him after all was said and done? Rachel wasn’t so sure.

“Mama,” he said again, and father and son grinned at her, looking so much alike that it took her breath away.

“Come here, buddy.” She held out her arms to her son, and Jonas bent down, putting Scott carefully on the floor and helping him keep his balance. Within seconds, her son started across the carpet toward her. Rachel swept him up in her arms for a hug. He still had his baby sweetness about him, his body warm from the nap, and after a moment, he popped his head up from her shoulder and put his hands on her face.

“Lub you,” he said. It wasn’t the first time Scott had said the words to her, but it had been a while, and it delighted her down to the core.

“I love you too,” Rachel said, catching Jonas’s eyes over Scott’s head.

A thrum went through her, a shimmering, lifted feeling. Oh, no. She couldn’t be falling for him now. Not again. Three years ago, she’d tumbled into bed with him, intoxicated by the sight, scent, and sound of his very essence. And after one kiss, brief at best, she was doing it again.

Jonas crossed the room and stood in front of the window, sunlight spilling down on his carved features. “What do you say, Rachel? Should we go for a walk?” Her first instinct was to refuse. She still had a job to do and she was starting to worry about her growing feelings for Jonas.

“Yep, yep, yep,” Scott said, clapping his hands as he squirmed down from her lap and ran to his father.

Jonas caught the little boy’s hand in his. “Or Scott and I could go for a walk,” he added, “if you wanted more time by yourself, that is.”

“No.” She stood up and grabbed her camera. “The lighting is beautiful outside. Let’s go. I’ll get some shots and combine a little fun with work.”

The three of them bundled up and went out into the snow. Scott’s feet sank into it and he laughed, trying to run ahead and falling. Jonas followed closely, picking him up whenever he needed a lift, and holding his son’s hand as they went down a trail at the side of the ski hill.

The way the sunlight filtered through the trees and landed on the pair called out to Rachel. She lifted the camera to her face and took photo after photo of Jonas and Scott. She knew by instinct they would turn out gorgeous, and that they would be priceless memories of things that could have been. Her throat tightened at the thought that she might not have another chance to get pictures of them together so easily.

It never occurred to her before, not really. All throughout her pregnancy, she had assumed there was no way to get in touch with her baby's father. It had been upsetting and sad, sure, but she'd put those feelings away when Scott was born. With a newborn, there was no time to mope around thinking about the family they didn't have. Only long nights and long days that were still filled with moments of such deep joy. And wasn't joy better when it was shared?

Jonas picked Scott up, holding him up in the sun. It was a classic parent-child pose—she used it all the time at family shoots—and she knew that Jonas would treasure this. Rachel could already see it in a frame on the mantel in his living room.

What else, though? What about the three of them? She shook her head, clearing the thoughts away. One spaghetti dinner and an unforgettable kiss wasn't a pact to remain together.

Jonas looked back at her. "What about you?"

"What about me?" she asked.

"Don't you want some photos?" He put Scott on his hip like he'd done it a hundred times, completely at ease. "Come on. Be in the pictures."

Rachel held the camera close to her chest. "I don't know about that."

Jonas grinned at her from underneath the winter hat he wore—a blue and white cabled pattern with a puff on the top. "This might surprise you, but I know my way around a camera enough to take some photos. Are the settings where you want them?"

"Yes."

Scott leaned toward her. Rachel handed Jonas the camera and took her son in her arms. She moved off, her heart beating hard in her throat. It was strange, hearing the shutter of her own camera and not being behind it. Rachel didn't want to think about it, preferring to be in the moment. To enjoy the fall of light on her son's hair and the laughter in his blue eyes. She rubbed her nose against his, the sound of the shutter clicking barely registering. It would be an incredible picture and one she'd treasure.

She put Scott back on his feet and held his mitten-covered hands in hers, turning them around to face Jonas. He had the camera up to his face, but it didn't hide Jonas's wide smile.

““The two of you look great,” he called out. “Absolutely beautiful.”

JONAS

Jonas had gone to bed feeling positive about the evening. The dinner went well, with her taking formal portraits of the family together. They'd been a good team. He'd taken nice photos of her with Scott, and she hadn't seemed uncomfortable while taking the family portraits. The only problem had been that he'd missed Scott. Jonas half-regretted not inviting him to the dinner, but he was positive it was for the best. With everyone there, including his brothers' girlfriends and Lindsey, his grandmother had been exhausted by the time they'd called it a night.

He'd been the last to leave and Jonas had half-hoped that Rachel had waited for him, but she was already gone. So rather than go to her suite and risk disturbing them, he headed home. Their kiss the other night still weighed heavily on him, especially since they hadn't talked about it. Even though Rachel had been the one to initiate it, he worried that he'd gone too far or maybe not far enough. He couldn't stand not knowing.

Today was a new day and another photoshoot. One that started with a holiday lunch for no other reason than it was winter, and they were all living in limbo between Christmas and New Year's. Nobody had plans, and everyone was on board with the lunch he suggested. He'd also let it slip that the photographer and her son would be invited just to pave the way. Rachel could take more photos, and he felt like he needed to make up for not inviting Scott to dinner.

Jonas knocked lightly before entering Rachel's suite fifteen minutes before they were due at his grandmother's apartment.

"Hi," she said, looking flustered and beautiful as she patted at her hair, which was in an elegant knot at the back of her neck. "Are you sure about this? Come in a minute. I'm almost ready."

He stepped farther inside, taking in the scene—the photo album neatly perched on the desk, and Scott playing with a set of blocks in the center of the rug in the living area. The door swung shut behind them. "Am I sure about what?"

"Having us at lunch. Scott stayed with Lisa last night, and it worked out well. What changed?"

Jonas took a deep breath. "What changed is that I think you should both be there. You've been taking photos for days now, and you'll be taking them through the New Year, and there's no use pretending that you don't have Scott with you."

Rachel narrowed her eyes, searching his. "They're going to ask questions."

"Nobody's going to ask questions," he insisted, wanting so much to take her in his arms that it hurt. "They already know he's here. The formal portraits are done. Do you have other plans to eat?"

"No," she admitted, smiling a little. "I just want to be *sure*—"

"I'm sure." He caught her hand in his and tugged her closer before pulling her into a hug. He could feel her tense shoulders relax slightly before she stepped back.

Rachel's gaze snapped up to his, her cheeks flushing.

A beat passed.

Then she stepped back close to him, her lips lightly brushing his. "Okay," she said, before whirling around. "Scott, look who's here!"

He twisted around from his blocks, saw Jonas, and came running so quickly he stumbled over a stray toy and tumbled onto the carpet. Scott popped right back up, a grin in place.

“Hi, kiddo,” Jonas said.

“Hi. Hi.” Scott was a bundle of energy, jumping into his arms with such force, it surprised Jonas.

“Want to go have some lunch?” Jonas loved watching the different faces his son made, some serious and some comical, but they all made him laugh.

“Yep.” Scott pointed to the door.

Rachel stepped to his side, patting her son warmly on the elbow. “Let’s go, buddy.”

“Yay!” Scott squealed but stayed put in Jonas’s arms, something that made his heart swell with love.

Fifteen minutes later, they stepped inside his grandmother’s apartment, which was teeming with activity. The rest of the family were already gathered around the big table in the dining room. The tension went out of Jonas’s shoulders. Oddly, he liked these kinds of meals, the ones that happened in the space between planned events. There was something more relaxing about them. Not so much pressure. And as much as his brothers frustrated him at times, he really did miss having them around and hoped they’d both agree to stay.

He introduced Scott to the group, and then the three of them sat at one end of the table near Tana and Lindsey. Tana immediately struck up a conversation with Rachel, hoping she’d get some action shots of Lindsey on the hills.

“I could try.” Rachel laughed. “I haven’t done much sports photography, but if we get a chance, I’ll take some photos. I’m sure we can get a few decent ones.”

The conversation flowed smoothly through the lunch. His brothers reminisced about Christmases past. Gabe told a story about the year he got his first game system and stayed up all night playing it, only to feel so sick from lack of sleep the next morning that he didn’t play again for two weeks. Chase talked about sneaking out early to ski before it was light and falling over a divot in the snow.

Through it all, Jonas caught a few thoughtful looks from his brothers, and his grandmother propped her chin on her hand,

watching Scott with interest as he ate.

Rachel held Scott on her lap and listened, a soft smile on her face, not seeming to notice any of the interest she was garnering.

“What do you normally do for Christmas when you’re not on last-minute jobs?” he asked her in a low voice while the others chattered on about favorite gifts and Christmastime treats.

“Oh.” Rachel snuggled Scott in close. “We keep it pretty low-key. This year Scott opened a gift early and then we headed here.”

“Really?”

“Yeah,” she said lightly. “I don’t visit my parents at Christmas anymore, and the friend group was celebrating on the evening of Christmas, so we missed it. But we’ll go next year.”

Scott picked up a crouton from his plate and chewed it.

“No, that’s not good enough.”

She whipped her head around, eyebrows raised. “What’s not good enough?”

“You need a real Christmas.” Jonas had never been surer of anything in his life.

“This coming from the guy who has no decorations in his house?” He could tell she was teasing but he didn’t have a chance to respond.

“I hate to cut this short,” his grandmother said, regret lacing her voice. “But I’m tired. It’s been a busy few days and I need to rest.”

They all got up in a chorus of reassurances. Rachel thanked everyone for the meal and the company. She headed for the door with graceful speed, but Jonas caught her by the elbow.

“Meet me at my place in two hours?”

A curious light came to her eyes, and she glanced behind him to where the rest of his family was beginning to filter out. “All right,” she said. “See you then.”

It was the busiest two hours of his life. Starting with a quick inventory of any unused holiday decorations that were easily accessible, and then a quick meeting with some of his staff to coordinate the details for the crazy idea he wanted to put into action. He rushed back to his house to prepare things on his end.

Jonas barely made it. Rachel knocked just as he put the star on the top of the tree he'd found in storage.

"Come in," he hollered. "It's unlocked."

Rachel came in on a stiff breeze, Scott in her arms, his cheeks pink from the cold. "I'm dying to know. What did you—*oh*."

She'd come into the living room, and all the decorations he'd set out reflected back to him in her eyes. The twinkling lights and shimmering ornaments on the tree. The little pile of gifts underneath. The soft Christmas music playing from his sound system.

"It's a few days late." He held out a hand to her, ushering her farther into the room. "But I hope this will do."

"Jonas," she said in hushed tones. "You didn't have to do this. Our Christmas was completely fine. It was—"

"Down," Scott demanded. "Down!" He struggled out of Rachel's arms and went to the tree, his little face shining with awe. He cupped one of the lights on the branches in both hands, then crouched down to look at the wrapped gifts. Scott reached out with one hand to push at the paper, then spun to look questioningly at Jonas.

"Go ahead, kiddo." He dropped to the carpet next to Scott, and Rachel followed. The three of them were sitting in the glow of the tree while Scott tore into the gift that Jonas handed him. He ripped the paper away piece by piece, then hugged the cardboard box to his chest.

"Can I help you open that up?" Jonas asked, laughing, but Scott wouldn't let him have it. "It's a ball," he told Rachel. "I have something for you, too."

"Jonas, you really don't—"

He reached across Scott and pulled a package from underneath the tree. “Open it.”

She bit her lip and ripped open the paper, revealing a cozy sweater with an elk across the front. Rachel threw her head back and laughed, gorgeous in the twinkling light. “I’m putting this on right now. Thank you.” Her eyes met his with incredible warmth, and then she was pulling it on, tugging it down over her shirt.

“Give me a sec.” Jonas stood up and reached for the sweater he left on the chair and quickly pulled it on before he changed his mind. Turning back around, the look of absolute delight on her face made his day. “We need a picture,” Jonas announced.

She pulled Scott into her lap and grinned, and he turned to sit next to them. He knew in that instant that he would always remember the sound of Rachel’s laughter as he took the photo.

“Aww, it’s good,” she said, leaning close as they looked at the photo on his phone. “We look happy.”

Nobody was happier than Scott, who marveled at the two other gifts. The paper held a certain fascination for him—probably the sound of it ripping—and he demolished the gifts down to their wrapping. One was a teddy bear that sang when you pushed its foot, and it was still in its cardboard packaging.

Scott wouldn’t let Jonas have it long enough to cut it free of the plastic ties. Instead, he tucked it under his arm and carried it around, cardboard and all, while he ran in circles around the living room. Every second or third pass, he stopped again by the tree to lean in and see the lights.

Joy.

It was pure joy, and Jonas leaned back on his hands, marveling at the sight. Every heartbeat pulled him closer until he felt overwhelmed with emotion. The lightness in his chest—it had to be love. There was no other explanation. It was as piercing and as true as anything he’d ever felt.

He took Rachel’s hand and brushed his lips across her knuckles. “Thank you.” He looked into her eyes as he said it. It was as if all the electricity in the universe had centered

between the two of them. “Thank you so much for coming over.”

“I—” She blinked, cheeks flushing. “You’re welcome.” She squeezed his hand. “I didn’t know you felt so strongly about Christmas considering you didn’t decorate.”

“I feel strongly about *you*,” he said. “About both of you having a good Christmas.”

“This is lovely,” she whispered, then cleared her throat.

He couldn’t let them leave. Or he couldn’t let them leave without at least offering them space in his home. They belonged here. “Please stay the night,” he asked, losing all the cool that usually accompanied him to his job and through his life.

“Where would Scott sleep?” Her teeth gnawed at her lower lip. “I don’t know if there’s a safe space for him here, and I don’t want you to have to rearrange your entire life just to fit us in.”

“My entire life.” He laughed. “I had a crib brought over from the lodge. It’s already in my spare bedroom.”

Scott stopped by the tree and rubbed at his eyes, a good indication they needed to fix dinner. It wouldn’t be long before he’d be ready for bed. Rachel rubbed his back in small circles, then gathered him in. “Okay.”

“Okay?” At her nod, he leaned down to kiss the top of Scott’s head and squeezed her hand. “Dinner is already prepped, I just need to heat it in the oven.”

“Oh? Is this another Chef Chris specialty?”

Jonas laughed. “It is, but I didn’t put it together, I asked the chef to take care of it so we know it’ll taste great.”

After dinner, Scott was more than ready for bed. “Time to lie down,” Rachel said softly as she carried him to the bedroom.

Jonas hung back, watching as she pulled his PJs from the diaper bag, changed him, and then helped him brush his teeth. He dropped a kiss on Scott’s forehead, letting Rachel lay him down in the crib. When she started to sing him a lullaby, Jonas stepped down the hall and took a seat at the edge of his bed.

A few minutes later, Rachel appeared in the doorway, looking as luscious as he'd ever seen her, a fire in her eyes. She came in confidently, pushing his knees apart to stand in the space between his legs. "Thank you for all the gifts," she said, heat in her voice. "But Jonas?"

His breath stopped. "Yeah?"

"There's something else I want to unwrap."

He put his hands on her waist. "What is it?"

"You."

RACHEL

The fact was, Rachel wanted him.

She'd wanted him from the moment she first saw him three years ago, she wanted him the other night when she kissed him, and she definitely wanted him now. This man had created a late Christmas for her just because she hadn't had time to do it herself.

Jonas's hands tightened on her waist as she leaned down, letting her fingers graze across his shoulders as she kissed him. He tasted good. Like mint and hope and something slightly forbidden. Should she have agreed to spend the night? Maybe not, but her desire was too powerful to be ignored.

Jonas groaned into her mouth. "You have no idea how much I've wanted to do this," he said against her lips.

"I have some idea," she answered.

He pulled her close then, and she was lost. Lost in the stubble at his chin and the strength of his muscles and the way his clothes fit against his skin so effortlessly. She was jealous of those clothes. The next time they came up for air, she tugged his sweater off, then his shirt.

She ran her fingertips down his abs, a memory surfacing of another time she'd done this. "Wow," she breathed. "Wow."

Jonas looked down at her fingertips against his skin. "We're not even," he said, moving in to pull Rachel onto the bed as he started to strip off her clothes hungrily. Jonas leaned down and

kissed her collarbone, then the hollow of her neck, then the curves of her breasts.

It was only sex, she thought hazily. Only sex and nothing else. The huge feelings that rolled through her like thunder were momentary impulses. No, that was a lie. She knew it was a lie more with every touch of his hands against her skin. Every roll of his fingers across her nipples. The heat of his breath on the side of her neck made her arch off the bed, wanting more. She'd never stopped thinking about Jonas. Or dreaming about him. Of what this moment would be like.

That made him dangerous.

He was a beautiful threat to her independence. What if he turned out to be controlling, like her mother or a jerk like her ex?

It was hard to focus on any of that as Jonas tugged her panties down to her feet and did away with them. He kissed up the inside of her leg, lingering at the side of her knee before he worked his way up her thighs. She was panting with want by the time he took his lips away, inches from her core.

“Why,” she panted.

“Because I want to kiss you.” Jonas closed his mouth over hers, drinking her in, exploring her with his tongue, devouring her. Then he left her lips and worked his way back down the front of her until his lips met the most sensitive part of her.

Fireworks—it was like fireworks. Gentle, dirty fireworks. His tongue was a symphony. His tongue was a revelation.

It had been so long since she'd felt him like this, but it came back to her like it was yesterday. How had she ever been able to live without this? Without him?

He swirled his tongue over her, repeatedly, then moved toward deep licks at her opening that drove her wild. Just when she thought she'd scream, he moved his mouth upward and applied an exquisite pressure that had her coming against his lips.

Jonas hummed his approval as she came, the feeling setting each nerve off with light and fire. “I missed that,” he said,

pulling back. He gave her folds one last kiss. “I want more of you.”

“You’ve already had more,” she reminded him, her hands grasping at the covers. The aftershocks of her first orgasm still trembled through her, smaller echoes of the larger release. “Please do it again.”

“I won’t make you ask twice.” His eyes darkened with need, and then Jonas pushed himself off her. She felt the loss of him painfully—come back, she wanted to shout, come back—but he sensed that, too. He moved to his bedside table, taking out a foil packet, and when he returned to the bed, Rachel scrambled up to give him more room. He paused at the foot of the bed and undid his belt, pushing his jeans down to the floor and stepping out of his boxers.

Naked, he was something else entirely. Clothed, Jonas was handsome—hot, even. Naked, he was a masterpiece. Strong shoulders narrowed to a nipped-in waist that featured a six-pack of muscles. He must spend real time working out, she thought wildly. Jonas rolled the condom on and climbed between her legs, bending to lick the side of her neck. It was so primal and possessive that she tilted her hips up for him, wrapping her legs around his waist.

Good. This was good. All her conflicted emotions fell away, and a kind of electric peace came over her. A laugh bubbled up—why did it feel so intense, yet so right? *More.* She wanted more. Nothing could be better than the way they fit together.

His mouth met hers at the same time he positioned his hips to meet her, the head of his cock making contact, and she bit at his bottom lip while he entered her. *Yes.* The size of him, the fit of him, it was a challenge—almost. But she was so ready and waiting that her hips rocked up to meet him, taking him all in.

Jonas let out a hiss near her ear and went still for an agonizing moment before he moved again, grinding into her with strokes that lit up every nerve ending. That managed to touch every part of her she wanted, as they moved together easily—as if they needed each other.

She *did* need him. She needed every ounce of pressure against her clit and the slow slide of each stroke inside her. He held her tightly, kissing her senseless.

Rachel came again, contracting around him in a burst of heat. Oh, it felt so good to be invaded by him, to be taken by him. She'd waited so long for this, dreaming of it at night. But this was no dream as his body moved against hers, the low groans of pleasure that escaped his lips enthralling her.

Jonas pulled out and turned her over. Her peaked nipples grazed the comforter as she stretched out, opening herself for him. He entered her again, this time from behind, and she had an intense memory—they'd done this the last time.

Another sweet memory come to life. She craved the press of his chest against her back and the cage of his arms around her. Tears gathered in her eyes.

He paused, brushing her hair back from her face. "Do you need to stop?" he asked, pausing for a second.

She turned her head and kissed him fiercely. "No, don't stop," she whispered. *Don't ever stop.*

He held her hips down hard and took her again, strokes long and deep until he tensed. "Rachel," he managed, and she was ready again, and then he was coming, thrusting through his release while she shuddered beneath him.

When he was finished, Jonas took her in his arms, breathing fast. After a minute, he got up and went to the bathroom, returning a few minutes later with a wet washcloth. He dipped it between her legs, then patted her dry with a towel.

Rachel nuzzled into him, and he held her close as he crawled back into bed under the covers. They lay like that in silence, basking in the afterglow of what they'd just shared.

"I'm sorry I didn't tell you who I was," Jonas said, tracing his thumb across her jawline.

She swam back up out of the sea of hazy pleasure. "I know who you are now."

“I didn’t tell you because I thought this lodge would be my entire life. My parents died when I was young, and my grandparents raised us, which you know. Since I was in high school, there was always the expectation that I would take over. My grandmother—” His mouth quirked in a smile. “I thought she’d want all of us to focus on the family more than anything, but now that my brothers have found love—and I’ve found that I *have* a family—” His hand stroked down her arm. “I didn’t tell you because I thought I could never feel anything like I feel right now.”

His vulnerability crashed into her, unlocking something at the center of her chest. “There are things I didn’t tell you too,” she admitted softly.

“Tell me now.” There was no judgment in his voice, only warmth.

Rachel took a deep breath. “I was engaged to get married. His name was Daniel. My mother had picked him out for me and I let her talk me into it. Into him. A week before our wedding, I caught him cheating and he acted like it was no big deal. So I called it off. My best friend had been invited to a party here at Elk Lodge and she brought me as her plus one.” It came back to her in jarring memories, ones Rachel had worked hard to forget. “Daniel was a jerk. He was like my mother. He wanted to control everything I did, while still doing whatever he wanted.”

“Oh, Rachel.”

“I almost didn’t come here that night. Annabeth arrived at my place and I was dressed for bed.” She grinned at the memory of her friend tearing through her closet to find an outfit for her to wear. “My mother was furious with me. She’d been the mayor of our hometown for years and was in the middle of a senatorial run.” Rachel laughed. “She’s in the middle of one now, too.”

A weight had lifted from her shoulders. The more she spoke, the lighter it got. “Anyway, when I was at Elk Lodge, I saw you, and you looked like a safe place. The same way you do now.” She felt, in a way, like she was putting her heart in her

hands and showing it to Jonas in all its beauty and imperfection. “But that’s why I didn’t get your number afterward. I didn’t want to ruin anything. I didn’t want the perfect fantasy to be ruined for us.”

Jonas made a noise in the back of his throat. “And then you got here, and I ruined it.”

“Not completely.”

He laughed, the sound a rumble against her skin.

“I didn’t love it when you took charge and wanted to hide Scott and—and all those things. It reminded me of my ex. But now that I know you a little more, and know about your family, I can see why you did.” Was she too forgiving? Too vulnerable? It just felt so *good* to trust him. So peaceful.

“I’m sorry,” Jonas said, pulling her closer and kissing her temple. “Truly. I’m sorry about that.” He offered no excuses and didn’t run from the confession. “I’m sorry for something else, too.”

“What is it?” she asked.

He stared up toward the ceiling, blowing out a quick breath. “That I want you so much.”

Rachel trailed a hand down the front of his body and found him already hard, though they’d just finished their first round of sex a few minutes ago. “I’m not sorry,” she said. She swung one of her legs over him and straddled his body.

He ran his hands up the sides of her waist, grinning at her.

“I’m not sorry at all,” she repeated, rocking back against his length. It was like Christmas all over. The lights coming on. The fire starting. “Don’t be sorry, Jonas.”

“If you’re sure,” he said, his eyes locked on hers. Such a gorgeous man, such a gorgeous room, such a gorgeous place. Was it so bad to let herself live in the moment?

It was too much—too trusting. But when Jonas entered her again, all her fears melted, taken over by desire, and Rachel let go.

JONAS

A knock at the front door woke Jonas from a sound sleep.

He rolled over onto a cooler part of the mattress and rubbed his face. Did he imagine the knock? It came again. Rachel didn't stir. He listened hard for any sound from the spare bedroom down the hall—nothing. Scott was still fast asleep.

Jonas crept out of bed at top speed, throwing on a pair of sweats and a long-sleeved shirt, the first available from the dresser. The cold hallway floor against his feet made him wish he'd taken enough time to put on socks.

He pulled open the door.

“Good morning. We need to talk.” Chase stood there in his oversized parka, the hood pulled up over his head.

Jonas stared at him. “Right now?” A high, cheerful peep from the spare bedroom alerted him that Scott had awakened. Jonas's stomach plummeted. “You'll have to come in.”

He ignored Chase's wide-eyed expression and ushered him inside. “I'll be right back.” Before Chase could answer, he headed up the stairs to the second floor two at a time. There was no sound coming from his bedroom—a good indication Rachel was still asleep.

Jonas found Scott standing in the crib, grinning at him. He swept his son up into his arms, emotion tightening his chest. It was a first of its kind moment. And the last thing he wanted to

interrupt the moment was having to deal with whatever it was his brother found important at this hour of the morning.

Jonas noted Chase had taken off his parka and seated himself on the sofa and was staring at the new Christmas decorations. He didn't stop to answer the questioning look on his brother's face but headed for the kitchen to get Scott a sippy cup full of milk.

Jonas settled into the loveseat opposite where Chase sat, his brother watching them closely. Gradually, his expression turned to a dawning recognition. *He knew the truth.*

"That little boy has your eyes," Chase commented casually.

"Yeah," Jonas said. His heart burned in his chest. This was the conversation he'd been trying to avoid since Christmas Day, and in all that time, he still hadn't settled on exactly what he was going to say.

"I thought you were just sleeping with Rachel." Chase cocked his head to the side. "The way you've been looking at her is a dead giveaway. But now it looks like—" He gestured to Scott. "What's the deal?"

"It's really none of your business." No matter how much he didn't want to be talking about this, Jonas forced his body to stay relaxed. It was as if he had some instinct to stay calm, to protect Scott from any agitation. "What's happened in my life belongs to me, not the rest of you."

Chase put both hands through his hair. He'd come back to Elk Lodge not long ago, after his ski career collapsed and he was rudderless, his leg hurting him and his heart bleak. "I don't understand how this could have happened."

"Well, when two people come together and..."

"Yeah, yeah, you know what I mean. I'm talking about you, Mr. Straightlaced and by the book."

"Life happened." Anger pricked at the back of his neck. Things *happened*. Like Chase's relationship with Tana, which had happened fast, and which Jonas hadn't been thrilled about. Not that he didn't like Tana, because he did. She was a great ski instructor. But Chase had become a bit of a player when he

started competing professionally, and Jonas didn't want to deal with the aftermath when his brother eventually screwed things up with her. And yet, Chase was here, confronting him about Rachel.

"It's not like you," Chase said, keeping his voice even, confusion written on his face. "You don't keep secrets like this. Why now?"

Jonas swallowed another flash of irritation. He'd needed them to look up to him over the years. To *listen* to him, for the good of the family and the good of the resort. That had been hard enough to maintain, especially with Gabe. His brother had left as soon as humanly possible and only showed up this year because of their grandmother's diagnosis.

"I'm disappointed, honestly," Chase said, his hands open on his lap. "You've been pushy with us for years about how our behavior reflects on the family and Elk Lodge, but now you want us to turn a blind eye to your own indiscretions."

"First of all..." Jonas struggled for control. Scott readjusted in his arms, still drinking from the sippy cup, unaware of the thick tension in the room. "Scott is not an indiscretion. And I'd appreciate it if you didn't bring this up with Grandmother."

"What? You can't have it both ways, Jonas. Either he's a secret, or he's not. When do you plan on letting her know?" Chase narrowed his eyes. "Or are you planning on waiting until she passes away to bring your son's existence to light?"

"I don't know," Jonas snapped. "Is that what you want to hear? I don't know what I'm going to do or say, or when I'm going to say it. If I recall, you also kept us in the dark about someone close to you until the time was right. Maybe in this situation, the time will never be right."

"Good morning," Rachel's soft voice cut through his soul, and a chill ran down his spine. How long had she been standing there? She padded across the living room and held out her arms to Scott, who beamed at her and leaned forward to scramble into her arms. "We'll get out of your way."

“No.” Chase stood up. “I’ll get out of your way. I shouldn’t have come.”

Jonas stood too, at a loss for what to say or who to follow.

Rachel was heading back up the stairs and Chase was making a hasty exit, pulling his coat on as he went.

“Stop,” he said, calling after his brother. “Wait.”

“We’ll talk later,” Chase said. “That’s what you want, isn’t it?” He opened the door and stepped out into the morning light, and then he was gone.

Jonas stood for a heartbeat in the middle of the living room. The meeting between brothers hadn’t gone well. And now, he was left to face Rachel. He climbed the stairs after her and found them in the spare bedroom, Scott playing on the bed while Rachel tugged a shirt over his head. “—go soon, buddy,” she was saying.

“Go, go, go,” Scott repeated.

Jonas’s mind was a storm. *Don’t go*. He didn’t want her to leave, not even a little. The closeness from the night before had been shut off, hidden behind a closed door, but that couldn’t be the end of it. His brothers couldn’t be allowed to dictate the relationship. He could *not* let them take this chance from him.

“Talk to me,” Jonas said.

She looked over her shoulder at him, her eyes bright with hurt. Rachel gave him a brave smile anyway. “You know, if you don’t want your grandmother to find out about us, then we shouldn’t risk the gossip. I don’t think it’s a good idea for us to stay any longer.”

“What I said down there.” He was at loose ends. “What I meant was that I need a better plan when it comes to telling my grandmother about us. And the way I said it came out wrong. I didn’t expect Chase to come over here. I didn’t expect them to know about Scott or us.”

“It’s okay.” Her answer wasn’t convincing. “I know how hard this is for you. The timing. But I know what’s good for me,

too. I know I can't stay here while you struggle to keep me hidden and fight with your brothers." Rachel's eyes glistened. "Really, Jonas, I think we have enough photos to make a wonderful album. You can take some of your own photos on New Year's, and I'll be happy to add them in, it's just—I don't think we should stay. We can't stay," she said, more firmly.

It reminded him of every anxiety he'd had as a child, as powerfully as if he were experiencing them all over again. It had started with the car accident. His parents had both died, and everything after that was a whirlwind of trying to get any sense of stability. If their car could go off the road, then anything could happen at the resort. Jonas hadn't expected that this specific scenario—the one in which his one-night stand reappeared in his life with his child—would happen, and now it was all coming apart at the seams.

His heart beat frantically. Chase's questions—and his sorry responses—couldn't be the reason they left. But he had no reasonable way to explain what had happened, other than what he'd already said. And he couldn't stop casting about for the magic words that would take them back to before Chase had shown up on his doorstep, to before Rachel had overheard the conversation.

Except there weren't any.

She took a pair of small pants out of the diaper bag and helped Scott into them. It was like standing on the train tracks, watching the train come, and being powerless to stop the collision.

"We could figure this out."

"Not now, we can't." When Rachel looked up at him again, there were no more tears in her eyes. "If you're so intent on keeping this from your grandmother until the very last moment, then all we can do is focus on the work we have to do, and duck out early. That will free you up to say whatever you need to say. And then you can—" She shrugged, picking up Scott, and nuzzling his cheek with her nose. "We can always talk later."

It hurt him to the core, that small sentence. Jonas, better than anyone, knew that you couldn't always talk later. Sometimes, later never came. A car went off the road. A plane crashed. A heart stopped. There were a hundred ways to lose out on possible futures.

Rachel picked up the diaper bag and put it over her shoulder. No, *no*. Time was going too fast, streaming around him in a way that made him slightly dizzy. "I'll let you know if we need anything else for the album," she said.

Jonas wanted to block the door. He had the intense desire to stand in front of her and the equally intense desire to let her be free. Rachel didn't belong to him. They weren't *together*. He wouldn't stop her from leaving if she wanted to go.

They headed down the stairs, and he helped Scott into his little coat, the hat from the gift shop, and his small mittens. Rachel put on her coat and brushed the black waves of her hair over her shoulders. He had the wrenching vision of having another child with Rachel—a child with her hair, but his nose and his chin—and he found he couldn't let her walk out without saying *something*.

"Are you sure?" He bounced Scott on his hip, taking a deep breath of his warm scent. "Are you sure this is the best plan?"

"It might not be the best for you," Rachel admitted. "But I know it's the best for me. I can't be here anymore. You understand that."

It wasn't a question, more of a wish. She wanted him to understand it. But the ground was shifting under his feet, the planet tilting off its axis, and he had to get it back on track. "No," he said finally. "You're right. This is the best for both of us."

It was the only way to protect his brothers. The only way he could protect Rachel and Scott from any criticism from the family drama that would ensue. The choice was out of his hands, and one he'd make for Rachel and his son before it got any more out of his control.

Rachel held her hands out for Scott, and he let his son go to her, knowing with a pang that if she left, she might never come back. “Let me drive you back to the resort.”

“No,” she said quickly, a faint smile on her face. “We need a little walk, don’t we, buddy?”

“Walk,” Scott repeated, rubbing at her cheek with one of his mitten-covered hands. He was so cute. It was unbearable to watch him go, this little boy he’d only just met. “Walk, walk.”

“Goodbye,” Rachel said, and he felt the word down to his bones.

Jonas opened the door for her, the cold sharp on his skin, and she went out, the scent of her lingering in the foyer as a painful reminder of everything he was losing.

RACHEL

Rachel knew Jonas was floundering with his new reality. There had been friction between the two brothers as they sat in Jonas's living room, and she'd heard it in his voice. *I don't know* echoed in her mind over and over. He didn't know what? What to do about her and Scott? Or his plan of action? Or any of it?

She shook her head and focused on the self-service machine at the print shop. This was the last of the photos, and she shifted Scott on her hip as she pressed the buttons on the screen. The sooner she could get these photos in hand, the sooner she could finish the album, and they could leave.

Leave Jonas. Leave his family. And leave Elk Lodge.

"Just a few more minutes, buddy," she murmured. "Then Mommy will figure things out."

"Mama," he said. "Walk." Scott loved the outdoors, and she used every opportunity to make sure they spent time outside. This place had been idyllic for him.

"We can't right now, but soon." Rachel finished the last of the printing and walked out of the shop. The snow was falling prettily all around, her son's face lit with joy as he tried to catch the flakes. She set the bag of photos into the front seat of her car before slipping off Scott's jacket, making it easier to buckle him into his car seat. She tested the straps.

Rachel tucked his jacket over his legs and handed him the ball Jonas had given him for Christmas, hoping to keep him occupied. She slid into the front seat and let out a deep breath.

Suddenly, the clouds broke apart, and the sun shone down on the quaint Main Street of the small town she'd fallen in love with. If she lived with Jonas—

She did *not* live with Jonas. Elk Lodge wasn't her home, though at times she hadn't been able to keep from wishing it was a place she could always return to. She could only attribute her fondness for the place to the fact that her son had been conceived there. But it wasn't what she *needed*. Not at this moment.

Annabeth. Her best friend since fourth grade would be able to give her the perspective she needed. One that wasn't centered on the Elkin family. Scott played happily in the back seat while she dug her phone out of her pocket and dialed.

"Merry Christmas and Happy Holidays," Annabeth answered merrily the instant she picked up the phone. "Are you home? Did your mother talk you into going to Montana?"

Rachel laughed, part of the knot in her gut unclenching. "I'm not home, actually. I'm at Elk Lodge."

A beat of silence passed. "What? Why?"

"Remember when I texted you about that job?" She rushed through the preliminary details—the last-minute hire, the drive to the Lodge—and then dropped the news. "So, it turns out Jonas Elkin, part owner of Elk Lodge, happens to be Scott's dad."

"*What?*" Annabeth shrieked. "He is? How? Explain. Now."

"He was the one-night stand." Rachel put a hand to her forehead. "I thought he was a guest, but I was way off, apparently. It's been a roller-coaster ride since the minute we recognized each other and he found out about Scott. Bad, then good, then trying to be professional." She spilled the whole story to her friend. The portraits. The hiding from his family. The makeup Christmas in his house once Jonas had discovered that she'd cut her own holiday short for the job. The growing bond between father and son. All of it, up to this morning and what she'd overheard, and how she'd left. Her throat went tight with emotion. "I can't avoid him forever, and I won't

prevent a man from seeing his son, but I can't stay here. I'm leaving early."

"Yeah," said Annabeth. "I can see why you'd want to do that."

"I want my own space," Rachel burst out. "I want to be able to negotiate with him from a position of strength. Not from the middle of his family's resort. A place he controls, I might add."

"You don't have to do anything you don't want to do," pointed out Annabeth. "Is he being—Rachel, be honest. Is he threatening? Too pushy?"

Rachel closed her eyes, thinking back over the past few days. He'd been nervous, yes. Shocked, yes. Thrown off-balance, yes. "He's been high-handed at times," she said slowly. "He's used to managing things, but no, never domineering, threatening, or insulting. He loves Scott." The truth dropped from her lips so easily that it shocked her. She opened her eyes and looked in the rearview mirror at her son, who was still playing with the ball from Jonas, utterly content.

"Does he?" Annabeth asked softly.

"He really does," Rachel admitted.

"How do you feel about that?"

"Good," she said slowly. "I feel good about it. They've spent more time together these past few days than I would have expected, and Scott loves him, too. They have a connection. It's amazing to see."

Annabeth sighed, and it was like the two of them were back in her hometown bedroom, sharing secrets about the school day. "Rachel, you know I love you."

"I know you do," she said.

"And that's why I feel compelled to say that you can't punish everyone for the way your mother behaves or for Daniel's mistakes."

Rachel scoffed. "Those weren't *mistakes*. He was a jerk."

“I’d argue that being a jerk is a long-term mistake,” Annabeth countered.

“Don’t leave out his cheating.”

“I haven’t. Look, I know you’ve been burned, but from everything you’ve said, Jonas sounds different. If you never give anyone a chance because they *might* be like him or your mother, then it’ll be a self-fulfilling prophecy.”

“Ugh.” Rachel didn’t like how right Annabeth was at that moment. “Maybe you’re right. I guess the only way to find out is to trust Jonas to do the right thing. At least a little bit.”

“Haven’t you already trusted him a little bit?” wheedled Annabeth. “Just a little?”

“I’m ending this conversation now,” Rachel said, laughing. “I have to get some work done.”

“Do the right thing,” Annabeth said, getting in the last word before she ended the call.



Jonas

Jonas had to see her. Couldn’t let her leave this way. He’d gone to his office and pretended to work. Walked the halls of Elk Lodge, looking for anything that needed his attention. And walked the trails around the property.

Nothing helped.

The more he pictured them driving away without a final goodbye, the more his gut twisted into knots. And yes, it *would* call attention to their situation if the two of them stayed at his house, but he couldn’t let them leave without asking. *Not now.*

He went up to her suite and stood outside the door, trying to calm himself. Rushing into this like a desperate fool wouldn’t help matters, even if he *was* a desperate fool.

Jonas knocked. There was no sound coming from inside, and he worried for one heart-stopping moment that he was too late.

The door swung open, and Rachel answered with a finger to her lips. “He’s finishing up his nap,” she whispered.

Jonas stepped into the room and shut the door with care. His need for the both of them rose again in the quiet. He could take her hand right now, and the three of them could go up to his grandmother’s apartment and tell her the truth. Jonas’s eyes landed on the album that lay open to a half-finished page. “Do you think you could take a break from work?”

She raised her eyebrows. “A break?”

“Don’t leave quite yet.” He motioned to the windows. “It’s a beautiful day. I thought we could take Scott sledding. He has snow clothes, and I have sleds.”

“Mama,” called Scott from the bedroom.

Rachel left the room to get him.

Jonas’s heart had never beat so fast or hard in his life. He knew what he was asking for—more time—and the wait for her answer was crushing him. But he’d survive it. What he wouldn’t survive was Rachel and his son leaving him.

She returned in a moment, and once again, he was struck by how gorgeous she was—black hair in a low bun, willowy frame draped in comfortable jeans and a soft shirt, stunning blue eyes. And Scott. Scott was the blond boy Jonas had been when he was a toddler, down to the point of his chin.

“Dada,” Scott said, pointing a chubby baby finger at him.

It melted Jonas’s heart. He didn’t move, not wanting to break the moment. But Rachel crossed the room toward him, and Scott leaned out.

Rachel let out a deep breath, as if coming to a decision. “We could go sledding,” she offered.

Jonas saw the gift in her eyes. *Time*. Something infinitely more precious than he’d realized.

Thirty minutes later, after a snack for Scott and ten minutes of bundling up, they were outside in the snow. Jonas buckled Scott into one of the children's sleds from the ski shed. His son laughed, pointing at everything that caught his attention as Jonas pulled him along, Rachel close by his side. Like a family.

They took the same trail he'd taken earlier, up next to the ski hill. Skiers whizzed past on the other side of the trees, the sun catching on the tops of the skis. The path split in two directions toward the top—one going to the peak of the ski run, and the other to the quieter woods.

Rachel went left, and Jonas followed. The only sound in this part of the forest was the sled pressing on fresh snow and the fall of their footsteps. They curved down the side of the hill, gentle twists and turns that made it easy to feel like Jonas had transported them somewhere else entirely—somewhere far from Elk Lodge, away from the pressures of his family and the singing tension between him and Rachel.

“Stop,” she said suddenly, pausing at a rise in the snow that formed a natural landing. From here, they could look out over the untouched part of the resort that was kept intentionally undeveloped. A place where visitors could appreciate a taste of the calm serenity of the wilderness.

Rachel turned her blue eyes on him as the sled came to a stop. She leaned in, rising on tiptoe, and kissed Jonas on the lips. The warmth of her was a pleasant shock out here in the cold, and he kissed her back, relishing her sweetness and her passion and the way she didn't seem to hold anything back when they kissed.

“Oh,” she said softly and began to pull away.

He pulled her back, a hand on her waist, and this time she melted, falling against him. Rachel made a soft sound in the back of her throat and slipped a gloved hand up the side of his face. Jonas reached up and tugged off the glove. Her skin was a balm against his cheek, and she laughed against his mouth. “My hand's going to freeze.”

“I won’t let it,” he murmured and bent to kiss her again. He could feel her giving in, feel the distance between them shrinking, and Jonas wanted more than anything to get a second chance. A third chance, he supposed. The second chance had already been in progress since the moment Rachel arrived at Lodge.

“Go,” commanded Scott, his voice high and excited. “Go. Go.” He leaned forward in the sled, screwing up his face in concentration, and Jonas hauled himself bodily away from the kiss and back into the real world. It took incredible energy to put space between himself and Rachel, who was flushed and bright-eyed, her breathing shallow. He handed her the glove, then turned back to Scott.

“We’re going to keep walking,” he said. “For as long as you want.”

“Forever?” Rachel asked, falling in step beside him.

“I thought eventually we could end up at my place,” he said, throwing his hopes out to the universe and to Rachel. “I thought you could stay with me tonight. For one more night, at least.”

Her eyes settled on his, and hope took flight. *Please say yes. Please don’t pack up Scott into the car and go.*

“One more night,” Rachel agreed.

RACHEL

When they arrived back at Elk Lodge after taking Scott sledding, Jonas tried to say his goodbyes so Rachel could get back to work.

“No,” said Scott, diving for him. “No. No.” He wrestled himself out of Rachel’s arms, and she put him on the floor. His son came over, clinging to Jonas’s leg.

Jonas flicked his eyes to hers, asking a silent question before he picked Scott up. “I could take him to my place while you worked on the album,” he offered. “You could also stay for New Year’s if you wanted.” She knew what he was asking.

Her conversation with Annabeth echoed in Rachel’s mind. Part of this was about trusting Jonas, and she already trusted him with Scott. The rest was learning to trust him for herself and that they could become a team. And it *was* much harder to work on the photo album when her son demanded her attention. “That sounds good,” she said. “Let me grab the diaper bag. And I’ll think about New Year’s.”

The three of them went up to her suite, and Rachel put some fresh clothes into the bag and handed it over to Jonas. “We’ll see you in a while?” he asked.

“As soon as I’m done with the book.” She hadn’t missed the look of hope in Jonas’s eyes as she kissed Scott’s cheek and ruffled his hair.

In the quiet after the two left, Rachel sat down at her desk and got to work with the photos. The work of arranging them was habitual enough to set her mind free. There really was no

reason for her to stay at the resort after she finished, other than the fact Jonas had asked her to stay. He *wanted* them, her, to stay. And if Rachel was truthful, she wanted to stay too.

Once this project was finished, they'd have more breathing room to figure out if there was a path for all of them to move forward. Or should she leave and do what she'd told Annabeth she wanted—negotiate terms from her own home? And if things didn't work out, Scott wouldn't see Jonas as often as he deserved to see his father.

It was a tough decision, one she almost wished she didn't have to make. But it was her choice and her life, and she needed to make that decision based on both her and Scott's needs. Rachel adjusted the photos in different layouts and chewed at her lip, trying to commit to a decision she could live with. Her heart wanted to stay. That was obvious from the way it fluttered whenever she thought of Jonas, and sleeping next to him, and waking up in his bed. Then there was the way he looked at Scott. Why couldn't relationships be as easy as working with photos?

A knock at the door made her hand slip on one of the photos, and she hissed, pressing it back into place. "Just a minute," she called. Rachel took her time making sure the photo was perfect, then went to see who was there.

She pulled the door open to find Jonas's brother, Gabe, standing in the hall. With his hands in his pockets and a determined set to his jaw, his expression was a good indicator this wasn't a happy social call. "Hey, Gabe. What can I do for you?"

"You know, I—" He looked away, seeming to gather his thoughts, and when he looked back at her, she was nearly knocked backward by the depth of the suspicion in Gabe's eyes. "My brother doesn't normally get involved with people. His entire life has been Elk Lodge."

"I know that," she added. "I know how important this place is to him, and his family."

"Is that what this is about? Family?" He kept his tone even, but Rachel could tell he was carrying a weight. "Listen. I did

some digging when Chase told me the truth about your son. I have reason to believe you might be in a bit of a situation financially. Is this about my brother's money? Because if it is..."

Rachel pressed her lips together tight, the blood draining out of them. Heat spread out across her chest, an angry, humiliated heat. "Is *what* about his money? The fact that we have a son together?"

"Do you have a son together?" Gabe faced her head-on. "Or is that some kind of deception?"

"It's not a deception," she said, wounded. "I met him three years ago, here at the lodge. We had a one-night stand, not that it's any of your business."

Gabe had the grace to look ashamed, but he rebounded quickly. "And you didn't tell him about the child? I just think it would be best if Jonas understood your financial situation before falling headlong into an unpleasant situation."

Her mind raced with possibilities, and each one had her angrier than the last. "So, you're going to what, exactly? Give him all the sordid details you got by spying on me?"

"Maybe," said Gabe hotly.

What the hell was happening? Jonas clearly wasn't the only bossy Elkin at the resort, and it made her furious that Gabe was blindsiding her like this. And if Jonas had just come clean to his grandmother and his family right away, this entire mess could have been avoided.

Rachel didn't need this hassle. Not after a lifetime with her mother. Not after her ex. Not after this week with Jonas, which had been unbelievably tumultuous for a photography job. "You know what, Gabe? Come with me. Right now." Rachel whirled around, letting the door start to shut.

Gabe stopped it with his hand. "Into your room?"

"No," she snapped. She grabbed her coat from where she'd thrown it on the sofa and put it on.

"Are we going outside to fight?"

“Would you prefer that?” Rachel stalked past Gabe, pulling the door shut with a confident hand. “No, we’re not fighting.” She moved quickly for the stairwell exit, Gabe sticking close behind.

They went through the lobby and out into the crisp chill of the evening. The last light from the sunset was fading, a golden orange in the sky. Gabe didn’t have a coat, not that she cared.

“If you have something to say—”

“I don’t,” she said, her words coming out clipped. They crossed the resort grounds and headed straight for Jonas’s front door. Rachel raised a hand and knocked on the thick wood. “Your brother does.”

“I came to talk to you, not—” The door opened, and Jonas stood there. “Not Jonas,” Gabe finished.

“What’s happening?” Jonas looked from Rachel to Gabe.

Scott came running from the living room, his feet quick on the floor. “Hi,” he chirped, and then he was gone again, his footsteps receding back to the living room.

“Your brother is a jerk,” Rachel burst out. “He came to my room to interrogate me about my personal finances. He questioned my honor. And then I think he tried to threaten me by saying he might tell you about my finances. This is your problem. He’s not my family, and he’s not my brother, thank goodness.” She turned to leave, and Jonas caught her by the elbow. Their eyes locked, the touch moving through her like a song, and her anger cooled—but only a few degrees.

“Wait,” Jonas asked, holding his free hand up. “Wait.” He gave her elbow an affectionate squeeze and released her. Jonas’s gaze snapped to his brother. “What were you thinking?”

“I was worried for you,” Gabe countered, heat rising in his voice. “I didn’t want you to get tricked by someone out to—”

“Out to *what*?” Jonas looked horrified. “Get money from me? It doesn’t matter. We have plenty of money. More than enough money for everything. And you thought you were going to pressure Rachel into what, exactly? Leaving? You should

never have done that, Gabe. You are *way* out of line, especially after your own recent behavior.”

Some of the tension left Rachel’s shoulders. Jonas was on her team and not against her.

His eyes met hers, and when he spoke again, his voice was soft, but determined. “I care about you.” The words sent a shudder of relief through her. He turned back to his brother. “I genuinely care about her. And I’m trying to see if we can make this work, but you and Chase are making it damn hard with your behavior.”

Gabe sighed, looking down at his shoes.

“Go home, Gabe. This is between Rachel and me.”

Gabe held up both hands, turned on his heel, and left without a word.

Jonas pulled Rachel into the house, shutting the door behind them. They returned to the living room to check on Scott, who was playing with the stuffed elk on the rug.

Rachel ran a hand through her hair. She had never been so hopeful and so terrified by his declaration. “You want us to work out?” she asked.

“I don’t want to pressure you, but I have to be clear—I want you and Scott in my life. I’m sorry that I missed so much of his life already.”

“I’m sorry you did, too.” Hope displaced fear. Maybe there *was* something to this and she could stay. And just maybe, they could build a life together.

“And no matter what my brother said.” Jonas shook his head, brows knitting. “I don’t care about your finances. If you’re having trouble, then what does it matter to me? I want to provide for all of Scott’s needs.” He looked over at their son again, face softening. “I want him to have the best schooling, the best housing, the best of everything. And I can give that to him.” Jonas met her eyes again. “Of course, I want to give that to you, too.”

Oh, no. The best, the best, the best. It reminded her of her mother. It reminded her of Daniel. They'd both wanted the best in life, and Rachel hadn't been the best. She'd never even come close to measuring up. It hit her like a cymbal crash, loud and startling and still somehow familiar. It was a short distance from *I love you* to *I'll handle everything, because you can't handle it yourself*.

No. Everything in her recoiled from that message. Rachel didn't want to be cosseted or controlled. She'd made it with her son this far, and she could keep doing it for the rest of her life if necessary. An ache in her throat forced her to swallow, and she straightened her back. If there was really no pressure in his offer, then he would accept it if she left.

"Thank you for that," she said, as gently as she could. Except the steel in her voice didn't send the same tone as her words. "I need some time. I'm going to take Scott back to Denver, and I'll be in contact with you later."

Jonas's face drained of color. There was a long silence between them, filled only by the sound of Scott, babbling to the elk. "If that's what you need, then you'll have it," he said finally. "I meant what I said."

It made her want to kiss him, but she braced herself against that possibility. If she kissed Jonas now, she would never walk out of here. "I think it's best if we leave now. I was on the last page of the photo album, and your grandmother will love it. I'll leave everything in my suite."

Jonas turned and went into the living room. He came back a minute later with the diaper bag over his shoulder with the elk sticking out of the top and Scott in his arms. He hugged his son tightly, and then handed him over to Rachel. "You'll let me know if you need anything before you go?"

"Of course I will," she said, the weight of her son in her arms grounding her. But Rachel knew she wouldn't ask Jonas for anything at all.

JONAS

Jonas sat at his desk, staring at his computer screen, feeling like his brain was on fire. It had all gone so horribly wrong. More like the worst possible scenario, and now, Rachel was gone.

He hated the idea of her out on the highway, driving home with Scott in the dark as she headed back to Denver. He wished she would have waited until morning. She'd made her position clear, and it wasn't until the front desk called to tell him that she'd left that he went to collect the album she'd been working on and the extra unused photos.

Everything had been stacked in a neat pile on her desk, symbolizing the finality of her decision. A decision that broke his heart.

"You okay?" Gabe asked, entering his office and dropping into one of the chairs across from his desk. "I know she left."

Jonas tore his eyes from his computer and glared at his brother. "No, I'm not," he answered. "Any other questions?"

Chase came in next, looking sheepish, and stood behind Gabe's chair. "Don't be mad at us too long, Jonas. It's the holidays."

"The holidays," he scoffed. "Is that why you're both acting this way? What has gotten into you? First, you—" He stabbed a finger at Chase. "Showing up at my house uninvited to question me about something *personal*, and then you—" He waved in Gabe's direction. "Coming after Rachel like that? Yeah, happy holidays."

“We were only trying to protect you,” Gabe said. “You’ve used that argument a million times over the years, usually to justify your own pain-in-the-ass behavior.”

Jonas saw the truth in his brothers’ eyes. He *had* said that to them, usually when he wanted them to go along with his plan for the lodge. Maybe there was a point where he should let go a little more. But he didn’t think now was the time. “I’ve tried to be the best older brother possible for you. I’ve tried to fill our grandfather’s role as the head of the family. Ever since Mom and Dad died—”

“We’re *worried*,” Chase cut in. “Worried she’s using you or trying to get her hands on your money. We know how hard you’ve been trying since we lost Mom and Dad. I swear we know.” Chase and Gabe shared a glance. “That’s why we’re asking questions. We don’t want you in some situation where you lose what’s important to you and everything you’ve given your life to make a success.”

“She doesn’t want my money,” Jonas insisted. “I offered her money. She wouldn’t take it. Rachel is proud and strong, and if anything, she’s trying to keep her distance from me.” The weight on his chest pressed deeper. Each minute that passed took Rachel farther from him.

Regret lodged deep in his heart that he’d let her walk out without a fight. Even if he left now, it would be impossible to catch up with her, not to mention more dangerous as the temperatures dropped toward freezing, and the roads became less manageable. “Are either of you planning to tell Grandmother what’s going on?”

Silence.

Gabe shifted in his seat. “Not yet.”

“What does that mean?” Jonas snapped.

“It means we’re not going to tell her just yet,” Chase said, shaking his head. “We won’t tell her until you’re ready.”

“But?” Jonas could hear the unspoken word in his brother’s comment.

“We know it’s been a lot to handle, after everything that’s happened since she announced her diagnosis at Thanksgiving,” Chase looked at Gabe, who flushed.

“And our own stupid behavior,” Gabe added.

“So you’ve got a week. Don’t keep secrets from her too long, Jonas. She—” Chase looked away, and Jonas’s stomach twisted.

Another long silence took over the office. The computer hummed in the background, and Jonas felt the way he had after they’d heard the news their parents were dead. *Adrift*.

“Have you eaten?” Gabe asked.

“What?” Jonas was bewildered by the question.

“Did you have dinner?” Gabe rubbed a hand over his face. His concern came a little too late. Not to mention that if he was so concerned, then he shouldn’t have butted in at all. Rachel had driven away, and nothing was bringing her back. “You can’t work all night. It’s not good for a person.”

The last thing Jonas wanted was to go to dinner with his brothers and act like there wasn’t anything wrong. But the computer screen glared at him, taunting him with emails that he’d read three times but couldn’t make sense of, there was still the proposal he had to put together for the other ski resort, and Anna had sent him a list of ideas for using social media to generate more interest in the resort.

There was a strange pit in his stomach. *Hunger*. Except it wasn’t food he wanted. He wanted Rachel.

“I haven’t had dinner.” He stood up from his desk and switched off the monitor. “I’m going down to the restaurant to eat and if you’re coming with me, I don’t want to talk about this. And try not to make fools of yourselves.”



Rachel

Scott had been fussy since they pulled away from Elk Lodge. Rachel knew it was her fault. They'd left past his bedtime, and he didn't want to be in the car seat. She'd passed back toy after toy but had run out only thirty minutes into the drive.

Scott started screaming. Apparently, dropping his stuffed elk was the last straw. Her head hurt from the intensity of his sobbing complaints. "Hey, buddy." He wasn't paying her the least bit of attention, but she had to try. "I'll get you your elk as soon as I can find a place to stop." There was no way she would stop on a remote roadside in the dark and with the snow coming down way heavier than it had been when she first left the lodge.

Why was it still snowing? It was as if even Mother Nature didn't want them leaving the lodge. Well, too damn bad. She'd gone just far enough that it made no sense to turn back. Especially given the tension and situation she'd left behind. Her only hope was to drive slowly.

Scott's screams dissolved into furious howls. Rachel turned on the radio, hoping to find a station that would soothe him. *Just get through the drive—one mile at a time.* Rachel tried to focus on something other than Scott.

Something like her future. She still had her photography business and her son, and that would be enough to keep her going for years. What she didn't have was Jonas. What she didn't have was a concrete plan for keeping her son's father in his life.

She let out a laugh that sounded more like a cry. Had it felt this anguished to drive away from Montana, where she'd grown up? Rachel couldn't remember. The future loomed ahead of her in the dark—more like ahead and behind. In front of her was a mother, disapproving and wanting her to be someone she wasn't. And her studio. Behind her was Jonas and all hope of a family and a normal life—something she'd begun to crave while staying at Elk Lodge.

Scott had started to wear out from his incessant cries.

A love song came on. "Ugh." Flipping to the next station, she nodded. Hard rock wasn't her favorite, but it would do. Except

the hard rock disagreed with Scott, who started screaming again, pained and shrill.

Her phone rang on the center console, vibrating crazily. The call could wait. The call would *have* to wait. She couldn't help Scott calm down and answer the call, and anyway, she had no interest in talking to anyone right now.

Rachel patted behind her, trying to find the elk. It was huge. How could it be so difficult to find right now? She finally grasped one of its legs. "Here you go, buddy," she said, putting it in Scott's lap. He quieted down instantly. Rachel pulled her arm forward, the awkward position causing her to cramp. She stretched and massaged the muscles, trying to get relief, accidentally bumping her phone in the process.

"*Hello?*" her mother's voice burst from the phone's speaker.

Why me? If Rachel had been parked, she'd have put her head down on the steering wheel and had a good cry.

"Rachel? Are you out driving?"

The smallest *thud* came from the backseat—Scott's elk hitting the back of the seat. His scream was instantaneous as it fell out of his reach.

"What's wrong with Scott?"

"Yes, I'm driving. His elk just fell on the floor. I can't talk right now," she shouted above the noise. "We're fine. I'll be in touch soon."

"Rachel, we need to discuss this vacation you've taken." Her mother didn't notice that she'd said anything at all. "It's not right of you to keep Scott from his grandparents during the holidays. We need family pictures. I *want* family pictures," she amended. "It's important for me to spend time with you, and —"

"I can't talk right now," Rachel cut in. "I'm hanging up the phone. Please don't call back."

"I'll call back, sure," her mother said. "It must be patchy service. I'll hang up and then—"

"No," Rachel shouted. "Do *not* call again."

“There’s no need to shout,” her mother scolded. “I’m only trying to talk to you about—”

“I can’t talk right now. I’m driving, and it’s dark, and whatever you want—”

“It’s not about anything that I want,” her mother continued, going on and on.

Rachel was on the verge of screaming herself. What did she have to do to get her mother to stop? A moment’s peace, that’s all she needed. Scott’s wails got louder. The stuffed elk wasn’t in reach this time, and Rachel felt a certain panic at her core. The snow fell thicker, whipping up and across the windshield, and it was getting harder to see.

“I’m hanging up, Mother.” She reached down, keeping her eyes glued to the road, and hit a switch on the phone, cutting her mother off in the middle of whatever it was she was going to say. Rachel waved a hand in the air, trying to get Scott to pay attention to her. Now was not the time to lose her mind.

“Row, row, row your boat,” she sang, trying to distract him. What she needed was a side road to turn off on so she could pick up his toys. They were approaching an intersection, and Rachel sent up a quick wish for the light to stay green.

It turned yellow.

Rachel tapped the brakes to stop, watching as an oncoming vehicle slid into the intersection. She pumped her brakes harder, fear lodging in her throat as her vehicle didn’t respond, the tires slipping instead of gripping the road.

It all played out as if in slow motion, the car heading straight toward them, headlights glaring. Rachel turned the wheel sharply, trying to avoid a collision.

The screech of metal and the force of the impact seemed to take forever. Rachel’s head went to the side, and she gripped the wheel tightly like she could stop all of this through willpower.

Scott stopped screaming. It was eerily silent in the car as it spun around several times. And then her car slammed into

something hard and unyielding. She let out the breath she'd been holding, immediately turning to check on Scott.

He appeared okay—mostly terrified.

But they'd survived.

JONAS

There was no way Jonas could live with the waiting. Not anymore. He finished up the last of the roasted sweet potatoes on his plate, wishing he could have enjoyed it, and wiped his mouth with his napkin. His brothers watched him, a habit that was becoming more than slightly irritating. “Are you two done?”

The server came to clear away their dishes, and the three of them stood to leave. Jonas had decided it was past time to tell his grandmother the truth. Waiting like this was going to give him an ulcer. He couldn’t afford the stress and all the mistakes that came along with it. Letting Rachel and his son leave, the biggest one yet.

Outside the restaurant, the three brothers paused. “I’m headed home,” Chase said. After a whirlwind relationship of his own, he currently lived in his private residence with Tana and Lindsey. “I’ll see you guys.”

Jonas headed up in the private elevator and hesitated outside his grandmother’s door. Doubts reared up, larger than life. What he needed was a medical opinion. He went down the hall to a secluded alcove to make the call.

Their grandmother’s doctor was a man from town who had overseen her care for over fifty years. He was part of a team of specialists now, people coming together to help manage her cancer—and later, her pain.

Ten minutes later, Jonas was glad he called. The doctor’s confirmation it would be okay was the boost he needed to face

his grandmother. He headed back down the hall, mentally preparing to face her.

His phone rang before he'd gotten halfway there, and he answered without looking at the screen. More than likely, the doctor with more to say. "Jonas Elkin."

"Jonas, this is Mark Hollies, chief of police."

He stopped short. A call from the chief of police was never good. "Chief Hollies." Jonas stepped back toward the alcove. "What can I do for you?" A thousand scenarios involving the resort flashed through his brain. Surely, nothing had happened while he was at dinner, or someone would have come to get him.

"I'm calling in regard to an accident that happened two hours ago."

"An accident?" Adrenaline surged through his body, fear lodging in his throat, making it hard to ask questions. "A guest of the resort?" he asked, forcing the words out.

"A woman and a little boy." *Rachel and Scott*. Blood rushed in his ears, a waterfall of life that meant nothing without them, and he struggled to hear what the sheriff was saying. "—paperwork from the resort in the car with them. She had your number on her phone, and we thought we'd start with you."

"Are they all right?" he rasped. "Please. Tell me they're all right." He felt an old horror come to life—the horror of hearing the news that his parents were dead. Jonas hadn't spent much time thinking about the world without his parents, the memories too painful. How much more so if he lost Rachel and Scott forever.

"They were in stable condition when we arrived on the scene and both are en route to the hospital now," Hollies said, as Jonas felt a stabbing in the gut. His eyes burned, and he blinked several times to clear them.

"It's my friend and our son," he announced without hesitation. "I'll be at the hospital as soon as I can."

Getting to the hospital was a process that Jonas had carried out many times, but this time, his brain couldn't manage the

overload of trying to decide what to bring. Or do. He went back to his office but couldn't remember what he'd come there for. Halfway to the parking lot, he remembered his coat. He'd need that at the hospital. They kept everything cold there, even in winter. And then he had to go back for his keys.

By the time he settled himself behind the wheel, his teeth were chattering. More from shock than the cold. He needed to see them both. To know that they would be okay.

The snow swirled in front of his windshield and made it difficult to see, slowing the drive to an excruciating crawl. The dancing shapes of what looked like deer on the sides of the highway forced him to tap his brakes several times. Jonas kept a firm grip on the wheel and tried not to do any heavy braking, prepared for any contingency that might arise.

An eternity later, or so it seemed, he parked by the emergency doors to the hospital and jogged inside. After what felt like a ridiculously long wait, a woman in scrubs escorted him to a room with the curtains drawn over the big glass doors. He knocked and went in without waiting for an answer. There was only so much his heart could take.

Inside, Rachel sat on the hospital bed. Scott slept in a crib next to her. She appeared to be sleeping, but as he came to a stop, Rachel opened her eyes.

"Hi," she said, a sheen of tears over her eyes. "I'm so glad you came for us."

He let out a strangled laugh, then came to sit beside her. "How are you? What happened? Are you going to be all right?"

The details of the accident, he knew, didn't matter very much. What mattered the most was that Rachel and Scott were both all right. But Jonas needed to hear her say it.

She took a deep breath and squeezed his hand. "I came to an intersection at the bottom of the mountain, before you get on the highway for Denver." Her brow furrowed as if she couldn't quite remember. "It was too icy to stop, but the light turned yellow, and another car was there and they couldn't stop either."

“Yes.” He rubbed a thumb across the back of her hand. “I know that intersection.”

“I swerved to miss the other car and hit the siderail,” Rachel finished. “Scott’s fine. The doctors have thoroughly checked him over. They say his car seat protected him. I’ve got—”

The doctor bustled into the room, clipboard in hand. “Ms. Alexander?”

“Yes, that’s me,” Rachel said, still holding on to his hand.

“I have the results of your x-ray, if you’d like me to go over them with you and your husband.”

Husband. Jonas realized the word had a nice ring to it. He waited for Rachel to correct the doctor. His heart flew like a bird.

“Go ahead,” she said softly.

“No evidence of fracture but we won’t know the extent of any soft tissue damage without an MRI. There doesn’t seem to be any evidence of whiplash yet, but it’ll be important for both of you to keep on the lookout for signs of damage to the spine. As soon as you can, you’ll need to make an appointment with your primary care physician.” He rattled off more instructions, such as how she shouldn’t be left alone in case of a concussion, but Jonas could only focus on the warmth of her hand in his. “We should be able to get you discharged soon,” the doctor said, explaining everything. “Any questions?”

“No.” Rachel smiled. “Thank you all for taking care of me and my son.”

The doctor flashed her a smile. “No problem. Glad it all worked out well.” Then he was gone, leaving the three of them in the room together.

Jonas looked into Rachel’s eyes. Oh, they were beautiful, the blue so sky-like and ocean deep at the same time. He needed to correct the biggest mistake of his life. “Come stay with me,” he said, keeping his voice low. Scott stirred in the crib.

“I don’t know.” Rachel frowned. “I should get back.”

“Let me take care of you and Scott. You shouldn’t be alone with your injuries. Doctor’s orders,” he pointed out. “Please, Rachel. I want you to get well. If you want to leave when you feel better, you can. It’s only for as long as you want to stay.” Although forever was okay in his book.

“Your place or the lodge?” She hadn’t nixed the idea entirely, which was a good sign. So was the fact she still hadn’t let go of his hand.

“Which would you prefer? I can take the suite next to yours, or you can stay at my house. It’s up to you. Wherever you would feel more comfortable.” Anything she wanted was hers for the asking.

Jonas would feel more comfortable when she was sleeping safely with him nearby, even if she didn’t want to share a bed with him. All that mattered was keeping her safe.

Keeping them all safe.

Scott woke up in the crib, reaching for the side and pulling himself up, a cry on his lips. “Mama,” he said. “Mama, Mama.”

Rachel tried to sit up in the bed and failed. She grimaced, trying to put weight on her arm. “I just need a minute.”

Jonas went to the crib and picked Scott up, holding him tight. His son pressed his face against his shoulder and settled against Jonas, his face hot through the fabric of the shirt. He turned back to Rachel. “Come home with me,” he offered again, and Rachel lay back against the pillows, relief in her face.

“Okay,” she said. “I think that’s for the best.”

RACHEL

Rachel's shoulder hurt worse than she'd expected it to. It was a wrenching, bruising pain, and every time she moved, she was reminded of how reckless she'd been, driving away in a snowstorm like that when it was getting dark. It didn't matter if the accident was the other guy's fault when he lost control of his vehicle because of the icy roads. If she'd been in the right frame of mind, she wouldn't have been out on the roads. Period.

It felt equally reckless to stay in Jonas's house. But the lodge suite was too close to the rest of his family, and they needed peace—all three of them.

When they got back to his place from the hospital, Scott clung to him, frantic, until Jonas finally took him upstairs to change for bed.

Rachel felt glued to the couch, her entire body made heavy by the painkillers they'd given her at the hospital. At the time, she'd thought they were too strong, but now she was glad she'd taken them. It was a deep pain that gave no quarter.

And to think she'd considered pressing on to get to Denver. In her totaled car, with an injured arm. She let her head rest on the back of the couch. It was like a miracle when Jonas had walked through the door of her hospital room.

"Hey," Jonas said, his voice bringing her back to the present, his hand on her knee. He crouched in front of her, eyes on hers. The depth of care and concern in his gaze scared her. "You don't need to sleep down here."

“I wasn’t going to.” Her mouth felt slightly numb, her tongue thick. “Jonas?”

“Yeah?”

“I might need help up off the couch.” It was such a novelty, having an adult there who would put his arm around her back and lift her gently from her seat. A scary, thrilling novelty. Was this what it was like to rely on another person? Jonas guided her up the stairs, and led her to the bed, handing her one of his t-shirts before gently helping her change out of her clothes.

“It’s only my shoulder that hurts,” she protested, but she didn’t want to stop him. *It felt too good.*

He then helped her to the bathroom and provided her with a cup and a new toothbrush. By the time she was finished, the night had pressed heavily on her eyelids. “Thank you,” she whispered. “For taking us in.”

A stroke down the side of her face seemed to coax her to the pillow. “You’re welcome,” Jonas said. “Now go to sleep.” He kissed her forehead.

“Will you hold me?” she asked, and then the last thing she remembered was feeling the warmth of his body wrapping around her protectively before floating in comforting darkness.



Rachel tried to turn over, tensing at her shoulder’s rude reminder of last night’s accident. She scrunched her eyes shut and pulled the blanket over her head to block out the light, unwilling to face the day just yet, and sank back into sleep.

A loud pounding on the front door downstairs woke her. She shuddered away from the sound and groaned. The other side of the bed tipped down, then up—Jonas, getting out of the bed.

“Don’t worry,” he told her. “I’ll get it.”

Rachel listened as his footsteps receded down the stairs, stopping at the front door.

“Where’s my daughter?” Her mother’s voice echoed through the entire house, and Rachel instinctively scrambled upright, fighting the sudden nausea and room spin. No! Her mother couldn’t be here. This was the last thing she needed.

How was she here?

Rachel’s shoulder disagreed with the new plan as she awkwardly pulled a sweatshirt over her head and a pair of Jonas’s sweatpants on. Her hands fumbled on the drawstring. In the end, she abandoned the effort, going down the stairs as quickly as she could, the raised voices unsettling.

Jonas faced off with her mother in the foyer, the door shut behind them.

“Mother,” Rachel said, feeling like a teenager who’d been caught after curfew. *“What are you doing here?”*

“I took a chopper to the resort as soon as I figured out where you disappeared to. A car accident, Rachel? Did you even think of your son?”

“How did you learn about the car accident? I’m in a different state.” Rachel swallowed down the nausea and tried to blow the fuzzies off her brain. She needed to be able to think.

Her mother ignored her questions and kept speaking. *“Who would drive at such a dangerous time with Scott in the car?”* Her mother’s face had gone pale, with high pink spots on her cheeks, and her blue eyes—exactly like Rachel’s—had narrowed, piercing her with a combination of anger and disappointment.

“How did you know about the accident?” she asked her again and her mother, finally, blinked. *“Did you—”* Rachel took a deep breath and tried to appease the throbbing in her temples. *“Did you install some sort of tracking device on my car?”*

The outsized presence of her mother seemed to fill the foyer even more. How did she always manage to take up so much space even when she was caught doing something like this?

“It was a security issue, nothing more. You’re the daughter of a senator. Of course I would keep track of you since you can’t

be bothered to check in with your own mother from time to time.”

A thousand arguments sprang to mind, all of them scrambled by her still foggy brain.

“Mrs. Alexander—” Jonas interjected on her behalf, trying to take control.

“Lincoln, as in remarried,” her mother snapped, not even bothering to look in Jonas’s direction.

“Mrs. Lincoln, my name is Jonas Elkin. Your daughter has been safe with me since Christmas.” Jonas angled his body between the two women and stuck out his hand.

Angry as she was, self-righteous as she was, Susan Lincoln was still a politician. She took Jonas in, no doubt calculating the value of his last name along with the surroundings. She must have determined that he was financially worthy because her back straightened and a photo-ready smile graced her face. Even in her winter coat, Rachel’s mother looked ready to step off Air Force One and greet the press.

“I’m glad to hear it,” she said primly, a tendril of warmth coming into her voice. “But I’d rather have gotten holiday plans directly from my daughter.”

“Oh, stop,” Rachel said, drawing their attention back to her. “You knew we weren’t going to spend the holidays together. Don’t put on a show.”

“I’m not putting on a show.” Susan lifted her chin. “I came here because it’s clear you’re in over your head, Rachel. You need someone to care for you. It’s time for you to come home to Montana, where I can look after you and my grandson.”

Rachel’s shoulder ached, and the rest of her body was still exhausted. It would be much nicer to go back up the stairs and crawl into bed. She could lie on her good shoulder and sleep a while longer. Instead, she was trapped in a nightmare in which her mother was demanding to take her home. *I’m thirty. This shouldn’t be happening.*

She opened her mouth to say so, but Jonas cut in. “That won’t be necessary. Rachel will be staying here with me. When we

met up recently during a photography job I contracted her for, it didn't take long for me to realize Scott is my son."

Susan's eyes went wide.

"And, as his father, I have rights," Jonas said lightly but with a hint of unabashed determination. This was how he was when dealing with difficult guests, Rachel realized. "I want her here with me. We're going to be getting married. If not now, then soon."

Married. Where did that come from? He'd never even mentioned anything of the sort to Rachel. There had been no proposal. They weren't *there* yet. Waves of shock pushed themselves through the haze of the situation.

"I don't know that it's entirely up to you," Susan countered shifting slightly to look toward her, but Jonas followed her movement and blocked her view again. With a glare, she continued. "I know my daughter. I know this behavior is a sign she's in need of guidance. A steady home. People who know her."

"I know her." Jonas crossed his arms over his chest. "I know her quite well. And she'll be perfectly cared for here at my home. They both will be. We have all the staff we need to attend us if she's in need of anything."

It took everything for Rachel to stay on her feet. This was her life under her mother's thumb all over again. People talking about her instead of to her. People using her as a pawn. Even Jonas's confession about wanting to marry her struck her as false. Did he only want to marry her because her mother was here or out of some false sense of obligation?

There'd been no mention of love.

This was all wrong.

As they bickered on, the cold truth set in. Everyone's need for control would spill over until it engulfed Rachel, and she suffocated. Scott would suffer for it, too. She couldn't save him from that if she stayed here. The truth was staring her in the face as she listened to the conversation going on about her. Her stomach twisted.

“Enough,” Rachel snapped. “Mother, if you don’t back off right now—and I mean *right now*—I’ll block you from my life, and you’ll never see your grandson again.”

Her mother’s eyebrows shot up; her mouth parted in shock.

A shiver of power went down Rachel’s spine. She’d expected it to feel better, being powerful—but it didn’t. It felt like the world was crashing in on her, aching shoulder and all. “And Jonas, you’ll always have the chance to see your son but having a relationship with him doesn’t guarantee you a *wife*. I make my own decisions.” Rachel’s throat tightened, sore with pent-up emotion. “I’m tired of being pressured and bullied and controlled at every turn.”

Now it was Jonas’s turn to look shocked. Hurt. Crestfallen. “That’s not what I was trying to do. I want to be with you.”

“Then prove it. Let me go home. To my home.”

Up on the second floor, Scott made a noise in his crib. “Mama. Mama. Mama.” The familiar rattle of his hands against the sidebars drew her out of this impossible conversation and up the stairs.

Rachel went to him at once, using the opportunity to leave. It hurt, picking him up in her arms, but it was a balm, too. Scott popped his head down onto her shoulder, and she breathed in the still-baby scent of him. Rachel knew it wouldn’t be long before he’d be a full-blown preschooler, and then a kindergartener, and her son would spend the rest of his life slowly moving away from her. But in this moment, they were close.

Her mother’s voice came up the stairs, distorted by the distance enough for Rachel to ignore the words. The pain in her shoulder spiked up another notch. “I’m going to take something for the pain, which means we’re going to need a ride out of this place,” she said, not caring that her son wouldn’t understand.

She headed back into Jonas’s bedroom. Spotting her suitcases on the other side of the room, she nodded, relieved that not

only had the police had the foresight to grab them for her, but that last night, Jonas hadn't unpacked them while she slept.

Rachel sat down on the side of the bed and put Scott on the floor. He ran up to the suitcases and tugged at one of the luggage tags still attached to a handle while Rachel got her phone from the bedside table.

Annabeth answered on the first ring. "Happy extended holidays," she joked. "Do you miss me?"

"I do," admitted Rachel. "And I'm also calling to ask you a favor. A big favor."

"Yes. I will be your maid of honor," Annabeth said solemnly.

It almost made her burst into tears. "I don't need one of those," Rachel answered, her voice wavering. She swallowed hard and moved to get the bottle of pain medication. Half of one would get her back to Denver. She snapped the pill in her fingers and washed it down with the glass of water left on the nightstand. "What I need is a ride."

A beat passed. "A ride from where?"

"From Elk Lodge back to my apartment." Scott crouched down on the floor and started playing with the zipper on the suitcase. Rachel was going to need help to get them down the stairs, but she didn't want to think about that. "My mother showed up."

"Wow. Do I want to know?" She and Annabeth had too much history for her friend not to recognize the importance of the words. "Is she still there?"

"I will tell you all about it on the ride, but yes, she's still here. And I want to leave. Like yesterday." She cleared her throat. "But I'll settle for leaving as soon as you can get here. You could pick me up at the main entrance. I know it'll take you some time to get here, but—"

"Don't say another word. I'm on my way."

JONAS

“I can’t believe you’re letting her do this,” Rachel’s mother hissed, midway through the most excruciating hour of Jonas’s life. Rachel had insisted on leaving the house and waiting for her friend in the lobby. He’d followed her anyway, and so had Rachel’s mother. “That is your *son*. And you’re letting her get in a car with someone else and drive away?”

Christmas music played softly in the background in the Lodge lobby, soft and gentle, and completely out of place. Why were they still playing it? Jonas made a note to tell the front desk to change the playlist. It wasn’t Christmas anymore. The holiday atmosphere made no sense, particularly now that everything was crashing down around him. Again.

“Mrs. Lincoln.” Thank god for the years of running the resort, which gave him a deep well of patience. “I can’t stop Rachel from leaving the resort if that’s what she wants to do.”

“Well, you should *try*.” Susan had planted herself in front of the Christmas tree in the lobby. The tree was scheduled to come down after the twelve days of Christmas. Jonas wanted to tear the decorations off. “You have a responsibility to Rachel and Scott. You need to convince her that staying here is her best option.”

“It’s not up to me to determine what her best option is.” He couldn’t try to control this situation. She’d taught him that.

“Don’t be obtuse.” Rachel’s mother scanned the lobby with a hawk-like gaze. “They need you to step up and lead the family. You should already be married, and you know that.”

“That’s not—”

“It’s what’s best for all of us,” Susan insisted. “It’s the truth, and I won’t be persuaded otherwise.”

“I’m not going to pressure Rachel,” he said lightly. “She’ll decide for herself what she wants out of our relationship.”

A flash of rage transformed Susan’s face, her cheeks going a hot red. “I can’t believe you.” Her raised voice echoed off the ceiling of the lobby. “I’ve been here for hours, trying to get you to *see* that Rachel should be your priority and you’re dead set on avoiding it. She is the mother of your *child*. You are supposed to be from a good family. I’m disgusted and refuse to stay another minute,” she declared, her raised voice drawing the glances of several nearby guests. Susan threw up her hands and stalked toward the door. “Scott is your *child*,” she added loudly over her shoulder right before the door closed behind her.

“Yes, he is,” Jonas said, mostly to himself.

“Jonas?” His grandmother’s voice sent cold shock skimming down his spine, a sick twist to his gut.

No. Not like this. The worst possible moment. Jonas turned to face his grandmother, who stood by the Christmas tree wearing a black cardigan edged in silver. She’d wrapped it tight around her thin frame.

All the hiding was over. There was no vestige of pretense left, not with Susan Lincoln shouting about his son for all to hear. There was a certain relief to it, and then a wave of anxiety that made his stomach clench.

“Let’s sit down,” he suggested, pointing toward the sofa.

His grandmother sank down onto it, her demeanor one of exhaustion. The glow of tree lights reflected on her face, softening her expression.

“Jonas,” she said, continuing to look at the tree, “tell me what that woman meant.”

He hadn’t rehearsed what he was going to say. It was an odd departure from his usual habits, but he hadn’t. “The

photographer, Rachel Alexander, I met her before. Three years ago, here at the resort and we spent a night together.” The words stuck in his throat, but he pushed on. “She got pregnant, and Scott is our son. I didn’t know. I only found out when she came to the resort to take the photos for your Christmas gift.”

His grandmother’s hand drifted to her throat, her gaze never leaving the tree. The Christmas music cut in between them, filling the silence. *Say something. Please.* This was the kind of situation he’d always hoped to avoid. With her—with all his family. Being a disappointment when so much was expected of him didn’t come easy.

“You’ve known,” she began, then paused as if for strength. “You’ve known all this time?”

“Since Christmas Day. Five days to be exact. Not before then.” Heat flared on the back of his neck. Maybe he should have announced it that first day, without waiting another second. It would have been better than this.

“Oh.” The breath had gone out of her, it seemed, “Oh, Jonas. I’m so disappointed,” she said, her voice quavering. In a flash Jonas saw how frail she had become. She was still confident, but the cancer had robbed her of the gentle peace she normally exuded, and now he’d only added to her troubles. “A child out of wedlock.” She shook her head. “I didn’t ever want that from you. For any of my grandsons. I thought I raised you better than that. And to not know. How old is he?”

“Two,” Jonas managed.

“He was growing up without you. Without a father.” An excuse rose and died on his lips—*she didn’t have my phone number.* “And more than anything else, it breaks my heart that you felt you had to hide the truth from me.”

“I didn’t want to,” he said quickly. “Only temporarily. I was always planning to tell you. It was a matter of timing, and with the holidays and your...”

His grandmother held up a hand. “I’m not feeling well,” she said, her voice soft and even, but enough to slice through Jonas’s heart.

“Is everything all right?” Chase asked as he and Gabe approached from the other side of the tree.

Numb from guilt at hurting his grandmother, Jonas didn’t answer. Gabe leaped forward, taking control of the situation. “Let me help you up, Gran.”

Jonas stood, his heart heavy. “She knows.” Judging by the expressions on their faces, they knew exactly what he meant.

“I need to go back to my room,” his grandmother told Gabe, patting his arm. “Would you walk with me?”

“Of course,” his brother said, taking her by the arm and leading her away.

Jonas found himself fixated on the tree, as if its decorations could offer him some sort of advice.

“It didn’t go so well, did it?” Chase asked, crossing his arms over his chest. “Grandmother looked upset and rightly so.”

“The worst part was she didn’t hear it from me. It came from Rachel’s mother shouting it for all to hear across the lobby.” Jonas ran his hands through his hair trying to make sense of it all. “She probably did it on purpose. That woman seems to have impeccable timing.”

Chase had the grace to look abashed. “I’m sorry, Jonas. I wish it hadn’t turned out that way.”

“Please.” Acid rose in his throat. “You *do* wish that, deep down. You wanted Rachel to leave before.”

“Well, I don’t now.” Jonas met his brother’s eyes. “Not judging by the look on your face. You look...” He trailed off, not saying whatever it was he’d planned to say. Chase grimaced. “I was unfair before. I had a situation with Tana that wasn’t as complicated as yours, but I still didn’t do everything right.”

“That’s a far cry from breaking Grandmother’s heart,” he pointed out. Jonas’s heart had been flattened, beating with a kind of weakness that scared him. He sat back down on the sofa.

“I had my own shit to deal with on top of getting to know Tana.” Chase said, sitting down beside him, his mouth set in a thin line. “If it wasn’t for her, I might have never tried to ski again.”

Jonas shook his head. “No way. You were born to ski.”

“Not after my accident. I was convinced it was over and every moment I spent here, it was like another pinprick of a reminder that my entire life was over and it was eating me up inside.”

“But you don’t feel like that now, do you? You’re still here.”

Gabe reappeared then, dropping into a nearby overstuffed chair. “She’s settled in her rooms and asked to be alone. What did I miss?”

Chase snorted. “I was trying to tell knucklehead here that the women we care about, change us and it’s not a bad thing.” His expression went solemn again. “I wanted to be anywhere but here. Tana changed all that for me. And Lindsey.”

“Same here. If you hadn’t called about Gran’s diagnosis, I’d have skipped out on the holidays again this year. I’d thought that if Gran could see that my life was great, she’d stop worrying about me, and well, that was a disaster,” Gabe said.

“How is it that three grown men—who are successful, I might add—manage to act like teens when it comes to our need to please Elin Elkin?” Jonas asked and his brothers chuckled.

“If you figure it out, don’t tell us because we’ll probably screw it up again,” Gabe said.

“I don’t know if what I have is salvageable,” Jonas said. “I’ve really made a mess of it all.”

“Gran will forgive you,” Gabe said, his voice like a solemn promise. One Jonas wanted to hold on to.

“Maybe she will. But Rachel might not be so forgiving. Her past...” He outlined it for them in broad strokes, without giving away too many details. “How can I earn her trust a second time if she never really gave it to me in the first place?”

The brothers were silent. Across the lobby, a pair of guests laughed with Aimee, who was working at the check-in desk. The music had changed to a song about silver bells. Jonas felt the ghost of an old evening across his face, night air a long time ago. His parents' voices in the back of a sleigh on the grounds of Elk Lodge. He'd been trusting, then. Trusting they'd always be there, but it hadn't worked out that way.

"You should go after her," Gabe said softly. "I went after Anna. I flew back to Vegas with my heart in my throat, and so should you. Go after Rachel."

Jonas stood, ready to end the discussion. "She doesn't want me there," he argued.

Chase let his head fall back on the sofa. "Are you kidding? Of course she does. If she didn't want to be near you, she wouldn't have come back to let you take care of her. You should go," Chase added, seconding Gabe's suggestion.

Maybe they were right. No, there was no maybe about it. They were right. Jonas needed to fight for what he wanted. For what he loved. For his family. He patted his pockets. Keys—he'd need keys. And her address. And then what? He had no idea how to convince her that she could trust him, or that he would do anything to be with her and Scott.

Start by getting there.

His brothers rose from their seats, watching him. "Do you need anything before you leave?" Gabe asked. "Anything we can do here?"

It was on the tip of his tongue to say *no*, but... "If you can keep an eye on things for me here, that'd be great. Everyone knows their jobs, but it'd be good if you were here." It was the first time he'd ever left his brothers in charge of the resort and neither of them worked here. Yet. But that was an argument for another day. "And more importantly, I need you to make sure Grandmother's going to be okay. Tell her I'm sorry and trying to fix things."

Suspicion grew in Chase's eyes. "Are you coming back?"

“Yes.” Whether he convinced Rachel or not, he would be back. For most of Jonas’s life, the resort had been his one constant—the resort and his grandmother. Even the rest of his family had come and gone. But he wouldn’t abandon them, or this place. Never. It was only that he had someone else he couldn’t abandon, either. “I’ll be back. Keep the building standing, would you?”

Gabe and Chase shared a glance, and then Gabe looked back at Jonas. “Get out of here,” he said. “Rachel’s getting away.”

RACHEL

Rachel put her head back on the headrest of the passenger seat and sighed, her shoulder still ached even with the pain medication.

“Scott’s asleep,” Annabeth said, her gaze flicking to the rearview mirror and back. “Let me just—” She reached forward and adjusted the music down a few notches. Annabeth had turned on the local pop station back at the resort, and ten minutes into the trip, the beats had lulled Scott into a nap. “Okay. Tell me what happened.”

Rachel closed her eyes. “I told you most of it.” There wasn’t much more to the story. With each passing mile, everything seemed more and more simple, but also more complicated. Like looking into a funhouse mirror. Running into Jonas, the father of her child, had been a shock. The fact he was not the man of her dreams as she’d fantasized for years was a huge letdown. Except it hadn’t been simple realization. Instead, she’d fallen hard for him, making the truth hurt worse than she cared to admit.

“You did *not* tell me,” Annabeth said. “You told me how this started. You didn’t tell me what led us to this little road trip, and you said you’d fill me in. Spill it.”

“I like road trips,” Rachel pointed out, opening her eyes.

“I *love* road trips,” said Annabeth. “And you know I’d drive to the ends of the earth for you, but—”

“It was a dream,” Rachel said, the words bursting free. She whipped her head around to make sure she hadn’t woken

Scott. He slept on, his arms curled around the stuffed elk Jonas had given him. Her shoulder protested as she turned back around. “Elk Lodge is this ridiculously magical place during the holidays, and I got sucked into it all and thought that Jonas was the one. That he could love me for me. That he could be a good dad. Okay, that I do believe. He’d only been around Scott for a week, and I’m pretty sure he’d move mountains for him.”

“So what happened?”

“His brothers, for one. Or two. The jerks. They actually accused me of targeting Jonas for his money.”

“Ugh.” Annabeth’s eyes narrowed. “Is that when you left?”

“Like an idiot. And then I totaled my car. Jonas wanted us to stay with him after I got out of the hospital,” she said. “And then, when my mother showed up, he let her know that he planned to marry me. He hadn’t bothered to ask me, and I was right there in the room with them. It was as if I didn’t exist or matter.”

“What an ass,” Annabeth said. “He proposed to your mom instead of *you*?”

“Well—” Regret tightened Rachel’s throat. “Yeah. He did. He was right about staying with him. I was out of it after the accident, and the hospital had given me a bunch of pain killers, and they’d warned us that I shouldn’t be alone.” She shook her head. “My mother was in rare form. And he reacted the way he probably has for years about most things. He’s the head of his family. It’s natural for him to take charge when there’s something going on at his resort, and trust me, my mother *was* a problem.”

She’d never forget the sinking feeling when she’d seen her mother standing in the foyer of Jonas’s house. It had felt like all the worst parts of her past catching up with her.

“So what?” Annabeth kept her eyes on the road. “That doesn’t mean what he did was okay. You don’t have to accept his upbringing as an excuse for the way he acted. You’re not one of his relatives that he keeps tabs on. You’re your own woman.

He doesn't just get to *say* that he's going to marry you. Did he really say that?"

"Yes. He announced it. Like it was a done deal."

"A person can't *do* that," Annabeth insisted. "That's a discussion you have together."

"I know, Annabeth. I know." Rachel looked out the window, at the snow-covered hills rolling by them on the highway. Gray clouds hung low in the sky, and every so often the sun broke through.

Rachel had been so hurt at the way he'd completely ignored her when speaking to her mother that she'd needed to leave. She'd wanted him to prove his love by letting her go. And he had. She just hadn't been prepared for him to let her go without a fight, without trying to persuade her to stay. Without saying he loved her. But then, she hadn't said it either.

She shifted uncomfortably in her seat.

"Are you okay?" Annabeth asked softly.

"Not really," she answered.

Rachel would have to be okay by the time they got back to her apartment. Scott would need her, and her life needed her. She didn't have time to wallow in self-pity about what she could have said to Jonas. They'd had an amazing week together, but that was it. It was over. All that was left was to decide what to do about Jonas having visitation rights with his son. Not exactly an ideal situation.

You could have talked to him.

Annabeth shifted into the other lane and back again, remaining silent.

Rachel kept her gaze fixed on the snow—white like icing on a cake. Or white, like a wedding dress. She could almost see Jonas in a tux, looking devastatingly handsome and incandescently happy. None of which would happen because she hadn't bothered to hash things out with him. Instead, she'd left.

Rachel swallowed a lump in her throat fairly certain that she'd probably made the worst decision of her life. She shifted in her seat to check on Scott again. He was still asleep, the stuffed elk clutched to him as if he would never let it go. Turning back around, her shoulder sent a shooting pain across her back.

It was too much to think about right now. Not with her emotions so raw.

The rest of the way back to Denver, they listened to music and talked about nothing personal. Annabeth carried her things inside the apartment. She'd only been gone a brief time, but it felt empty and dark. Rachel moved through her small place, turning on lights, and Annabeth played with Scott on the living room carpet.

"I don't have anywhere to be," Annabeth said. "I can stay awhile. Want some mac and cheese, Scott?"

"Mac cheese," he repeated, and Rachel didn't have the energy to protest. Annabeth went into the kitchen, Scott hot on her heels.

Rachel sat on the sofa. A chance to breathe. It seemed like only minutes had passed, but all too soon, the two of them were ready to eat.

Annabeth put Scott in the highchair attached to the table. She put his bowl in front of him, a spoon in his small fist, and dropped into the next seat.

"Is it good?" Annabeth asked Scott.

"Good," he repeated, then turned in his seat and pointed his spoon at Rachel. "Mama, sit." She smiled at her son, loving each new word he learned to say.

"She's resting a minute," Annabeth told him gently. "You know, Rachel...don't overthink this. If he's not able to give you what you want, he's not the right man for you. I'm the last person who thinks you need to stay with him just because he's Scott's dad. Plenty of people coparent without living together."

"I know," Rachel said. But her friend's words didn't help. No weight lifted from her tired shoulders. Nothing helped. All she could think about was what it *would* feel like if she were

settling into Jonas's arms tonight as she remembered what it felt like when he held her close. Not that she wanted to admit that to Annabeth. "Thank you for sticking around," Rachel added.

"You want me to stay the night?"

No. That was the right answer. Rachel was a single mom, and Scott was her responsibility, and no one else's. And yet...help sounded nice. More than nice. "Yeah. The spare bedroom is already made up."

"Okay." Annabeth tickled Scott's arm. "Hear that, buddy? I'm staying the night."

"Stay," Scott repeated, shoving another bite of food into his mouth. Most of it anyway.

The three of them whiled away the afternoon, pretending nothing was wrong. Annabeth took Scott for a walk on the paths through the apartment complex, both coming in with pink cheeks and red noses from the cold. But it had been a wonderful respite for Rachel as she tried to sort out her life.

Annabeth ordered Indian food for dinner, and Rachel joined them at the table. The pain in her shoulder seemed to be letting up, at least a little. Every time the pain medication wore off, it hurt a little less. She picked her way through a plateful of butter chicken and naan. By the time they were finished eating, Scott was yawning, and starting to fuss.

"I got this," Annabeth offered. "Let me get him in his PJs."

Rachel was as tired as Scott looked, and she didn't have the energy to argue with her friend. She could hear them in the bathroom as Annabeth washed his hands and face, brushed his hair, and helped him with his miniature toothbrush.

"He's all yours," she said, coming back to the living room. Annabeth handed a sleepy boy off to Rachel.

She took him into his room, rocking him back and forth a minute in the shadowy dark, her son cuddled on her shoulder. Would it be like this if Jonas were here? Would they both come to the side of the crib, or would he wait for her in the living room, like Annabeth was doing now?

Scott didn't protest bedtime, lying down almost at once. Rachel was all for joining her son in slumberland, but Annabeth had other ideas, having turned on the TV.

"How are you doing?" her friend asked as Rachel sat in the overstuffed recliner.

"I'm all right. And I'm glad you're here," Rachel said. "Turn it up a bit."

The two of them watched TV until Rachel's eyes were burning, and she stood, stretching her good arm above her head. "I hate to say it, but I'm exhausted," she admitted. "Do you need anything before I go to bed?"

Annabeth gave her a long look. "I'm fine," she said. She stood, putting her arms around Rachel, careful not to jostle her. "Have a good sleep."

They went their separate ways, and for the first time all day, Rachel gave in to the urge to check her phone. She flipped through the notifications sitting on the edge of her bed. Missed call after missed call, all from her mother.

More importantly, none from Jonas.

Her shoulder hurt. Her chest hurt. Or was it her heart?

You wanted him to let you go, and he did. This is what you wanted.

Then why didn't it feel good? Why did it feel so awful he hadn't called? Not seeing his name on her phone screen was a gaping wound, even more painful than her arm. More painful than anything she'd ever experienced.

She turned out the light and curled up in her own bed, rolling over at the last minute onto a soft lump in the middle. Rachel searched with a hand and came up with the fuzzy shape of a stuffed elk. The emotions of the past week—of the past day, of the past hour—came crashing down on her, along with that old familiar letdown of the holidays being over. No more Jonas. No more holidays. No more merry and bright at Elk Lodge. No more Christmas music, and no more wild hope.

When she'd seen his face and his reaction to his son, it had swept over her like a wave. Now, just like a wave that had crashed into the shore and receded, the hope was gone, and she was left with an aching heart.

Rachel burst into silent tears, all of them dripping down onto her pillow. She cried and cried until, finally, sleep carried her away.

JONAS

Jonas should have left immediately. Even when he felt the temperature drop, he should have gotten in his car and left. When the sky turned pink, he should have already been down the mountain. Now, he was watching the snow drifts pile up quickly and cursing at himself for taking too long to leave.

Trudging back into the lobby, his brothers looked up at his approach. “Why haven’t you left yet?” Gabe asked.

He flopped back down across from his brothers and waved at the sky outside. “The snow’s coming down too fast and I won’t make it safely down the mountain,” he said, his plan rearranging itself around the new circumstances.

“You definitely don’t want to drive in this weather,” Chase said. “Gran sent a message that she plans to stay in her rooms the rest of the day and will have dinner sent up later.” A spike of fear drove itself through Jonas’s heart. This was all his fault. “I’m going up there.”

“Not by yourself, you’re not,” Gabe said, as his brothers stood, prepared to join him.

Jonas tried to let the warmth of the resort seep through him as they made their way to the elevator, but instead, he felt chilled to the bone. They rode up to her floor in silence. It’d only been a month since she’d announced her diagnosis, and he held out hope that the treatment would prolong her life, but all of the heartache the brothers had managed to heap onto her in the last three weeks couldn’t be helping.

Jonas tried the door and found it unlocked, a sign the brothers were welcome. Jonas shook off the last of the chill and tried to focus. A quick glance at Gabe told him he wasn't the only one feeling ill at the prospect of their grandmother's swift decline. What if this was the last time they had with her?

Jonas pushed the thought out of his head. He'd treat every moment he spent with her as the possible last one. That's what he should do with everyone just in case something went wrong and the people he loved were ripped out of his life. A new panic seized him—he'd let Rachel and Scott go without saying anything. His fingers itched to text her. But she'd asked for space. He was proving he could give it to her with his silence, though it felt hellish to do it.

Chase got to the bedroom door first and knocked softly. "Gran, are you awake?"

"Come in," she called right away.

They entered the lamplight glow of her room and found her sitting up in bed, propped up against the upholstered headboard, her hair in its usual elegant chignon. She had a small box with what looked like letters sitting next to her, a cup of tea cradled in her hands, and she looked out toward the sky. "Hello, boys. Have you seen the sky?" She gestured to the expansive window and the brothers turned to look. "Your grandfather called it the 'blue hour.' That special time as the sun drops just below the horizon. He used to tell me that it was always prettier up here and I have to agree."

Jonas leaned over her bed to kiss her cheek. "How are you feeling?"

"Exhausted," she admitted, her eyes traveling over each of them. There was such sadness there. Jonas pulled up a chair next to the bed. "Have you come to talk?" she asked.

"Yes," he said, reaching for her hand.

She put the teacup down and took his hand in hers. A silence fell over the room, almost prayerful, and Jonas waited.

"I don't understand," she said finally. "I don't understand how you could have kept this secret, Jonas."

He felt the weight of her gaze on him and took a deep breath. “When Mom and Dad died, our entire world ground to a halt. We”—he gestured to himself and his brothers—“were struggling with our grief and what we were supposed to do. You and grandfather were there for us. You reminded us that we weren’t alone, we were a family and we would get through it.” Jonas’s throat tightened at the memory, the old feelings welling up again. The devastating loss.

“I knew that with Mom and Dad gone, it would fall to me to run the resort one day and that was something I could do. To repay you for everything you’ve given to us. To me. And then Grandfather died, and the sadness we’d all pushed away came out again and I was hit with this need to protect you.” He kept his voice even, but it was a struggle. “I can’t let it go, this need to protect all of you.” Jonas looked at Gabe and Chase to make sure they knew he included them. “Somewhere along the line, it extended to everything—even unwelcome news. Anything I thought would upset you. I couldn’t stop. Especially now.”

Jonas sucked in a breath, the oxygen flooding his system. He’d finally been honest about the way his parents’ accident had upended him.

“Oh, Jonas,” his grandmother said, clasping his hand with a gentle firmness. “To have lost your parents at such a young age. Your grandfather and I, we thought that the best thing we could do for you was to keep moving forward. To give you guidance and set you up for success. But we didn’t talk about it. We didn’t grieve the way you boys needed to, and I worry that it’s happening again. Sometimes just moving forward isn’t the best thing to do.” Her eyes traveled around to his brothers, then settled back on him. “It can’t go on like this,” she said gently. “No matter what happens to me.”

“She’s right.” Gabe’s voice was thick with emotion. “You can’t do this forever. It’ll take you away from us just like a car accident would.”

The pressure bore down on him again, harder, before it let up. Gabe was right. But then a hand came down on his shoulder, then another, and his family surrounded him.

Chase added, “You have to let go of this worry you carry. The need to be in charge of everything. For the people you love, but also for you. It’s not healthy.”

Jonas held his grandmother’s hand. He found he couldn’t let go. They were all right—of course they were. It was only logical. You couldn’t fall asleep with an aching jaw and tense shoulders for years without knowing on some level that it wasn’t sustainable.

“Jonas,” his grandmother’s voice broke through the introspection. He raised his eyes from where they held hands and looked into her eyes. “I forgive you for not telling me about Rachel and Scott as soon as you found out.”

“Thank you,” he said, getting a full breath of air for the first time in what seemed like years. “Thank you. I love you.”

“I love you, too. I love all of you. And since we are confessing to things, I must admit that I have one as well.” Jonas froze and he could feel his brothers tense behind him. “I’ve known about my cancer diagnosis for some time, but I didn’t want to burden any of you with what was going on.”

Chase and Gabe immediately started talking over each other, but she held up her hand to silence them. “Chase, dear, you were struggling after your accident and in so much pain. And Gabe, you’d built a life for yourself away from Elk Lodge. And you, Jonas.” She squeezed his hand again. “You had shouldered so much. I thought that it would be best not to say anything while I began treatment, but we can all see now that keeping secrets isn’t good for any of us.”

Grandmother nestled back against the pillows. “Now, I think we’ve shared enough for today. Go. I’ll see you at breakfast tomorrow.”

“Yes, Gran,” Gabe and Chase told her as they all said their goodbyes.

Crisp air and starry skies guided Jonas’s walk home, helping to clear his mind. The storm had rolled over and disappeared into the night. His misery hadn’t. His grandmother’s forgiveness was a relief, but a deep sadness had settled in him. He’d lost

Rachel. And in a horrible Catch-22, the only way to prove his respect for her was to give her the space she wanted.

His home greeted him with a burst of warmth from the front door and another layer of quiet. Unwelcome quiet. It hadn't been silent when Scott stayed here, and Rachel had her own ways of creating sound, her own patterns on the steps. Jonas closed his eyes and let himself imagine them there one more time. Then he hung up his coat and went in, sitting on the sofa and opening his laptop.

There were always things to check on at the lodge, and he went through his email on autopilot. It was Rachel's name that stopped him in his tracks. Her name, there with the subject line *Extra Photos*.

His heart rocketed up into his throat as he clicked on it, trying to be nonchalant. And failing. Who was he pretending for? He laughed at himself in his empty house. Jonas ran a hand through his hair and braced himself for what might or might not be inside the email.

Jonas,

These were some photos that didn't make it into the album. Wanted to make sure you had them anyway. Enjoy!

—R

Promising, right? It was probably something she did with every client, but Jonas thrilled at the friendly tones. At least she wasn't telling him good riddance. Jonas clicked on the link at the bottom of the email. Another page opened, featuring a photo gallery with photos of his family.

Complete with vivid colors and natural smiles. She'd even caught his brothers with their new partners, looking so in love it took his breath away. But it was the photos of him with Scott that stole his heart completely.

Walking on the trails, holding his little hand, grinning down at his son. Tossing him up in the air by the Christmas tree. The two of them on the floor in this very room, Jonas helping Scott ride around on the stuffed elk.

The man in the photos was happy. Satisfied with the moment he was living in. He looked happier than Jonas realized he could be. Or had been.

It was what he wanted more than anything.

To be happy with Rachel and Scott.

He stared at the computer screen until his eyes burned and the images blurred in front of him, flipping through the pictures repeatedly. This was what he wanted in life. Nothing else. Nothing more.

Finally, he snapped the laptop closed and went hunting through his desk for a pen and paper. He took it back to the sofa and sat down, using the laptop as a writing surface.

Jonas was going to write Rachel a love letter. He wanted to paint the life together he saw—show her what they could have together.

The decision, however, would be up to her.

Jonas wrote tens of emails every day on behalf of Elk Lodge. None of them would ever come close to the weight of the words he was writing now.

He rubbed his eyes, trying to get them to cooperate, then took the pen in his hand.

Dear Rachel.

Once he started, the words began to flow until the paper was covered in his neat writing, front and back.

He'd said everything. Now all he could do was send it special delivery to her address, and hope.

RACHEL

Rachel's shoulder felt better after a night's sleep. Apparently, you *could* cry out a shoulder injury. It just wasn't as easy for heartache. It was New Year's Eve day, but there was nothing to celebrate—not for the year going out or the new one coming in.

Annabeth only stayed for breakfast, promising to call later in the afternoon to check on her. She'd been gone three minutes when there was a knock at the door.

"Beth," Scott cried, sprinting for the door. He reached for the doorknob but couldn't quite make it. Which was a good thing considering his hands were still sticky with syrup from the pancakes Annabeth had whipped up. They'd been excellent—fluffy, light, and delicious, and Rachel had eaten six, making her more than a little tired.

"I'm coming, buddy," Rachel said. Things were going to be okay, she promised herself as she made her way to the door. More than likely, Annabeth had forgotten something and had returned. Rachel pulled open the door with her non-injured arm. "What'd you forget, your—Mother?"

Her mother stood impatiently in the hall outside her apartment, snowflakes melting in her hair. "It's time for us to have a conversation."

The carb-coma Rachel had been about to enter disappeared in a flash, replaced with a stiffness in her back and a tension she didn't want or need. She couldn't believe her mother had

followed her here after she'd specifically told her to go away. The woman had some nerve.

Scott tensed behind her, and she reached out to steady her son. "This isn't a good time, Mother. I think it would be best if you called first instead of just showing up."

"Hello, Scott," her mother said reaching for Scott who backed away before she could touch him. "How's Grandma's little boy?" It was just like her mother to ignore Rachel's request.

"Goodbye," Rachel said. "We can talk when it's a better time."

Susan held out a hand to block the door from closing, then pursed her lips like she was tasting something sour.

"I'm sorry." The words clearly hurt her to say. Susan Lincoln hated apologizing even more than she hated bad photos of her in the press, which was a lot. "I'm sorry for the pressure tactics," she continued. "Could I come in?"

Rachel did *not* want her mother in her apartment, but short of pushing her out of the way and slamming the door in her face, she had no idea how to get her to leave. She turned to Scott, whose eyes were round as he stared up at his grandmother, who was nothing more than a stranger to him. "Scott, why don't you go play with your blocks, okay, buddy?"

Her son looked to her and nodded his head in a way that reminded her of Jonas. "Okay, okay," he told her before running over to them and flopping down on the floor.

Rachel took a steadying breath; the sound of the door clicking into place meant she wasn't going to get what she wanted. Again. It didn't help that she felt every inch of her apartment around her right now—the worn furnishings, the breakfast dishes still on the table, and the toys scattered all over the floor. She could see it in her mother's constant need to catalog all the ways Rachel didn't measure up as her daughter.

"I just want you safe." Her mother's expression brightened into a parody of excitement and love. "And I want you to be cared for."

She stopped herself from rolling her eyes, but it was a near thing. "I'm an adult, Mother. I'm managing fine on my own."

Never mind that Annabeth had stayed the night—that wasn't a sign of a bad mother or an incapable one. People needed help sometimes. Something she needed to keep reminding herself of.

“But wouldn't it be better if you married that Elkin?” Ah—*that* was why she looked so excited. She'd checked him out and found him to be a suitable candidate for a senator's son-in-law. “I know he's interested. We both do. Unless you somehow botched that deal up too.”

Wow. Rachel wanted to say so many things, but she couldn't choose just one, and they withered and died before she could select the perfect retort. That left an opening for her mother to continue.

“And if you *did* botch it, then I have other candidates. Daniel is still willing to take you back, even though you embarrassed him.” She hiked the strap of her purse higher on her arm.

So much for her hopeful mood. “I embarrassed Daniel? He's the one who cheated on me. If anything, he should be begging me to take him back.”

Her mother actually sputtered at that. “Well, you weren't even married yet, so it's not as if he actually cheated on you.”

“Oh, you did not just take his side. You need to leave. Now.”

Her mother's eyes burned with a fervency that made Rachel want to vomit. “I'm concerned for you, Rachel, that's all. If you're out here alone, then you're vulnerable. If your photography business went under, what would you do?”

Susan pressed her fingertips to her lips as if she was sick with worry about Rachel's business. “It seems to me your career is hanging in the balance, and if you were to lose all your work, then you might not be able to care for Scott.”

Rachel pushed away the thought that her mother's comments sounded less like concern and more like a threat.

Keep cool. Don't give her the satisfaction of losing it on her. “I will always be able to care for my son,” Rachel said in the most even voice she could muster. “If my photography studio had to close, I'd find another way to make money.”

“And how long would you go without?” Susan raised her hands in front of her like Rachel was committing to closing the studio today, with no plan. “If you didn’t have the money to take care of Scott, then you know that we, as your parents, would have to step in.”

Step in. Such small words, suddenly that small threat was looking enormous. *Stepping in* meant using all her power as a senator to take custody of Scott. Rachel saw it play out before her eyes—the court hearings where she’d get steamrolled, no matter how good a lawyer she hired. The inevitable ruling in her mother’s favor. Even her mother loading Scott into the back of her car, the same pinched look on her face. Her mother would consider it her highest duty to raise Scott “properly.”

Time to give her mother a taste of her behavior. “I don’t think that’s in Scott’s best interest. Or yours.”

Her mother’s eyebrows shot up, and Rachel continued. “Having an out-of-wedlock single mother as a daughter who is *also* an unfit mother would be the last thing that would look good on the campaign trail, especially if that daughter wound up talking to the press. What would people think?” Rachel pretended to think about it. “They might wonder how a woman like you raised such a terrible child.”

“This kind of talk is completely unnecessary.” There—there it was. She was leaning back on her own self-righteousness. “You know I would only do this to save Scott from harm.”

“He’s not in danger of being harmed.” This time, some of the acid in her heart leaked into her voice. “If you think that, then you’re delusional. And you should back off right now before I have you removed from the building.”

Her mother sniffed, and for a moment, Rachel felt the woman who had been so domineering all her life rise like a giant shadow that encompassed the room. It was like she was sixteen again, and in trouble for missing curfew by five minutes, only the stakes were so much higher. “Fine.” A tight reply from her mother. “I only wanted to discuss things with you. You’ve been having a difficult—”

“Mother.” She kept her voice sweet because Scott was in the room, but she couldn’t have felt less sweet. “I’ll have you removed from the building. And while I wait for security to arrive, I’ll call the local news.”

“You are insufferable.” Susan turned on her heel, not bothering to look at Scott, and wrenched open the door. “I’ll wait for you to come to your senses,” she said over her shoulder, and then she was gone, out into the winter morning.

When the door shut behind her, Rachel felt like a book was closing, or a doorway—or both. That chapter in her life was over. Her mother had crossed too many lines this time, and in a way, it freed her. She did not, under any circumstances, have to maintain any sort of relationship with the woman who threatened to take custody of her son.

“Mama. Pick up,” Scott said, and Rachel scooped him up into her arms and pretended to tickle his belly. This made him laugh, a deep belly laugh. Rachel never actually tickled him and that was a game between them. *I’m free*, she thought wildly. *We’re both free*. She reached for her phone on the table next to the couch, flipped through the contacts, and blocked her mother’s number. Paused, and then also blocked her stepfather and her chief of staff.

Yes! She had never felt more triumphant, except on the day that she gave birth to Scott—that was the strongest she’d ever been in her life. Except for now. “I did it, buddy. Mommy did it.”

He clapped his hands, cheering for her, even though he had no idea what she’d done. It would be a long time before he understood, if he ever did. The two of them danced around the living room in the bright light. There was no music playing, just the beat of Rachel’s own heart.

She hadn’t felt this fierce in a long time. Confident. Strong. And ...alone. When she set Scott down on his feet, he dove back into his blocks.

Threatening custody. What had ever given her mother the nerve? Years of being clear with her, of trying to set

boundaries, and it had come to this. *And you shut it down*, she thought. *You sent her packing.*

Celebrating with Scott felt good, although Rachel ached to share her victory with someone else. Someone who would understand and rejoice with her. Hug her.

Someone like Jonas.

Rachel dropped onto the couch and watched Scott play, trying to sort through what to do with the feelings that raged through her, trampling her heart. Why wasn't he *here*? Why didn't the phone ring? *Because she'd told him not to call.* But it seemed almost incomprehensible that he couldn't feel her out here, missing him.

Scott was the living image of Jonas, a constant reminder of everything she'd walked away from. Scott abandoned the blocks and sprinted across to his other toys, going straight for his favorite—the stuffed elk. He buried his face in it, crushing it to the floor. “Dada,” he said, the word breaking Rachel's heart into a million pieces.

“I know, buddy,” she said. “I miss him too.”

RACHEL

Another knock at the door that afternoon had Rachel nearly jumping out of her skin. She braced for it to be her mother again, driven back with more complaints about the different ways Rachel's life choices makes her job as a senator in another state difficult. Or Annabeth. She'd mentioned calling to check in on her, and Rachel wouldn't put it past her to show up instead, ice cream in hand.

Rachel opened the door to find a young man standing there in black slacks and a blue winter coat with a company logo on it. He glanced down at the tablet he held. "Ms. Alexander?"

"Yes, that's me," she said, eyeing the slim envelope he held in his other hand with curiosity.

"I have a special delivery for you. Please sign here." He held the tablet out toward her.

She scrawled her name on the tablet, and the man handed her the envelope.

"Enjoy your day," he said, turning to leave.

I'd enjoy it a lot more if people stopped knocking on my door. Rachel turned the envelope over and over in her hands. It had her name written on the outside, and that was it. No return address.

Dear Rachel,

I never knew how much I loved my family until I met you. I knew I loved them, of course, but I didn't know—not consciously, anyway—how far I'd go to protect them until I

saw you becoming a part of it. You and Scott. Meeting you again, after all this time, woke something up in the deepest parts of me.

I got your pictures. That's why I'm writing this, even though it seems silly to send a handwritten letter when we both have phones and emails and all of that. In those pictures, I saw the man I want to be. A man who's satisfied with his family. A man who's committed to protecting them but not overwhelmed with the responsibility. A man who can enjoy his days, just because the people he loves are nearby.

After you drove away, my grandmother retired to her room for the day. She was distraught over the fact that I hadn't told her about you or Scott. I've been trying so hard to protect everyone, taking so much responsibility for things that aren't mine to control, and it's because I've been terrified that I'll wake up one morning having lost someone else.

You showed me what I'm missing out on and I'm tired of never experiencing the joys of life. Especially the joy I can share with you and Scott. I'll try my best to let go of the need to control everything, but I will always want to protect you and Scott.

I love you.

I know it's too soon to say it. And I don't want you to feel pressured to say it in return or to do anything that makes you feel uncomfortable. I don't expect you to call or text even, if that's your wish. I just thought you needed to know the truth about how I feel. Whether you're with me or not, I want you to always be safe and happy.

If you need anything—and I mean anything—just ask, and I'll be there in a heartbeat.

All my love,

Jonas

Rachel held the letter to her heart, an ache spreading through her chest at the simple vulnerability of it. The stiffness of the envelope made her look inside, where she discovered two photographs. One of them was a copy of an older photo. A sob

escaped her throat as she gazed down at the older photo. A picture of Jonas, at about Scott's age, looking just like her son. And a man who looked just like Jonas, but older, held him in his arms, grinning at the camera. A dark-haired woman stood nearby, leaning in close—his parents.

The other was a clumsy selfie he'd snapped of the three of them. Scott was in Jonas's arms, his head thrown back, laughing. Rachel was laughing, too, but trying to smile for the camera. Jonas wore a half-smile that spoke volumes about how happy he was. To a photographer, the photo was off-center, and Scott was laughing more than he was posing. But none of those things mattered, except for the fact that the image radiated happiness.

She traced their faces in the photo, tears slipping down her cheeks. "Beautiful," she murmured to herself.

The rush of love overwhelmed her, slamming into her like an avalanche. Love. It described everything she'd been feeling but failed to admit. It was the answer she'd been searching for.

Jonas had made it clear he was standing back, honoring her wishes and letting her decide their future. Something her mother and her ex never let her do. She'd been so busy defending herself against the past—and, frankly, parts of the present—that she hadn't noticed her future trying to find a way in.



Jonas

The email confirmation of delivery assured Jonas that Rachel had received his letter. He resisted the temptation to call, since he'd promised he wouldn't do it. And he'd honor that promise no matter how difficult it was. Focusing on work, he went through the motions, doing anything and everything not to watch his phone—waiting for it to ring or a text to come through.

Jonas sat at a computer in the meeting room behind the front desk, checking on VIP records. This was, technically, a task he

delegated, but it required total focus and was therefore perfect for him. Normally. His mind wandered away from the words on the screen and back to Rachel at every opportunity.

And now he was hearing her voice.

He clapped both hands to his face and rubbed hard. Hearing things—that was beyond anything he'd ever expected. He should just go home before he made a costly mistake.

Jonas stood, knees cracking, and made his way out toward the front reception area. "I'll be at home," he said softly to Helen, who was prepping the drinks station, so they'd know where to find him. "If you need anything—"

"Thank you so much," a woman who sounded like Rachel spoke from the other end of the desk. "The room will be perfect, I'm sure." This was no sound-alike. It was Rachel.

His heart stopped. His breath stopped. He blinked—once, twice.

"Dada," Scott squealed when he spotted Jonas, reaching for him.

Jonas moved out from behind the desk in a daze and took Scott into his arms and hugged him tightly. "Rachel," he said, wanting to reach for her, but afraid that if he touched her, she would turn into a hallucination and be gone. "You're—"

She slipped the key card into her coat pocket and smiled. "Yes. I'm here. I mean we are here."

"But how? Annabeth? You don't—your car—"

"I've never seen you this speechless before." Her eyes glittered with pleasure. "I took an Uber." Her radiant smile deepened.

"You took an Uber from *Denver*?" Scott patted the sides of his face, nuzzling Jonas's cheek with his nose.

"It was the most expensive Uber of my life." Rachel laughed, but when she finished, her expression turned serious. "But it was worth it." She patted the handle of a single suitcase at her side. "There's something I need to say to you."

“What’s that?” he asked, never taking his gaze off her.

“I love you.” The words sounded so sweet coming from her lips, that it felt like champagne in his veins.

“I love you, too,” he said raggedly, not particularly caring that this scene was playing out for the front desk staff.

“I’m willing to give you a chance.” Relief. Complete relief.

“You are?”

“Yes. But if you get pushy or bossy, I’ll flatten you,” she said, poking her finger into his chest for emphasis.

Scott laughed. “Flat,” he said, clapping his hands.

“Flat,” Jonas agreed. “As a pancake.” He winked at his son.

“You gave me the respect I asked for, and now I’m giving you my trust. I’m not going to walk away again, Jonas,” Rachel said, her voice low and soft, every word meant solely for him.

“Good. Are you really planning to stay here in the lodge?”

“I didn’t know if you’d want me at your place.” She glanced down at the suitcase. “After—you know. After I left.”

He drew her to him, kissing her forehead, breathing in the scent of her hair. Rachel tilted her face up and caught him on the lips. She let out a sigh as she did so, and it struck him that she’d missed him, too. Jonas hadn’t been the only miserable one. The proof was there in the lines of her body, in the way she simultaneously pressed against him and relaxed like he was the only person she trusted to hold her upright.

“Come home with me,” he insisted, as Scott tugged at the collar of his shirt. “I want you there more than anything.”

“Anything?” She crooked an eyebrow.

“One step at a time,” he warned, and then he grabbed the handle of her suitcase, pulling it quickly across the lobby. Rachel did her best to keep up, huffing a laugh. “First things first, I’m driving you back to my place. And then—”

“Anything could happen,” said Rachel.

“Anything,” he said.

“Thing,” said Scott, thrilled to be part of it.

JONAS

Jonas had just put Rachel's suitcase in the bedroom when a text came through. He checked his phone screen.

Gabe: Sources say Rachel Alexander just checked in. Is this true?

Jonas: Yes, she's here. With Scott.

Gabe: We're all in Gran's apartment. Waiting for you.

Jonas: Be there soon.

"Rachel," he said, as solemn as a wedding proposal. "I'd like to introduce you to my family. Formally. Not only as the mother of my child, but as the love of my life."

She made a face, laughing. "That sounds *very* formal."

He put an arm around her waist and pulled her close, tasting her sweetness while Scott busied himself opening cupboards in the kitchen to investigate. He groaned against her lips, realizing how much he missed her, this, them. When she opened her mouth, he deepened the kiss and she fully melted against him. One hand slid up to cup the back of her neck and her hands slid up his chest, one pressing against his heart and the other holding tight to his shoulder.

He grunted in annoyance when his phone pinged again.

Chase: Tick-tock. Gran is waiting.

Looking at the message, he laughed realizing how much of a pain in the ass, he's been to his brothers. "It'll be okay, I promise. Trust me," he told Rachel.

“I do.”

The three of them made their way back to the lodge to meet up with the family. The scene in his grandmother’s apartment couldn’t have been more different from the night Rachel had left. Grandmother held court in the living room, with Lindsey and Tana on the sofa next to her. Chase and Gabe sat with Anna on another long sofa across from them, the fire crackling in the hearth and big band music playing on her sound system.

“They’re here! Finally,” Gabe called out when they entered the room, his brother standing to shake his hand. Chase joined them.

“Before you go any farther, we have something we need to say,” Chase said, looking at Rachel. “We both owe you a big apology.”

“Huge,” Gabe interjected. “We were absolute asses to you, which you didn’t deserve and should never have happened.”

“Well, this is interesting,” Jonas said just loud enough for them to hear.

“Don’t forget to promise that you will never do something that asinine again,” Anna called out from where she was sitting, and Jonas laughed. Rachel turned to look at Anna, who waved her hand at her. “Girl, make them grovel.”

Rachel frowned and both Gabe and Chase took a small step back and she took a step forward. They continued to move like that, and Jonas noticed a twitch of amusement around her eyes as she fought to keep frowning. Finally his brothers stopped moving and held their breaths as she stepped closer to them.

“Apology accepted.” They both breathed out. “But you both owe me. Huge,” she parroted back at them.

“Mama, down,” Scott demanded, breaking the standoff, and the mood in the room instantly brightened.

She set Scott down and he ran farther into the room, freezing when he saw everyone looking at him. Suddenly shy, he reached for Jonas and wrapped his arms around his leg, peeking out at everyone.

His grandmother held her arms out to Scott. “Are you my great-grandson?” she asked.

The room quieted. “Grandmother,” Jonas said, placing one hand on Rachel’s back and reaching down to put his other hand on Scott’s shoulder. “You’ve already met Rachel, Scott’s mother. And this is Scott, our son.”

“Hi,” Scott said, causing everyone in the room to burst into laughter, his expression priceless. Scott ran forward and climbed into his great-grandmother’s lap. The two of them seemed to know each other already, the little boy cuddling into her arms, and the last of the tension unknotted from Jonas’s heart.

“Proud of you, man.” Gabe put a hand on his shoulder. “And we really are sorry that we acted like jackasses, each in our own way.”

“I forgive you,” Jonas said magnanimously. “I’ve had my fair share of those moments over the years.”

“Yeah,” said Chase. “You have.”

Jonas thought his heart would burst with everything he was feeling. To have everyone here, with their partners, with their children, and ringing in the New Year. It was amazing.

Lindsey was the first to nod off in one of the big armchairs, and Scott followed her soon after, dropping his head onto his great-grandmother’s shoulder and falling asleep. Only the adults made it all the way to midnight.

“Champagne?” Tana asked, keeping her voice low for the sleeping kids.

“Absolutely.” Chase nodded. The two of them went to get the glasses, filling them with the bubbly fun before handing them out to everyone.

Lindsey shifted in her chair but didn’t wake, and Scott slept heavily. There was no chance the midnight celebration would bother them. The three couples gathered around the fireplace to watch the clock, making sure to position themselves to include their grandmother. Jonas’s heart beat heavily against his rib cage. This was it. The first year he’d be in this position,

the first year he'd leave behind the weight that had dogged him for what seemed a lifetime.

"Ten," Jonas said, when the second hand drew close, indicating with a wave of his hand for everyone to join in the count.

"Nine. Eight. Seven. Six. Five. Four. Three. Two. One," they all said in unison.

Everyone called out a Happy New Year cheer, but then the room fell silent.

"Happy New Year," Rachel said softly, their heads drawn close for a more personal wish. Jonas pulled her in and kissed her. She tasted like champagne sweetness, hope, and his future. Vacations and holidays and love. So much love.

After a long minute he came up for air and found his grandmother looking out over all of them with pride shining in her eyes. Pride and love. Her shoulders were relaxed, as she stroked Scott's back idly, utterly content.

Thank you, Lord. If his grandmother was happy, then Jonas could truly move into this New Year without regret. He could lay it down and let it go.

Rachel put her hands on either side of his face and drew his attention back to her. "What's on your mind?"

"My parents," he said, an image of them before the accident coming to mind. They'd been happy. Nothing had ever burdened them as much as Jonas's past would come to. Not that he'd known of, anyway. "And you, and Scott, and how we have a future together."

Across the room, Chase picked up Lindsey in his arms, gesturing to Tana, and they said their goodbyes. Anna and Gabe sat down on either side of Grandmother. Jonas leaned over and took Scott from his grandmother's arms, cradling him against his chest in the hopes of letting him stay asleep. Jonas pressed a kiss to the top of his grandmother's head. "Happy New Year."

"And many more," she answered with a wink. "Get that little boy to bed."

Scott slept on while he and Rachel drove back to his house. Between them, they managed to get him changed into his pajamas and into the crib without waking him. Jonas glanced around the room, thoughts of what needed to be done to turn it into Scott's room coming to mind. Whether they stayed there or not, it was important for his son to have a space of his own.

In Jonas's bedroom, they shut the door behind them, and Rachel reached for the hem of her sweater. She pulled it off in one smooth movement, and Jonas followed suit, taking off his shirt—and everything else. Soon enough, there was nothing between them, and she came to his arms naked and beautiful and wanting.

He kissed her again, taking her down to the bed, a heavy sense of satisfaction settling deep inside him. Everything he did from now on would be a symbol of his commitment to her—even this. He kissed her, starting at the apex of her legs, sucking her gently until he was coaxing little moans from Rachel's mouth, and until she was wet to the touch. He dragged his fingers over her softest flesh, gathering her juices to taste them. She groaned at the sight of him licking her off the pads of his fingers, and then Rachel pulled him back down into another hard kiss.

She twisted, pushing him onto his back, and crawled over him. Jonas ran his hands over her hips, tugging her into position. His head swam with champagne and emotion, but it all focused into a single point when she notched herself onto him and sank down, taking in his full length.

“Yes,” he hissed, pressing his lips to the side of her neck. “Yes, yes, yes.”

“This is our first New Year together,” she panted. “I've had too many without you.”

“Never again,” he vowed. Jonas kissed all the skin he could reach. The curve of her shoulder. Her bottom lip. The line of her jaw. He kissed her as she rocked into him, taking the illusion of control.

After a while, she melted into him, and he took over, working her hips for her, bringing her down hard against him. Pleasure

sparked at the base of him and rose up his spine, cresting in a wave of shuddering release. Rachel arched her back to meet him, clenching around him, coming with her head thrown back and his hands on her skin. He touched her everywhere, running the pads of his thumbs over her nipples and grazing her hips and tugging her down, down, down.

There was no better way to start the New Year.



Rachel

Rachel fell gracefully to the pillow when they were finished, stretching her arms above her head. “I’ve always been into you. Do you know that?”

Jonas looked at her, his head propped up on one elbow, eyes glowing. “What’s that mean?”

A rush of images came to her, one by one. Seeing him in the lodge restaurant that first night, the first time she’d become aware of his existence. Jonas over her in bed, his powerful gaze concentrated only on her face as if she were the only woman in the world. Driving away from the resort afterward, knowing that she was leaving a piece of her heart behind.

“I mean, I’ve been drawn to you since the moment I first saw you.” She traced the line of his lips with one of her fingertips. “I wanted you,” she admitted. “I wanted you so much it was like the pull of gravity. But back then, I wasn’t ready for a relationship of this magnitude.”

The world seemed to shift around them—was still shifting, even as they lay here safe in bed. It was rearranging itself to get out of their way. Nothing would stop her from being with him now. Not her mother, not her past—nothing. “I’m so lucky that we’re here together, now.”

He stroked her hair, gazing down at her with the same intensity as that very first night. “Me too,” he murmured. “Which is why we should talk about the future. If only briefly.” Jonas cracked a smile that sent another wave of

pleasure down to the tips of her toes. “I know it’s late, and you’re tired.”

“What about the future?” As if to prove him right, Rachel yawned, unable to stop herself. “I’ll talk about anything with you.”

“Where do you think you might like to live?”

Her thoughts wandered back to Denver, to her apartment and her studio. “I have my photography business to run, and that’s an hour away from here,” she mused. “I could divide my time.” Something didn’t feel quite right about that.

Jonas nodded thoughtfully. “Or you could live here with me.” There was no pressure in his voice, no demand, only a simple statement of fact. “I’d like you and Scott to stay here, and I can promise you that if you did, I would never do anything to interfere with your business. I’d rent you any studio space you wanted, either here at the Lodge or in town. There are a couple of places I’ve seen that—” He laughed, stopping himself. “It’s entirely your choice. But I want you to know that the offer stands.”

“You want me to live with you?”

“Desperately,” he whispered. “I want to fall asleep with you in my arms every night and wake up next to you every morning. If you need to live in Denver, then I’ll find a way to make that work, but being apart—for me, that can only be temporary. I love you too much to be apart for long.”

“And I love you,” she said, sinking into the warmth of that truth. “I love you so much.” What did it matter if she worked in Denver or worked here? Her loyal clients would still work with her, and she could find new clients. Right here at the resort was an entire market at her disposal.

Most of all, there was Jonas. Jonas’s smile. Jonas’s laugh. Jonas’s body next to hers in bed. “I’ll live here with you. I want that, too. And a little storefront in town where I can set up my studio and keep all my photography gear, which you haven’t seen yet, but there’s a lot.”

He kissed her then, and she felt his happiness through that kiss. It encompassed her and sent a thrill through her all over again. “Oh,” she groaned. “When you kiss me like that, it makes me want you so much.”

“You have me,” Jonas said, climbing over her, pressing kisses to her skin. “For now, and always. Are you sure you’re not too tired?”

“Mmm.” She tilted her head to give him better access to her neck. “When you kiss me like that, I find myself waking up,” she admitted, running her hands over his shoulders, his chest, and his abs.

He nipped at the sensitive spot on her neck and then pressed a kiss there, and she shuddered in response. “If you’re tired, we could always wait until morning, assuming Scott isn’t awake yet.”

“Oh no you don’t, Jonas Elkin. You will make love to me this instant and none of this ‘wait until morning crap.’”

Jonas laughed and then kissed her breathless before leaning across her to grab a condom. Snatching it out of his hand, she ripped the foil and smoothed it on over his erection. Lifting her leg, he had her drape it over his hip. and he slowly entered her, each torturous inch stretching her until she felt full. Full of Jonas. Full of his love. Full of an immeasurable joy that would only grow.

“I love you, Rachel Alexander,” he murmured into her ear. “With all my heart.”

“I love you, too, Jonas, but if you don’t take control and start moving, I will.”

Chuckling, he kissed her and then flexed his hips, sliding in and out in long, glorious strokes that made them both moan in pleasure. There were definitely some things that Rachel was more than happy to have Jonas control. Then again, she couldn’t wait to see his response when she was in charge. She was sure they’d both love it.

JONAS

ONE YEAR LATER

“I thought this would get easier,” Jonas told his brothers as they stood near the fireplace in their grandmother’s apartment. Rachel’s voice filtered over from the sofa. She and Scott, now three, were having an animated conversation about dogs, and Jonas thought his heart would give out at any moment. He patted the ring box in his pocket one more time. It was still there. “I don’t know if I can do this.”

“You can,” Gabe reassured him. “You’ve done everything right.”

“I know,” he said quickly. “I know. What if she says no?” he asked, no longer afraid to let his fear show. Jonas had wanted to propose to Rachel for the past year, ever since she’d come back to the Lodge for New Year’s Eve. But he’d waited, not wanting to pressure her.

“She’s going to say yes,” Chase chimed in. “I know it. Just ask her. It’ll be perfect. And just think, Gran could be here for the wedding.” Chase cleared his throat, suddenly seeming choked up. “We could all be there.”

“Okay.” Jonas took a deep breath. “Hang out with the others for a few minutes, would you?”

“Of course.” The two brothers wandered back into the living area, and Jonas went to where Rachel stood in a clutch with Tana and Anna. “Hi,” he said into her ear. “Could I steal you away for a minute?”

“As many minutes as you want,” she whispered back, giving her friends a little wave.

The two of them went down the hall to a large study nearby. Jonas instantly felt relaxed walking into it. His grandmother had kept their grandfather's collection of books intact, and it was like she'd gathered the whole family here to support him. The past was all around him, in the books on the shelves and the voices filtering in from down the hall. Jonas drew Rachel over to an enormous picture window near the fireplace that looked out over the ski hill, lit up for the night and watched over by the stars.

Rachel took his hand. They looked at the scene together until Jonas's breathing settled into a regular pattern. "What was it you wanted to talk about?" she murmured.

He got down on one knee, still holding her hand. Rachel gasped, her eyes instantly filling with tears. "I wanted to tell you that I've never loved anyone like I love you." Emotion threatened to overwhelm him, but he swallowed it back. "You're everything to me. You're the sun and the moon and—the entire universe, really."

She giggled, squeezing his hand.

"I want to spend the rest of my life with you. Will you marry me?"

Rachel stared, her eyes wide with wonder. Jonas remembered this look—it was the way she'd looked at him from across the restaurant on the first night they met.

"The engagement can be as long as you want," he said quickly. "If you feel any pressure at all, you can say no, and we can leave this behind us—"

"Yes," Rachel said. "Yes." The second yes came out as a delighted cry, and she threw herself down to her knees and wrapped her arms around his neck, kissing him hard and fast. He could taste the salt of her tears on her lips. "I'll marry you. I'll marry you tomorrow if that's what you want."

Jonas took the box out from his pocket and opened it, watching the progression of emotions on her face—anticipation, then shock, and then deep joy. "Jonas," she gasped. "This is gorgeous."

It was a diamond solitaire set in platinum. “This ring reminded me of your beauty and perfection.” Jonas took the ring from the box and slid it onto Rachel’s finger, and the two of them watched the fire reflected in its surface. “I’ve been nervous all day,” he admitted.

Rachel put a finger under his chin and raised his eyes to hers. “I’ve been a little nervous today, too.”

“Why?”

She bit her lip, eyes shining. “I’ve got big news to tell you.”

His heart thudded, running through the possible scenarios in his mind.

“I’m pregnant,” Rachel whispered.

Joy shot through him like fireworks—hundreds of them. He kissed her, clumsily in his state of shock, then pulled back to look at her face. “You’re pregnant,” he repeated.

“And you get to be there for the whole thing this time. I—” Rachel’s voice was thick with tears and love. “We’re going to do this together.”

He was over the moon. Jonas ran a palm over her belly, imagining what it would look like when it started to swell with his child. Their child. He hadn’t allowed himself to think any more about missing her pregnancy with Scott, but now his heart cracked open with it. Getting to be there would heal him in ways he couldn’t begin to anticipate. It would heal her, too. She wouldn’t have to do this alone. He’d be by her side at every opportunity. “Pregnant,” he said again. “With my baby.”

“With your baby,” she said with a laugh. “And if it’s a girl, I’d like to name her after Elin.”

Oh, she knew just how to get to his heart. “Let’s go tell her and everyone else.” Jonas was wild with joy, and it was all he could do to keep from running back to the living room. The last year had been a miracle, every single day a blessing shared with Grandmother. And now, he had another blessing to share with her.

They burst into the living room and Jonas raised Rachel's hand high in the air. "We're engaged," he announced. It was not the smooth announcement he'd imagined, but it didn't matter—his family erupted into applause and cheers. Scott came running to leap into his arms. "And Rachel is expecting," he added, letting the cat out of the bag.

Another round of cheers, and Tana and Anna descended to hug Rachel. Grandmother got up a bit slower, but she joined in, too. She came to him first and squeezed his hands. "Congratulations," she whispered. "I'm thrilled for you. The both of you."

"If it's a girl, her name will be Elin," he said, his voice low as he shared the wonderful news. "We're going to name the baby after you."

Grandmother patted the sides of his cheeks, a sheen of tears in her eyes. "That's lovely," she said. "That's the loveliest thing I've ever heard." She turned away from Jonas and went to Rachel, drawing her in for a big hug. "When do you think you'll be married?"

Jonas saw the hope in his grandmother's eyes. Every day that passed was a loan from the universe, he knew—and they were grateful for every single one. Rachel met his eyes. "Valentine's Day."

"Valentine's Day!" Tana clapped her hands. "I love it. The entire world will be celebrating with you. We'll *all* be celebrating with you. I can't wait."

Jonas stepped over to Rachel and wrapped his free arm around her while Scott hugged him hard. "Daddy, pick me up, pwease?" he asked softly, his three-year-old vocabulary much improved. It was his favorite thing to say, and Jonas hoped he never stopped.

"Of course, kiddo," Jonas told him. He turned to Rachel. "I love you," he said. "I love all of you," he added, earning himself another laugh from his brothers. "Merry Christmas."

"Merry Christmas," they all replied.

It was time for Christmas breakfast, then there would be presents, but for Jonas, it was time for the rest of his brand-new life to begin.

EPILOGUE

Three years later

Jonas stood at the viewpoint that overlooked Elk Lodge, the first snow of the season having blanketed the area in a dusting of white powder.

“Is everything ready?” Jonas asked Gabe, who looked to his wife Anna for confirmation.

Anna tapped through a list on her tablet before nodding. “Everything should be set. I’ve got drones flying taking video of the resort from all angles. They’ll sweep around to catch the far end of what was the Blue Diamond. As soon as you do the ribbon cutting, the greatly expanded Elk Lodge will be open for business,” she practically shouted, making Gabe chuckle.

“I swear, my wife is way more excited about all the PR she’s done for Elk Lodge than she ever showed working for my software company,” Gabe told them and Anna smacked his arm with the back of her hand.

“Marketiq never really needed my help, babe. You created a primo product.”

“And you sold it for how much?” Chase asked, joining the growing group.

“None of your business,” Gabe said, wrapping his arms around Anna and pulling her back to lean against him. His hand landed on Anna’s growing belly, and she smiled up at him.

The last three years had been exciting, and the Elkin family had grown with little Elin born first, followed by Tana and

Chase's son, Trevor, and then baby Ashley, who was due in March.

Chase was still enjoying his job as sports director, and Gabe shut down his California office in favor of switching most of his staff over to remote work. His developers were happier, and they had the option to work out of the Las Vegas office. Gabe split his time between Vegas and here at Elk Lodge. Anna became highly sought after for her social media magic, so she tended to pick and choose her clients.

Anna had used Rachel's photos all over social media, and Rachel now had a waiting list of clients. She'd recently expanded her studio to include a larger gallery. Susan Lincoln had won her senate seat and found herself divorced from husband number two. After Elin was born, she'd reached out to Rachel, but it had been tense.

There were shouts from below, and Jonas watched a large group of people get out of several SUVs.

"Looks like the gang's all here. Come on, let's go say hi." Chase led the group down the hill to meet up with the arriving party.

"Go on, I'll be right there," Jonas told them. He watched his brothers and their families jog down the hill to embrace the Dentons and their wives.

"Don't you want to say hi?" Rachel asked as she joined him. "You haven't seen them since Amelia got promoted to director at Grayson, and she's looking fit to pop. Jules said that Josh almost canceled, he was so concerned about her flying until her doc gave her the go-ahead. She keeps threatening to keep him out of the delivery room if he doesn't lighten up."

Jonas laughed, wrapping his arms around Rachel and kissing the top of her head. "This is their first child; I'm cutting him a lot of slack, given how overprotective I was when you were pregnant with Elin."

"Don't remind me. You kept trying to feed me. I was so happy when both Chris and Mara blocked you from FaceTiming them all the time for cooking suggestions."

“Well, all you wanted to eat was that horrible cereal and tacos. Of course I was going to try to get you to eat something healthier.”

Holding hands, they walked back to the lodge entrance. Gabe had stopped in front of a bench with a plaque on it, commemorating both Richard and Elin Elkin. “I wish she could be here for all this. The expansion of the resort, the expansion of the family.”

After Elin Elkin passed, it had been Rachel’s idea to install a friendship bench visible from his grandmother’s apartment, and the brothers often met out here, spending a quiet moment together.

Rachel squeezed his hand. “She’s here. Both of your grandparents are. And if she could say it, she’d tell you how proud she is of you for everything you’ve accomplished. Of all of you.”

It had taken more than a year for the purchase of Blue Diamond to go through and then several more months to get all permits required for the renovations. Jonas’s grandparents had long ago drawn up dream plans should they ever have the chance to buy the property, and the brothers had managed to make most of it a reality. The boutique resort would cater mostly to private groups, and thanks to both Chase’s and Chris Denton’s connections and Anna’s social-media savvy, they had a waiting list before the place was scheduled to open.

“Elkin! Get in here. We’re all waiting for you,” Mitch Denton shouted at him. Jonas raised his hand in a wave.

Leaning down, he kissed Rachel. “Thank you.”

“For what?”

“For being you. For keeping me sane. For not letting me get too overbearing.”

“Elkin!”

“We’re coming,” Jonas shouted back as they laughed. He tugged on Rachel’s hand. They jogged the rest of the way to the double doors and walked inside to loud talking and laughter.

He was immediately surrounded by the Dentons, each one reaching out to with greetings and congratulations. Mitch and Jules were there with their three children, and Jonas couldn't resist commenting on Mitch's *very short* haircut.

"Just you wait. You keep expanding the resort like you are, and you'll have thinning hair too," Mitch declared, and everyone laughed.

Josh and Amelia were next, and Amelia and Rachel embraced like old friends as Jonas reached out to shake Josh's hand. "Good to see you. Looks like the baby is coming soon."

"Yeah, I was going to cancel, but—" Josh started to say before Amelia interrupted him.

"But nothing." She leaned sideways to give Jonas a kiss. "I'm fine. We're fine. Thank you for having us."

"I did the same thing until Rachel yelled at me. I was driving everyone up the wall." Jonas smirked and shook his head.

Chris said something, and there was a loud chorus of laughs, and Mara reached out to hug the both of them. "Our cookbook just got featured in the *New York Times* and he's been asked to do a bunch of guest appearances. He's been flying high since he found out," Mara told them.

"That's fantastic. Congratulations," Jonas told her.

Lindsey came running over and tugged on Jonas's sleeve. "Mom and Dad say it's time."

"Thanks, kiddo. Ask them to have the drinks brought out."

"Okay." At ten, Lindsey still tended to have a bit of a limp if she was overtired or did too much, but she had become an amazing skier. Tana had even allowed her to enter a couple competitions, and she was excited to compete in a local slalom in December.

Jonas finally pulled off his coat and walked to the center of the room. Scott and Elin were clustered next to Lindsey and Trevor. "If I could have everyone's attention."

He waited while they settled down and turned toward him. "Servers are coming around with drinks. The drinks with the

blue ribbons are all nonalcoholic and the ones with silver ribbons have alcohol.”

He waited again, as everyone reached for drinks. Amelia had grabbed blue, Josh silver. Both Mitch and Jules had grabbed silver as did Chris, Gabe, Chase and Tana. Anna reached for blue as did Mara *and* Rachel.

“I want to thank everyone for coming out. It means it lot to all of us that you would be here on this day.” Rachel was playing with the blue ribbon on her glass and Jonas couldn’t think of what he’d planned to say next. “I, uh...just a second.”

He went over to Rachel, Anna and Mara stepping to the side, and took her hand. “Does this mean what I think it means?”

She grinned back at him and gave a small nod. “Just found out.” Jonas gave a shout and wrapped his arms around her, hugging her tight. “So does that mean you’re happy?” she asked him, stretching up to kiss his cheek.

“I’m very happy. Thank you for everything,” he murmured while everyone congratulated them. Finally lifting his head, he gestured to Mara. “Hey, Chris, how good’s your family leave policy?”

“My what?” Chris looked around and Jonas pointed to Mara’s glass. Chris’s eyes widened when he realized what he was looking at. “Mara? Do you have a bun in the oven?”

Mara laughed as everyone let out a collective groan. “Yeah, Babe, I’ve got a bun in the oven.” Chris let out a whoop and hugged her, lifting her off the ground.

Everyone talked over each other, the excitement flowing around the room. More drinks were poured, and eventually everyone quieted. Jonas cleared his throat to get their attention.

“So, I had this whole speech planned out, and I think I’ve forgotten most of it.” There were chuckles. “Our grandparents always talked about why they built this place. They wanted it to be a place for families to make memories. Looking around at all of you—my family and friends who knew Elin Elkin well—she would have been delighted to see all of us so happy

and *prolific*.” He dragged that last word out, making everyone laugh.

He held his hand out to Rachel, who joined him, twining her fingers with his. He lifted their hands, kissing her knuckles. “Have I told you yet today that I love you?”

She leaned up to kiss his cheek. “At least a dozen times, and I love you too. Now finish the speech already, I’m hungry.”

Jonas laughed again. His heart was so full, he didn’t think he could hold it in. Five years ago, he never could have imagined a life like this, filled with the happy sounds of children, the sweet noises Rachel made when she didn’t think anyone was paying attention, and the absolute love and joy he felt every single day.

“My wife tells me I have to hurry up because she’s hungry.” He blew out a breath, needing to get serious. “Chase, Gabe, come here.” When his brothers joined him, he shifted, so they were standing in a line. Raising his glass, he waited for them to do the same. “As we celebrate the opening of the new resort, we also wanted to take this moment to celebrate the woman who raised us. I don’t think we would have become the men we are today if it wasn’t for her. To Elin Elkin.”

Everyone raised their glasses, answering the toast. “To Elin.”

A small toddler voice piped up. “To me?”

Jonas reached down to scoop up his three-year-old daughter and hugged her tight, and then joined the others as they headed into the restaurant.

Another Elkin generation was born, and Jonas hoped that some of them would choose to work in the family business. But if they chose to find their own path, that was okay too. Elk Lodge would still be here welcoming them. That’s what you did for family.

**END OF THE BILLIONAIRE'S
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CHRISTMAS WITH THE ELKIN BILLIONAIRES BOOK THREE

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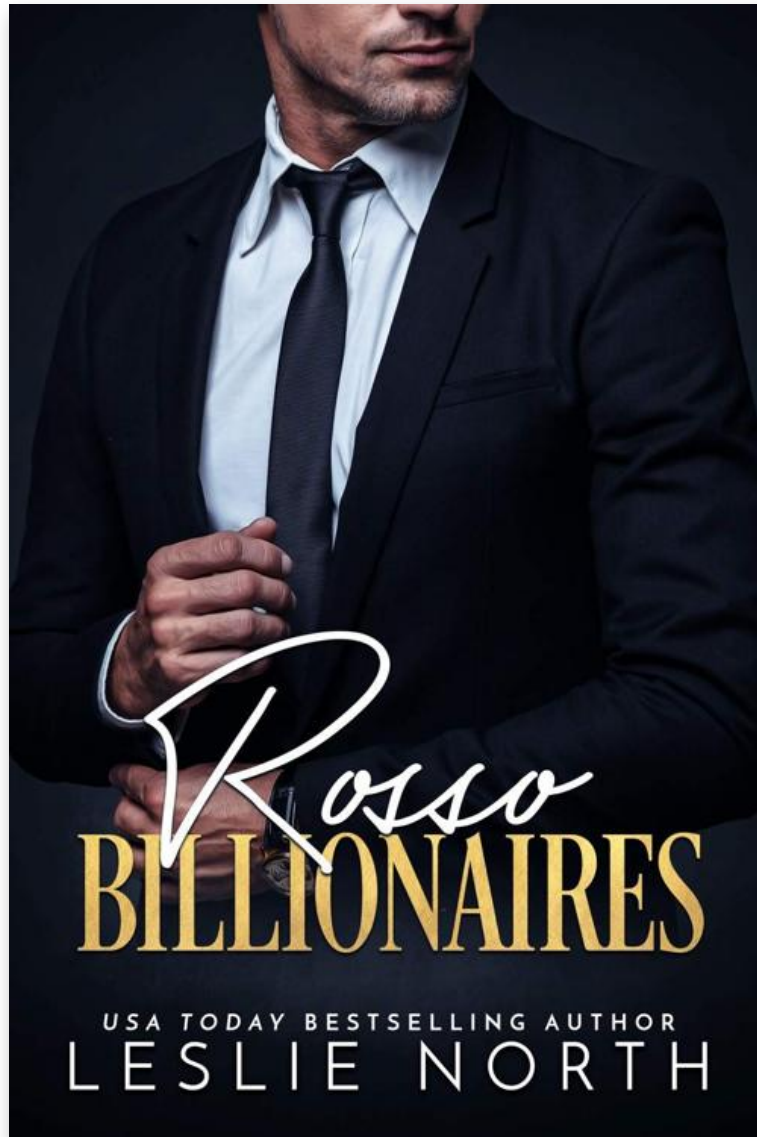
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EXCERPT

Chapter One

Antonio

“You’re stalling, Petrakis. Get on with it,” I said when the attorney paused again while reading Matthias Rosso’s will. I didn’t miss the way Petrakis’s eyes went to the open boardroom door. “Or are you expecting someone?”

Rather than answering, Petrakis cleared his throat and focused on the will in front of him, flipping pages as if attempting to find his place.

“You were listing the properties our father owned,” Alexandra said. My sister’s tone was kind, with just a hint of humor. In

that, and in her dark beauty, she was so much like our mother had been. Whenever she spoke, I could almost hear my mother cajoling me to eat my vegetables or leave my stinky shoes outside at our villa on Kato Antikeri.

She'd been gone for years, and now my father was, too. Gone a month. His death was shocking in its suddenness, but Matthias Rosso had never been one to take his time or ease into things. When he wanted something, he barreled through any obstacles to get it. And then, as soon as he was done with it, he dropped it like a bad habit. I could almost picture him deciding he was done with life and then dropping dead on the spot. If anyone had that kind of sheer, stubborn willpower, it was my father.

And now the man was gone—all that power and authority snuffed out for good. There was nothing left for me and my siblings but to get through this reading of the will and learn how Matthias had chosen to divvy up everything he'd left behind.

“Eva, would you pour me a glass of water?” Petrakis directed his request to the youngest of us, probably assuming she'd readily do it.

“Here you go.” Eva only nudged the pitcher and a glass closer, not directly calling him out but still making it clear that she wasn't his assistant.

I gave Eva a subtle nod of approval, getting a wink in exchange. Then I turned back to the lawyer. I was enough my father's son to have no patience with stalling tactics. “What does our father's will leave us?” I leaned across the table. “Spell it out. Now.”

Petrakis gulped nervously but began to read. ““To my daughters Alexandra and Eva, I leave each a trust fund of fifty million US dollars to be administered by their older brother, Antonio, until each of my daughters reaches the age of twenty-five. If either of my daughters should marry before the age of twenty-five, I leave it up to my son to release the trust or to continue to manage it.”“

Irritation tightened my jaw, and my low growl made Petrakis glance at me. “Your father was concerned about fortune hunters.”

“Obviously. He must have forgotten that my sisters are intelligent women able to make their own choices about men and money,” I said.

“It is the twenty-first century,” Alexandra added dryly.

“Yes, well, Matthias wanted you all to find the right partners in life.”

What Father wanted was to do the finding himself. He never approved of our choices.

There had been one time, just one, when I had lost my head when it came to love. I’d gotten so tangled up in an American student studying in Greece that I hadn’t known which way was up. My father had been horrified, convinced that the girl was a gold digger. He’d thrown money at a private investigator who’d delivered a stack of suspicious pictures and a whole trove of nasty insinuations. The next time the girl had come to see me, Father had been there, eager to let her know exactly what he thought of her trying to get her hooks into his son.

The girl had fled, crying, and she’d never returned. Father had said it was because she was embarrassed at getting caught out in her schemes. Maybe that was true. Or maybe she’d been hurt and upset because she’d been innocent of all those accusations, and Matthias had been the schemer, bribing the investigator to make up lies about her so that I would let her go. I’d never been sure. But I’d certainly been a lot less willing to trust after that. Any woman could be a gold digger, looking to use me. And anything my father said could be a lie. It had created a strain between father and son that had never fully healed. And it had made Father even more determined to ensure that his children chose their partners wisely. Which was how my sisters ended up with absurd conditions like this tied to their inheritances. I barely managed to bite back a growl.

“Continue,” I said.

“I leave this world with a heavy heart for the wrongs I have done to my son, Antonio. There was a time when Antonio found it easy to trust others. But that changed, and I blame myself for that.” I felt my sisters’ questioning eyes on me as the lawyer read. “To make up for this, I leave the rest of my estate to him, with the exception of the Villa Livia on Kato Antikeri...which goes to Claire Bennett.”

Anger and disbelief burned through my gut. The bulk of the estate and all its responsibilities I’d expected, but nothing could have prepared me to hear her name mentioned.

“Who?” my sisters said in unison.

“There is one more condition that impacts you all,” Petrakis continued, ignoring their reactions. “Everything, including my daughters’ portions, will be held in trust for my son until he is married,” the lawyer read. “Antonio must marry by his twenty-fifth birthday. If he fails to do so, all of my children will be disinherited.”

Alexandra gasped. “But his birthday is next month! That’s absurd. Had our father gone crazy?”

“That’s his idea of righting wrongs?” I was almost too incredulous to speak.

Petrakis put a protective hand on the document. “Your father was of sound mind.”

I rose and paced to the far end of the room to look out a window as I struggled to regain my composure. My father could be cruel in life, ruthless and difficult, but I had never anticipated that his final act would be so twisted. I had to marry by next month or everything was lost to us? Ridiculous.

I had connections in the business world and would find a place for myself even without an inheritance, but my sisters? They were still so young. Alexandra was just out of university, and Eva was only now about to begin. How could my father have done this to them? There must be a way to fight this. “How do we contest this farce, Petrakis?” I asked without turning.

“If you contest the will, you will automatically forfeit your inheritance—and that of your sisters. That clause was in the

first paragraph. If that should happen, then only the other bequests, including the one to Claire Bennett, will be honored.”



Claire

“I heard my name,” I spoke from the doorway. “My apologies for being late. My flight was delayed. Are you Nick Stavos?” The older man in the expensive suit didn’t look much like a documentary filmmaker, but perhaps he was the financial backer for the project.

As I waited for a reply, the room seemed to still. The two young women seated at the table stared at me with surprise and hostility in their expressions. Another man stood at a window with his back to me. Was he the filmmaker? Possibly. If so, I had some questions for him—such as what I was doing here in the first place. My work doing voiceovers for documentaries rarely required me to be on site. Arranging the trip at the last minute had been a hassle.

Still, I wouldn’t complain too much. It wasn’t as if I truly minded an excuse to travel to Greece. If anything, I was looking forward to the chance to create some new memories here. Memories that would hopefully help me forget those horrible last few days from when I’d been here as a student. I wanted to let those memories go, wanted to forget about the heartache and anger I still carried around with me. Maybe this trip would help me finally move on. I hoped so, anyway.

“You’re Claire?” the younger of the two women asked after a tense moment. “Claire Bennett?”

“Yes. I was supposed to meet with—”

“Have a seat, Miss Bennett,” the older man spoke. “There, at the head of the table, will do. My name is Georgios Petrakis. I’m the one who arranged for you to be here. You’re in the right place.”

Was I, though? Because something about this didn't feel right. For one thing, the women were staring at me as if they'd seen a ghost. And while the man by the window still hadn't turned to face me, I could see the tension in the line of his shoulders. It was clear they'd all been discussing something about me before I'd arrived, and it didn't seem like any of them were happy with what they'd heard.

Had they changed their mind about hiring me? After flying me all the way out here?

I set only my purse down, reluctant to commit to sitting while there was such a strange tension in the air. "Is there a problem with my contract?" I asked. "Should I speak to my agent?" Despite the time change, I knew Brenna was awake—I'd called my best friend turned agent not long after my flight had landed to check in. Brenna had been so excited about this great opportunity—"the perfect resume builder," she'd said. Maybe it had been too perfect. Too good to be true.

"There is work for you," the older man assured me. "But I will admit, I used a bit of subterfuge to bring you here today. Your role on the film doesn't actually require your presence here in Greece. You were brought here for the reading of a will."

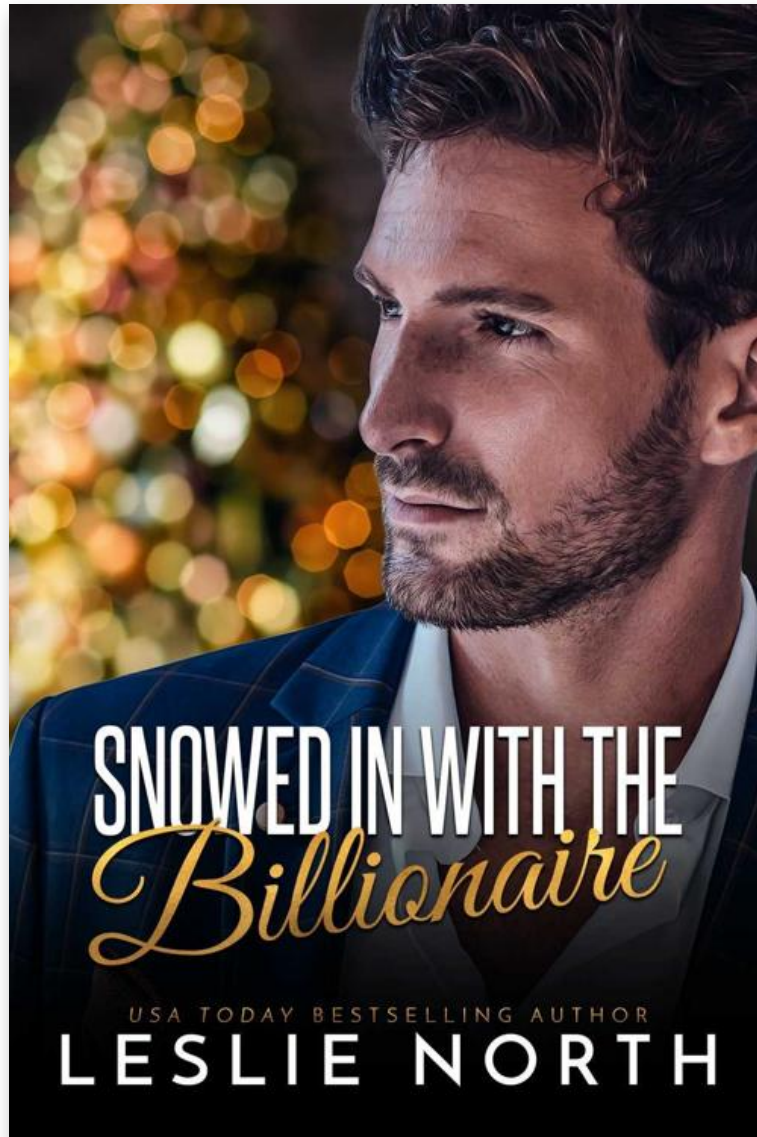
What? This was getting weirder by the second, but curiosity kept me in place. "Whose will?"

"My father's." The man at the window turned and strode toward me. Antonio Rosso stared at me, his eyes ice-cold—just as they had been the last time I'd seen him. When his father had humiliated me. "Matthias Rosso."

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Will a Christmas surprise make both their dreams come true?

Brea Nelson is used to her family's prickly attitude, but she's determined to spend the holidays with them. Unfortunately, a major storm and serious car trouble complicates her plans.

Stranded in the middle of nowhere, she finds herself knocking on the door of the infamous George Clark, a cutthroat CEO whose name is all over the news. Brea is pleasantly surprised by his muscular body and striking good looks. But his cold, rude demeanor promptly douses what's left of her holiday cheer.

Business always comes first for billionaire George Clark. But a near-death experience has forced him into hiding on Christmas Eve. When his solitude is disrupted by the shy but beautiful Brea, he's less than thrilled at the interruption. But he can't deny there's something special about this plucky woman... Something that cuts through his arrogant exterior, and warms his cold heart.

One night may be all it takes to ignite a spark between these two strangers. But will a Christmas miracle be enough to keep them from going their separate ways?

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EXCERPT

Chapter One

Brea slouched forward in the seat, squinting through the blinding snowfall that had taken over her windshield. How could the forecast have been so wrong? They were supposed to get nothing more than a couple of inches with some light wind, yet here she was, inching her way through a literal blizzard. The muscles in her shoulders were tense, and her back was sore from leaning into the windshield as she strained to see the lines on the road. And she was cold. So cold. She'd fought with the heater before she'd pulled out of the parking lot, but the trickle of air emerging from it was lukewarm at best. Her fingertips were numb despite her gloves.

The road was empty, making it obvious that everyone else had gotten the memo about the change in the forecast but her. She was also the only one foolish enough to volunteer to work on Christmas Eve, knowing that she still had traveling to do. As the first flakes fell, she had considered scrapping the trip home, but if there was any chance of her making it to her parents' house then they expected her to be there, snowstorm or not. Thanks to their demands, she was fighting through the start of what seemed like the snowstorm of the century in a

dinosaur of a car that could barely get her to and from work on a good day.

Her windshield wipers weren't keeping up with the snowfall, and the fact that she couldn't defrost her windows wasn't helping with visibility. Brea worried about that ice narrowing her field of vision. Was the snow changing over to sleet? Her teeth were chattering, her nose was frozen, and she still had at least two more hours of this ahead of her before she'd pull into her parents' driveway. She reached a shivering hand over to the small knob and turned the volume up on the radio. It was one of the few things that still worked in the car.

Brea bopped along to a few songs before the commercials started. She hated listening to the advertisements and was tempted to switch the station, but as soon as she reached for the dial, the car swerved for a moment on a particularly icy patch of road. She was able to regain control before her tires left the road—barely. In the aftermath, she decided that listening to commercials wasn't such a big deal after all. She had to keep two hands on the wheel.

The station switched from ads to updates. It was one of those "traffic and weather together" programs, and Brea felt her stomach drop as she listened to the reports. The roads were a mess and getting worse, and the storm wasn't even close to over. If she had known how bad it was going to be before getting on the road, she'd have just stayed home. But it was too late now. She was closer to her destination than her starting point, so it wouldn't do her any good to turn around. And in weather like this, she doubted she'd have any luck trying to find a vacant room in one of the motels along the way. Nope, her only option was to push forward and hope for the best. After the official reporting, the DJ and his partner riffed about the storm and then moved on to gossip.

"Now what do you think of billionaire playboy, George Clark?" the female host asked.

"I have a lot of things that I could say about Mr. Clark, but I need to keep it clean for our audience, which doesn't leave me with a lot of options," the guy replied in an annoyed voice.

“Jealous, are you?” she teased.

Brea listened closely, waiting to hear the latest in adventures from the not-so-mysterious rich boy. He was always finding himself in the spotlight, and the entertainment from his exploits seemed to be endless.

“I’m not a fan, that’s all. He seems like a jerk.”

“Don’t be so hard on him.” The woman laughed. *“He’s young, he’s hot, he’s single, and he’s still figuring things out.”*

“Wait, you’re not one of Georgie boy’s groupies, are you?” he joked with his cohost.

“Why wouldn’t I be? You have to admit that he’s a good-looking guy! Even you can’t deny it.”

“Oh, he’s good-looking, sure. The problem is that he knows it, and it’s left him with a huge ego.”

“I’m sure something about him is huge,” the woman said with a giggle. *“Anyway, I have a feeling that our favorite bachelor is going to have an interesting holiday. Check this out: Earlier tonight, Georgie was leaving his annual charity Christmas Gala—with some mystery blonde on his arm, of course—”*

Brea rolled her eyes at the guy’s predictability. She wished she could switch the station because she didn’t give a shit about George Clark.

“And? That’s not news.”

“No, there’s more! Someone took a shot at our boy!”

The woman paused to let the words sink in, and Brea let out an involuntary gasp. She was certainly not following the CEO’s every move, but she didn’t want him dead, either. She’d rather he just get a hard dose of reality and grow up a bit. She thought it was disgusting the way that women threw themselves at his feet and he just tossed them aside as he pleased. Was one of those discarded women the shooter? Brea would never wish harm on anyone, but the man’s behavior must have been pretty horrible for someone to come after him like that.

“Someone took a shot? Are they crazy? Do people not realize how powerful George Clark is?” he asked incredulously. “Any ideas on who the shooter is?”

“Not yet, but there are rumors floating around that it’s a business partner who was hung out to dry. George wasn’t harmed. His security team rushed him away before the crowds even understood what was going on.”

“And now that the news is out about the attempt on his life, I’m sure the internet just broke with the overflow of women who are devastated over the near loss.”

“You can’t blame us for being a bit starstruck by him,” the woman chided. “He’s got a glamorous lifestyle. What I wouldn’t give for a night or two with him!”

“Well, where’s Clark now?” the guy asked. “You said he was ushered away, but to where?”

“There are only rumors as to where he is,” she replied. “Some say he’s in a safe house; others have guessed that he is in protective custody. He hasn’t been seen since the incident, which was about two hours ago. By now, he could be anywhere.”

“For your sake, and for all the lonely housewives of the world, I hope old Georgie boy is okay. Wouldn’t want your holiday ruined.”

“Yeah, I hope he’s okay, too,” she replied. “But I can’t imagine he’s going to let this little run-in ruin his holiday, either.”

He laughed. “I bet he’s holed up with some supermodel getting creative with his candy cane.”

Brea rolled her eyes. It was just getting annoying now—so much so that she took the chance to quickly reach over and flip the knob to the off position. She couldn’t concentrate on the road with all the chatter. Besides, she had no desire to keep up with the George Clark gossip.

With the radio off, she realized just how strained the engine was sounding as her car putt-putted through the snow. Gears were grinding, and she was beginning to wonder why she was putting herself through this trip in the first place. It wasn’t like

her family would truly miss her if she was a no-show. At least, not her parents.

They only wanted her there so they could point out how much of a failure she was and how she'd messed up her life. But then, not showing up would only give her mother more ammo to use against her on the next visit. That alone was incentive enough for her to push forward. She might be the family scapegoat, but she never stopped hoping that *something* would change. If her parents remained distant, she was going to find her own fairytale family, even if she had to force it the entire way.

The car skidded unexpectedly, hitting another patch of ice and jerking Brea out of her thoughts. She took her foot off the brake and tried to steer out of the fishtail that was nearly pulling the wheel from her hands. She overcompensated and slid off the road to the right with the front of the car landing into a ditch packed with snow.

“Shit!” she exclaimed, slapping a gloved hand onto the steering wheel. She stepped on the gas, smashing the pedal to the ground, only to hear that depressing whir that made it clear she was only making the situation worse. Climbing out, she immediately sunk half a foot into the snow, the damp soaking in around her calves through her jeans. She'd not bothered to wear snow boots because she'd thought she'd be in her car the whole time. Now she cursed herself for not being better prepared.

Circling around the car, she saw that her back driver's-side wheel had lifted all the way off the ground, and the car sat crooked in the embankment. She sighed, knowing that she wasn't going to be able to get it out by herself. She dug a hand into her jacket, searching for her cell phone, then yanked off her glove and called her mother.

She knew that her mother wasn't going to be thrilled with the call or her cry for help on Christmas Eve, but she had no choice. Brea could already hear her mom suggesting that she needed to find her own way out of this predicament, but who else was there for her to call? The phone was silent. After

several frustrating seconds, she realized that she had no service and that her call hadn't gone through.

Brea slid back into the seat, the leather having turned icy in the few moments she'd been outside. The car was still running, but with the heat barely working, there was no point in leaving it on. The storm raged on, but she knew that she was going to have to go out in it and try to find help, or at least a safe place to wait out the storm. If she stayed here, she would freeze by the time someone drove by. Besides, it wasn't much colder outside than it was in the car anyhow, and someone had to live *somewhere* around here. She knew from her previous trips that there were several homes scattered through the trees, visible from the road when there *wasn't* a driving snowstorm reducing visibility to zero.

Reluctantly, she pushed open the driver's-side door. Yanking her purse from the passenger seat, she slammed the door and locked it, though she was sure that even if anyone were to come across it, they wouldn't find anything worth stealing.

She climbed up onto the road so that she could at least have a bit of stability under her feet as she marched. Her tennis shoes threatened to slide on the ice as she fought to keep her footing. She huddled in her coat and pulled her scarf up to cover her ears. The icy sleet sliced at her eyes, making them burn. She could barely see through what had surely turned to blizzard conditions, but she pressed forward. She needed to find refuge.

She narrowed her eyes to try to see through the haze of snow, searching for a glimpse of something: lights in the distance, smoke from a fireplace, the out-of-place color of a car in the distance. She'd walked maybe half a mile, but her entire body ached as if she'd walked for ten, exhausted from battling the wind and the cold. She was beginning to worry that she would lose a few toes. At this point, she'd vowed that if she came across an empty house, she wouldn't think twice about breaking in. Let them arrest her. At least a jail cell would be warm.

Brea's feet only moved out of will; she was no longer truly aware of the ground beneath her. She stumbled to her knees and caught herself on her hands, feeling the snow seep through

her thin gloves. She pushed up, and as she regained her balance, she saw a shimmer of hope to her left. There was a driveway leading up to a large cabin that she could only glimpse through the wind and snow. Brea took off running towards it, slipping on the ice like she was a fawn on newborn legs.

Relief coursed through her when she finally reached the door. It was solid, with an old brass knocker, which she wrapped her stiff fingers around to pound on the door. She waited impatiently as she heard someone getting closer. Another long moment, and the door creaked open. A gush of warm, slightly smoky fireplace air greeted her, instantly comforting her despite the storm at her back. But when she took in the person standing in front her, her jaw dropped open.

It was *him*.

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