



FAKED

KARLA SORENSSEN

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To Fiona Cole,

*Without her willingness to listen to my ranty voice messages
about fictional people,*

this book would have turned out very, very differently.

#dreamteam

CHAPTER ONE

CLAIRE

I DIDN'T ALWAYS HAVE a crush on Finn Davis. There were about ten minutes there, back in seventh grade when he showed up, that he really pissed me off.

Not because of anything he did, per se. Because he's always been the same guy. Quiet and observant when he was in public, a knife-sharp sense of humor and playful personality when he was with people who knew him the best. No, Finn was the recipient of my thirteen-year-old rage for those ten minutes because he was the reason I hated being a twin for the first time in my life.

Lia and I were identical. Teachers and fellow students often confused us if they didn't know us well.

On that day in seventh grade, when the principal brought Finn into our classroom, Lia and I met him at the same time. But there was something about her, some energy buzzing at an undetectable level, that drew his attention and made him feel comfortable.

They'd been best friends ever since.

And I hated that I looked like her—exactly like her—and was still different enough that the sweet, shy new boy in class, the one with a cute smile and long legs, didn't look twice at me.

I didn't think about that day much anymore. It was eight years ago, and Finn was such a fixture in our family that my

crush had lessened to a low-lying simmer. Barely detectable unless you held your hand directly over the heat.

But then I opened stupid Facebook. And saw a picture of him in his stupid “I’m going to be a doctor someday and don’t I look good in blue” scrubs, and I felt my heart die all the deaths from how cute he looked.

So now I couldn’t stop thinking about the day he appeared.

Couldn’t stop thinking about him.

Which is why I avoided my sister by locking myself in my room to study. I was so afraid that after all the years of locking up the butterflies that wanted to flutter through my veins at the sight of him, she’d take one look at me and know.

It worked, too, for a while.

When I felt my fingers burn with the urge to pull up the picture again to stare at his smile, at his dimples, and pretend I’d be a great doctor’s wife someday, I pulled up the one thing on social media guaranteed to stop any sort of heart flutters.

I searched for social media updates from our mother, Brooke, which was even more pathetic than my crush on Finn.

Crossing my arms on the surface of my desk, I dropped my forehead down, banging it a couple of times for good measure.

That was how I was sitting when my bedroom door burst open.

“What’s your problem?” Lia asked.

“Nothing.” I kept my head right where it was.

Lia leaned over me, dumped her shit on my desk, and pulled my laptop out from underneath my forearm so she could see it. Honestly, nothing was sacred when you lived with your twin.

Except my crush on her best friend.

“Oh,” she said meaningfully.

“What?”

“Did your neck *break*? Are you incapable of moving?”

“I’m comfortable.”

She chomped on something loudly. Carrots. Or celery. When she swallowed, she spoke again. “Cyberstalking Brooke again?”

Instead of answering, because I didn’t particularly want to lie, I grunted.

“Didn’t we decide she was in India?”

With a sigh, I stared at the wood grain on my desk and tried not to think too hard about how easily we could discuss the fact that the woman who gave birth to us was Lord knows where in the world, and we didn’t even really care anymore that we didn’t know where.

The sound of a clicking mouse preceded a thoughtful hum from my twin sister. “Nope, someone tagged her in ... huh, a concert in Germany. She’s on the move, I guess.”

“Oh, good.”

Lia sighed loudly. “Have fun with that.” With two patronizing pats on the back, she left me alone again.

When I heard cupboards slamming in our postage-stamp-size kitchen, I lifted my head.

“Chicken shit,” I whispered to myself. Like she’d somehow be able to see my “picture of Finn in scrubs” feelings stamped on my face.

This was what happened when my feelings couldn’t be muted by my brain. They were louder than I wanted, and I hid them less successfully.

Turning my laptop back to me, I drummed my fingers along the edge, trying to decide what to work on next.

The paper for my Early Childhood Intervention Strategies class was in desperate need of revisions, but even one of my last classes before I graduated with my Bachelor’s in Developmental Psychology wasn’t enough of a distraction.

But I knew what was, which was why it’d been my default in the first place.

Searching the internet for glimpses of your mother brought about strange emotional reactions. Unless you'd experienced those reactions, it was hard to put them into words. Occasionally, we'd get a postcard from her with an updated address, or a caption-less picture would show up on the usually quiet Facebook account she still had access to. Those tiny snippets were the only way my sisters and I knew where Brooke was currently spending her days.

Not that we ever sent postcards back.

Or reached out to her.

She'd lost that privilege years ago.

Even though I knew it wouldn't actually make me feel better or even distract me much from Finn, I found myself scrolling down her page.

My heart and my head warred mightily when I studied the last few pictures she'd posted. I wasn't furious at the thought of her; it was hard to be when we had such a happy life in her absence. But I didn't feel nothing either.

Sometimes, I wanted to punch her.

Sometimes, I wanted to hug her. Most of all, I wanted to sit across from Brooke Ashley Huntington-Ward and pick apart her brain. That was the most desperate feeling of them all, fighting for first place in my head. I wanted to understand why, and it drove me abso-friggin-lutely batshit crazy that I might never have that understanding.

As I scrolled through, counting five pictures posted in the past three years, my twin sister's phone lit up on the desk next to me where it was charging. My eyes cut to the screen, a force of habit because it was often a group text from one of our other sisters or Paige.

It wasn't from any of them, though. What appeared was a text from Finn, and like I'd trained my body to do it, my heart sped up at the sight of his stupid name.

Finn: Lia, PLEASE, I'll owe you a million favors if you help me out.

"I'll help you," I mumbled miserably. It didn't even matter what he needed help with. I'd do it.

But I didn't close my eyes because picturing my twin sister's best friend was another thing that made my head and heart war mightily. And every single time, my head won.

Leave him alone.

It would be too weird.

He doesn't even look at you that way.

Those were all the things I told myself when my crush on Finn flared out of control. And it had helped for years. It had helped all day.

"Text from Finn," I yelled.

"What does he want?" Lia called from the kitchen.

I swallowed heavily as I read the text again. "Help. He'll owe you a million favors."

Lia groaned. "He could offer two million, and I still wouldn't be able to do it."

"What does he need your help with?"

"Some fancy-pants dinner and award ceremony on Friday night. He needs a plus one, and since he refuses to find himself a date, his mom practically demanded that I go with. I think she actually put my name on the guest list because she assumed I wouldn't say no."

My heart clenched with unwelcome jealousy. "It's just dinner. Why not go?"

"I can't. There's this amazing guest lecture that same evening, and I am not missing it. I've wanted to hear her speak for years." She waved her hand. "He thinks I'm just being stubborn, but this is about my *education*."

"Of course, it is," I muttered.

Lia was physically incapable of admitting when she was being stubborn, which was about ninety-two percent of her existence.

The sound of her footsteps approached my doorway, quick and loud. Determined. Those were determined Lia steps, and it made me nervous. “Wait,” she said.

I spun my chair to face her. “What?”

Don't say it, don't say it, don't say it, a frantic voice chanted in my head. Because I knew.

A devious smile spread over her face.

“No,” I said instantly. Twin telepathy, y'all. It was a real thing.

“Oh, yes.” She rubbed her hands together. “We haven't done a twin swap in years, Claire. Come on, won't it be fun?”

While my head tried desperately to wrap around the idea of pretending to be my sister for the first time since high school, it was a faint whisper compared to what my heart was doing.

That particular organ buried in my chest was roaring and thrashing, screaming at me to *do this one thing* that would grant me my greatest unfulfilled wish.

Time with Finn.

“I can't,” I told her. “I hate lying. Not only do I hate it but I'm also terrible at it.”

Lia clasped her hands in front of her. “Please.”

“I know you love school, Lee, but it's one lecture. How much more English Lit does one need to be lectured on?”

She gave me a look because even though our majors were sun and moon different, we both loved school with equal intensity. Sometimes, I worried that the youngest Ward sisters would forever be enrolled in college because we just loved learning.

Our brother, Logan, often said if anything put him into debt, it would be the multiple doctorates he feared the two of

us would acquire and never use for anything.

“It’s not just a lecture.” She put on her pleading face. “It’s Catherine Atwood from Oxford.”

“Am I supposed to know who that is?”

Lia shrugged helplessly. “No, but ugh, she’s like ... everything. She’s a freaking rock star to anyone who’s ever studied the Brontë sisters. Her dissertation on Religion, Gender, and Authority in the novels of Charlotte Brontë is basically my bible.”

I rolled my eyes. “Only mildly sacrilegious, but okay. Why do I have to pretend to be you? Why can’t you just tell Finn you can’t go?”

Lia ignored my questions. “She’s from *Oxford*, C. She rarely does guest lectures, and she’s in the States for the first time in years, and she’s here at *UDub*.” Her eyes widened. “It was meant to be.”

“Lia,” I prompted.

From the set of her jaw, she knew exactly how little all that extra information would sway me. She blew out a hard breath. “His parents want to impress some richy rich dude so they can get money for their community center, and they think I’ll help.”

“How exactly?”

Her arms waved around. “He’s a Washington fan. Logan. All that. I guess one Ward is as good as any other.”

Oh, great. My favorite feeling in the entire world was when it didn’t actually matter who I was as an individual because I was being lumped into a crowd. Of course, when your brother was a Hall of Fame football player turned coach, it kinda came with the territory.

Lia’s eyes lit.

Mine narrowed.

“Their community center,” she said quietly, “where they help *all those kids* every year.”

I tsked. “You don’t need to resort to guilt-tripping me by using my major.”

“Really? Because I haven’t heard you say yes.” She assumed a praying position, hands folded together over her chest. “C, please. Finn would never agree to lie to his parents. Think of how many kids this will help if they get this money.”

No, Finn wouldn’t lie to his parents. It was one thing I’d always liked about him. We both sucked at lying.

But he’d also think it was weird if I attended with him. He’d only feel comfortable if his best friend were on his arm.

My brain spun visions of accompanying him into a beautifully decorated ballroom with my hand resting on his tuxedo-clad forearm.

“He’ll know,” I argued weakly.

But my heart ... it muted that argument so fast, my head spun around in place.

Lia blew a raspberry through her lips. “Nah, he won’t. You know how to be me, Claire. It’s *one* dinner. Then I’m off the hook to see Catherine Atwood, and his mom gets off his back, they get all the money, and everyone is happy.”

One dinner with Finn. One night to soak up his attention instead of playing the third wheel between him and my sister.

Not a third wheel like on a date. They’d never even hinted that they wanted to cross that line, which was the only reason I was even considering this insanity. Because for one night, I wanted to know what it felt like to have his eyes on me. To wear a pretty dress and spend the evening by his side.

“One dinner,” I said again.

She bounced excitedly in the doorway. “You’ll do it? Seriously?”

I could do this. One night. One meal. Maybe we’d dance. And if he realized I wasn’t Lia, I could prepare a very convincing argument ahead of time about why he should enjoy the evening with me.

My head settled, swirling with all the thoughts of how I needed to prepare and the things I needed to learn to feel ready.

Their handshake, some weird combination of bumped fists and hand slaps and a few snaps. Inside jokes.

Panic welled up because the thought of trying to harness Lia's energy—that thing that made her *her*—felt impossible.

I had three days to get over that.

So I began muting every argument that sprang into my head. Slapping the words away one by one until my brain was silent of objections.

“I'll do it.”

CHAPTER TWO

“YOU GOT *FIRE*D, Bauer. You won’t be able to talk them out of it.”

My trainer, Scotty, knew me well enough that saying that kind of shit to me would only make me that much more determined to do it. Like he’d waved a red flag in front of a snorting bull.

“Listen, I had a great relationship with Burton before the ... situation.”

“The *situation*?” he hooted. “You’re talking about when you got caught on camera, drunk—”

“I was not drunk,” I interrupted. “I’d had three beers and was having a good time with my friends, but I was *not* drunk.”

“Whatever. You got caught on camera cussing out Burton’s favorite athlete; the gold medalist snowboarder who’s been with them forever, and everyone loves and adores.” He was quiet, probably waiting for me to argue. He’d known me since I was a punk-ass seventeen-year-old, and I pretty much always had an argument. But because it was Scotty, I stayed quiet. “And you are *not* a gold medalist who everyone loves and adores. You are a few good competitions away from qualifying for the Olympic team, but that doesn’t mean shit in the grand scheme of things.”

I winced. None of that was wrong.

But, in my defense, the other guy *had* been drunk, and the camera didn’t catch the part where he was standing behind my

friend Cassidy making some pretty rude-ass gestures about her figure. So who looks like the asshole on Twitter?

Me.

My main sponsor, the one making it possible for me to keep competing, dumped my ass before I could so much as blink.

They apologized, of course. Told me it had been great working with me for the past couple of years. Just ... not enough.

Not enough to risk the brand, where the rest of the sponsored athletes have a harmonious working relationship.

The exact wording of the voicemail on my phone was burned into my brain. So me being me, I'd decided to hop my ass into the car and head down to their offices in Seattle to try to convince them to keep me around.

Because if they didn't, my part-time hours bartending would not cut it as income.

That should've told Scotty how serious I was about this because I hated coming back to Seattle.

The drive from Vancouver down to the Emerald City was as familiar as the back of my hand, which is why I hated making it. The kind of drives that I loved making were the ones where I was a hairpin curve away from the next mountain vista. Not knowing what might happen next was what made it exciting, made my blood pump and my brain hum with bottled-up energy.

That was not the case when I drove from my home base by Whistler and Blackcomb Mountains back down to where my dad and Adele lived with my half-brother Finn. No matter what the circumstances were, I avoided going home like the plague.

"You gonna go home while you're there?"

I snorted. "Gotta stay somewhere."

"Did you warn them?" he asked dryly.

“Nope.” There was a certain level of glee in my voice that had Scotty chuckling despite himself. “Can’t wait to see Adele’s face when she warns me for the thousandth time not to corrupt her angel while I’m home.”

“She doesn’t do that anymore,” Scotty said. “Quit making shit up.”

He was right, but I’d heard my stepmom say something along those lines so many times over the years that it felt like she still said it.

Finn, don’t listen to a word he tells you, look at where his choices have gotten him.

Sometimes, I heard it on a loop in my head even though it was close to seven years since she’d said it. She’d leaned down and said that to my just turned fourteen-year-old half-brother as I finished packing my bags to move out. My parting piece of advice had been not to do every single damn thing that they told him to do because otherwise, he’d end up miserable.

“She sure as hell thinks it, though,” I pointed out. “The second my years of teen attitude ended with me in handcuffs, she wrote me off for good.”

Scotty harrumphed on the other end of the phone. “Yeah, well ... without those cuffs, you never would have ended up with me, so consider yourself lucky.”

I grinned. “I do, old man.”

“You still haven’t thanked me for not pressing charges, you ungrateful little shit.”

Destruction of private property (which turned out to be Scotty’s house) hadn’t been my finest moment. But the spray paint on my hands and my skateboard had been pretty damning evidence when the cops caught up with me a few blocks away from the scene of the crime, so to speak.

But it had led me to Scotty, who’d seen my skateboarding skills in the neighborhood and offered to train me, teach me how to snowboard, if I was interested in working off my debt to society. Lucky for him, and me, I had.

“Scotty, love of my life, what would I do without you? When are you coming home again?”

“Next week.” He snorted. “And that is a sad commentary on your love life, which I know doesn’t suffer.”

I scratched the side of my face. “Actually, I think I’ve been in a rut. No one catches my interest these days.”

“Bauer’s having a dry spell?” he gasped.

I flipped off my phone even though he couldn’t see. “Very funny, old man.”

“I think so.” He cleared his throat. “First, I only say that because I know you’re not as much of a manwhore as you like to pretend to be, and second, don’t change the subject from Burton.”

“What do you want me to say? I think it’s a good idea to go talk to them, and you disagree.”

“Just take a couple of days and cool off, Bauer. You’re a hothead and say stupid shit when you’re mad. Give it some time. You’d be amazed what you could accomplish if you just calm your ass down and try being nice to people instead. Schmooze instead of bulldoze.”

“I’m hanging up now.”

“Bauer,” he warned.

I punched the button with a sigh, cranking up the volume on my music.

The Bluetooth in my Jeep interrupted almost immediately.

“Fricken Scotty,” I said under my breath.

My thumb punched angrily at the button to answer the call. “Scotty, I’m not discussing this.”

“Bauer?” a different voice responded.

I blinked down at the screen. Shit. Not Scotty. The caller ID proclaimed it loud and clear as my little brother.

Golden Boy, as I’d stored him in my phone.

“Finnegan,” I greeted as formally as possible.

“I heard about your sponsor.” He coughed. “Since you never answer texts, I figured I’d call and see if you’d answer.”

My forehead creased at the sound of his voice. “You sound awful.”

“I feel awful.”

“Let’s talk about you being sick then because I don’t need to rehash losing my sponsor.”

He sighed. “What happened?”

I shifted in my seat. “You saw the video, right?”

“I saw what was posted on Twitter, yeah.”

“Well, then you know what happened.”

Even to my own ears, I sounded like a grumpy asshole. It made it so much harder when Finn was being nice to me because then I actually felt bad. Adele treated me like trash because that was how she’d seen me for years, so I felt no guilt being rude to her. If anything, it brought me *great joy* to rile her up. But being mean to Finn was like ... punching a puppy for no reason. Anyone with a soul couldn’t really stomach the thought of it.

“No, I saw the video clip,” he said, pausing only to cough again, “but I know that’s not always all of it.”

Saint Finn. He sounded like Influenza’s poster child of Yuck, and he was calling to check on his asshole brother.

I rubbed my forehead. “I wasn’t the only one under the influence, and believe me, he did something to instigate my rant.”

“Yeah, you used some combinations of the F word that I’ve never heard before.”

“And Adele says you’ll never learn anything from me,” I pointed out.

He sniffled noisily, clearly not amused by my attempt at a joke.

“I’ll be fine, Finn,” I told him. “I’m on my way to Burton now. I’m going to try to fix it.”

He was quiet. “You’re on your way here?”

“Shit,” I mouthed. “Yeah. I suppose I could’ve warned you before I showed up at the house later.”

“They won’t be home anyway.”

“Why not?” I checked my blind spot and moved lanes.

“They’ve got a big fundraiser to attend tonight for some tennis player’s charity.”

My mind flipped through the mental Rolodex. “Ah, sure. I heard about that. One of my buddies was supposed to go with his agent, but he had to work.”

When he hacked through the speaker again, I grimaced.

“I was supposed to go,” he said. “But I need to call Lia and cancel.”

“Why were you two going? That’s not your usual scene.”

“To help Mom and Dad. They still haven’t secured the funding for the expansion they want. I guess the guy they really want to meet will be there because it’s so sports-focused. Thought Lia’s connection to football would help them.”

Ahh. Of course, Finn and his intrepid best friend would be chipping in for the cause.

My mind started racing, almost so quickly that I could hardly keep up with my own thoughts.

Sports-focused. Athletes and philanthropists, agents and corporate sponsors, all in one room.

There might even be someone from Burton there.

“Just how sick are you?” I asked.

“Sick. If I didn’t have a fever, I might try to tough it out, but there’s no way I can go.” He sighed. “Mom and Dad will be upset because there’s no way Lia will go with them on her own.”

Listening to him think of others first, I had to admit once again that Finn, on his own, wasn't a complete shit.

A little square, maybe. And Mr. 4.0 Everything definitely had me beat in the brains department, where I excelled was more of a physical nature. Which is why he was in the middle of getting his medical degree that would have him working ninety plus hours a week someday, and I was a semi-professional snowboarder who just lost his main sponsor.

I couldn't do math for shit, but I didn't need to. If any one of my frustrated teachers over the years could point me to a single time in my twenty-six years when I'd needed algebra, I'd eat my favorite Libtech snowboard one bite at a time.

But I didn't hold that against Finn. It wasn't his fault that his mom came from a crap marriage, into the connubial bliss they found themselves in with each other, and the fruit of that union (him) was thereby all good and perfect things. My dad had been a sad, widowed, single father before he met Adele, so he viewed Finn in pretty much the same way my stepmom did.

Finn coughed again, the sound so disgusting that I winced like he'd just sprayed his germs over my face.

"You better not need me to come take care of you," I told him.

"No," he groaned. "But I thought about asking Mom for some of her chicken soup."

"And you think that'll help?" I asked under my breath.

Not quietly enough, though, because he sighed.

"Bauer," he chided. I couldn't blame him. If someone spoke ill of my mom, they'd get an elbow to the throat. God rest her soul. I didn't even really remember my mother, but I'd still punch someone if they bad-mouthed her.

"Sorry." I shifted in my seat, the tires on the highway eating up the distance between the place I called home and the place I came from. It might have been only a few hours on the road, but they were a universe apart from each other for how differently I felt about them.

“Speaking of Mom, I better call her next,” Finn said.

“Just ... hang on a second.” I tapped my fingers on the steering wheel as I weighed the idiocy of what I was about to suggest. “Maybe I can help.”

“You?”

Since I never offered to help our parents, I couldn’t even be annoyed at how shocked he sounded.

“What if I went in your place?”

Finn was quiet. “Why would you even offer?”

For a moment, I contemplated telling him I wanted to help. Telling him it was for our parents, but he’d never believe it.

“Maybe I can find someone of my own to schmooze. A new sponsor.”

“I don’t know, Bauer,” he hedged. “I can’t imagine them going for it.”

“So don’t tell them.”

“I have to tell Lia,” he interjected, voice sounding stronger than it had the entire conversation.

“No, you actually don’t.”

“I won’t lie to her.”

“You’re a terrible liar, so I wouldn’t suggest lying,” I told him. “Listen, Finnegan, if Lia won’t go alone with our parents, she sure as hell won’t go with me, right?”

“Not a chance.”

Lia was as much a product of Adele’s brainwashing as Finn was after years at our house hearing about the juvenile delinquent who got in trouble with the law and ran away from home at the age of eighteen.

“And you’re saying that they want Lia there to impress some guy?”

Finn was quiet again. “Yeah. I guess he’s a big Washington fan. They thought maybe meeting Logan Ward’s little sister

would ... I don't know, give them some way to introduce themselves."

I rolled my eyes because it sounded like Adele's idea. But if it gave me an in to that ballroom, I just might have a chance. "Makes sense."

"So you want me to," he paused, "just let them think it's me coming, but you'll show up instead?"

"Yup." Imagining Adele's face when I walked in, I couldn't stop my grin. "I swear, I won't even hang out at the table except to eat. They'll hardly see me while they're off pimping out your best friend to the rich old man."

"That isn't what they're doing, Bauer," he said wearily.

"Mmkay."

"I don't know."

"Finn, think about it. This helps everyone. It helps our parents, and it helps the center," I said helpfully as if he didn't know why they were there. "Lia will forgive you because she'll hardly have to deal with me."

"You know she'll flip out when she sees you," Finn said. "Imagine the F words you used in the video coming back in your direction."

"I will prepare myself as much as possible," I answered gravely. "It's not the first time a woman has cussed me out."

"Just ... be nice, okay? This is a big deal for our parents."

Don't screw it up. I heard the message loud and clear, straight from the mouth of the Golden Boy.

"Finnegan, I wouldn't dream of being anything other than a perfect angel."

CHAPTER THREE

CLAIRE

“ABSOLUTELY FRIGGIN NOT.”

Lia slumped back on her bed. “It’s what I would’ve worn.”

I pointed at the dress clutched in her evil hands. “That’s half the amount of fabric I want covering my body.”

My sister sat back up, just as her eye roll completed a full rotation. “It’s floor-length.”

Frantically, my hand waved somewhere in the vicinity of my sternum. “Yes, and there’s a slit the size of Minnesota and a V that makes my belly button feel *preemptively* cold.”

Lia grinned. “I know. You’ll look smokin’. Maybe the guy who they want money from has a thing for twentysomething brunettes.”

Oh, she was so, so unbelievably funny.

“I’m kidding.” She sighed since I was giving her my best Mt. Rushmore impression.

“Well, let’s not kid about sexualizing a philanthropic financial exchange because, current social climate aside, that’s a horrible, prostitute-y idea, and I wouldn’t go for it in a million years.”

Lia nodded seriously. “Noted. Neither would I.”

I looked back at the dress. The thought of wearing that in public—and not just the kind of public where other people with eyes could see me, but with Finn in public—made my skin feel two sizes too small for my body. Like it was shrink-

wrapping my skeleton to protect me from the pretty pale-yellow satin. Couldn't I just go to the black-tie event in my jeans and Chucks? My faded Washington Wolves long-sleeve tee with my last name on the back?

Okay, fine, it was on there from Logan's playing days, but it was still my name too.

Lia, though physically more athletic than I was (how was that for some twin bullshit?), dressed like a well-groomed human being more often than I did. Her wardrobe contained things like beautiful gowns, in case we had to attend a charity event like the one in ... oh, four hours, I realized miserably.

For the past few days, my sister has spent time drilling me on things that *she* would know. As if I didn't already have all facets of Finn's life memorized.

His favorite food was grilled ham and cheese and tomato soup even though she regularly hassled him for eating like a six-year-old.

His favorite athlete was Tiger Woods—rain, shine, infidelity ... whatever. In Finn's mind, his resilience and drive overcame any personal issues.

She even quizzed me on silly things that would literally never possibly come up around a civilized dinner table. Like Finn's most embarrassing moment, how on the day he lost his virginity to Cassie McMahan at the age of seventeen, he ripped the condom with his bare hands taking it out of the package.

Something I absolutely didn't know before and could've lived the rest of my life without knowing because I remembered Cassie McMahan and her long, gorgeous blond hair. Her curvy, hourglass figure and luscious lips. If that was Finn's type, I was freaking screwed.

I glanced down at my body, which I considered on the happy side of average in all things.

Average height, I didn't tower over anyone, except maybe our eight-year-old nephew, Emmett.

Fairly average brown hair, if you asked me, though I always felt like Lia's managed to look glossier than mine.

Basic blue eyes.

A nose, some lips, and some cheekbones that were maybe a bit better than average, gifted to us from Brooke.

Everything about my package, so to speak, felt ill at ease with the slippery material of the dress, and the way it would skim down my body. It was the kind of dress that had people staring, I realized. Lia was never bothered by that. My twin didn't seek out that attention, but she wasn't uncomfortable with it like I was.

I walked over to the bed and ignored Lia's speculative gaze. My fingers reached out and snagged the hanger, lifting it so that the dress flowed down in one fluid column of silk.

"I never wear yellow," I heard myself say.

Lia bit down on a triumphant smile, and I ignored that too.

One night. I would have one night, my chance to experience quality time with the guy I'd been crushing on for years, even if he did think I was my sister. We would eat an overpriced meal that would most likely taste like cardboard and listen to actual adults talk about important things. And maybe, just maybe, I'd take a chance and tell Finn that it was me and how I felt.

Wearing a yellow silk dress that made me look far more than average.

The thought was there and gone before I could stop it.

"There it is," Lia whispered. "You're gonna look killer, little sister."

I gave her a dry look. "By two minutes."

"Still counts." She booped my nose. "Go try it on. I need to leave for my seminar in fifteen minutes, and I want to see how it looks before I go."

As she left me alone in my bedroom, I felt a pang of nerves brighter than the ones I'd been carrying around for the

past few days as we led up to this insane plan. It wasn't that I worried about the dress not fitting. Even if Lia managed to look a bit more polished, we were the same size and had the same coloring.

I could mimic her hairstyle, put on my makeup like she did (she went heavier on the lipstick than I ever dared), and even adopt some of her mannerisms without thinking twice. But it was the quiet moments that I feared most. The times during dinner when Finn might look over at me, expecting to see his best friend and share a look over something they both found stupid or overbearing. What would my face look like at those moments?

Like my oldest sister, Molly, I wore my emotions on my face. Except with Finn. I'd learned to hide them under the mountain of sisterly respect, the undefinable twin bond that had always been more important than how much I loved Finn's smile, and the way he muttered jokes under his breath when he thought no one was listening. The quick way he thought and the way he was able to handle Lia when she was at her most stubborn.

Nothing between them was romantic, I knew that. They'd been friends for too long. But maybe I'd be able to start something with him, if he got the chance, a real chance, to get to know me as more than Lia's sister.

Still alone in my room, with the sounds of Lia banging around the apartment, I undressed quietly. A glance at the bedside clock told me that I had over an hour before Finn would pick me up.

Trying on the dress before doing my hair and makeup might've been silly, but then maybe I was silly to want my sister to give me her stamp of approval before she ducked out and left me alone in this duplicity. As I slid the straps off the padded hanger, I thought about one of the lessons in my last classes.

Children usually start forming the ability to tell a lie around the age of three. It was developmentally appropriate and fairly harmless at that age. It's actually a positive signal, in

some ways. When a child can form the idea that a different narrative might serve them better, it shows that they're starting to process how the mind works. *My mom thinks one thing, and I disagree; therefore, I'm going to tell her something that she wants to hear.*

Strange to think of it as encouraging, but from a developmental standpoint, it's not a terrible thing when kids figure out their way around the truth.

But what Lia and I were doing, that was a signal of a whole different type. I pulled the dress up over my body and inhaled sharply at the feel of the material against my naked skin.

Decadent.

Sumptuous.

And selfish.

There was very little positive for anyone in this, except me. Even Lia wasn't really gaining anything by me going in her place because we both knew she wasn't going to skip the lecture. My lie wasn't on the same level as a four-year-old telling his mom that he would get dressed, and instead ended up in the backyard, stomping through mud puddles in his pajamas. I was pretending to be someone different just to gain time with someone who'd never looked at me twice.

With that gem of a thought, I turned and caught a glimpse of myself in the mirror propped up against the stark white wall.

My breath caught unintentionally.

"Whoa," I whispered.

Lia's face appeared behind me, split into a wide grin. "Daaaaaaayuuuum. You look *good*, C."

My cheeks suffused with her genuine praise. "I can't wear a bra with this, Lia."

"You sure cannot." She nudged me with her elbow. "Don't bend over too fast for anything."

“I can promise you I won’t.” I skimmed my hands down the front of the dress. The V was so stupid low, showing a slice of my chest that had never before been shown in public. But besides that, I looked ... I looked like a princess.

Like if Belle from *Beauty and the Beast* got a twenty-first-century upgrade on her killer dress.

A hot, definitely not average looking princess.

“Finn’s mom’s middle name?”

I rolled my eyes. “Robin.”

She hummed. “His half-brother’s sponsor?”

I turned. “I will not need to know any of that stuff. Besides, you told me his brother is a touchy subject. Why would he come up at a fancy dinner where they’re trying to impress someone?”

“You never know,” she said. “That’s my point.”

“He just lost his sponsorship with Burton this week.” I sighed. Like I cared much about Finn’s apparently insane, fully tattooed, snowboarder of a brother. Half-brother, whatever.

She snapped her fingers. “Nice. Didn’t even trip you up with that one.”

“You need to go,” I told her.

“I am, I am.” Lia paused before she left my bedroom again. “You’re gonna do awesome.”

I smiled at her. “Thanks.”

“They won’t even know it’s you!”

My smile fell as she left because as the innocently spoken words fell between us like a deflated balloon, I suddenly didn’t feel so much like a princess.

I felt like a fraud.

The door slammed shut behind Lia as she left the apartment.

Just me, my sad princess reflection, and the yellow dress made for someone else.

It took a second, but I met my own blue eyes evenly and took a deep breath. “C, pull your shit together. You’re a mother-effing Ward.”

So that was what I did.

After carefully covering the dress with my cotton robe, I curled my hair until it fell over one shoulder in pretty waves. Using all of Lia’s makeup brushes, I applied goldish-bronze eye shadow until my eyes looked almost indecently blue in my face. The arms on the clock clicked faster and faster until I was sure someone was playing a cosmic prank on me.

One hour to get ready felt like insanity for the woman who could shower, dress, and be ready for class in less than twenty-two minutes on a normal weekday. What kept me steady was imagining Finn at the door, handsome and clean-shaven in his crisp black tux.

I closed my eyes and sighed happily. Maybe I’d get a dance, if I was lucky. I’d just have to not do something stupid like grab his ass when he thought I was Lia.

My phone buzzed, the phone that now had Lia’s phone cover on it because my sister was nothing if not thorough, with a text bearing her name.

Lia: Still no word from Finn, but that’s not abnormal if he’s busy. He’s NEVER late, so have that fine ass ready to go in five! *kiss face*

I smiled as I typed out my reply.

Me: PAY ATTENTION. This speaker is important, if you didn’t know. I’ll be fine.

Lia: I owe you a thousand favors.

Me: Yes, you really do.

I tucked my phone into my small nude purse and stepped into the open toe heels she’d picked out for me. They boosted my height by a few inches, and I took a few steps around the family room until I felt steady. The clock kept going, a few

minutes past when Finn was supposed to arrive, and I felt a twinge of unease.

Hopefully, everything was okay.

Just as I thought it, and then ridiculed myself for thinking it, the downstairs door to our apartment building buzzed. Lia would never expect Finn to come up, so I took a deep breath and channeled my sister.

“Be right down!”

With a cringe, I released the button. Too chipper, Claire, far, far too chipper.

I locked the apartment door behind me, then took the steps down one flight of stairs to the lobby carefully. Beyond the entry door, I caught a glimpse of broad shoulders encased in midnight black, hands tucked into the pants pockets.

My eyes narrowed. Those shoulders ... they were a bit too broad. A few more steps, and I realized my hand was shaking as it grasped the door handle.

That was when he turned around.

No. No, no, no, this was all wrong.

When I didn't immediately push the door open, his hand came out of the pants pockets, and I caught a flash of ink along the back of his big, rough-looking hand.

My mouth was hanging open when he opened the door.

Where was the smiling face? The clean-shaven jaw? Where was Finn?

“You ...” I whispered. My head was shaking before I could even attempt to mask my reaction.

There was no smiling. No, his facial expression could be categorized as a smirk if I'd ever seen one. His mouth was firm and wide, a hard, smirking slash in his face.

Which was also not clean-shaven. There was a jaw, all right, but the similarities ended there. He was darker, bigger, taller than Finn in all categories. But the eyes, I noted immediately; he had the same color eyes as his brother.

“Not who you were expecting, I know,” he muttered, eyes glancing down the front of my body. “Finn is sick, so you’re stuck with the bad brother for one night, princess.”

CHAPTER FOUR

IT TOOK me less than ninety seconds to realize that I'd been duped.

The entire drive over to a modest area just outside of downtown Seattle, I'd imagined how Lia would react. The utter glee I felt at how she'd react to being stuck with me all evening—Lucifer's castoff, as she called me whenever I poked at Golden Boy—was nothing short of beautiful.

If the woman who opened the door, the woman wearing the yellow dress clinging to every single curve perfectly, the woman staring at me like she'd never seen another human being of the male variety before was Lia Ward, I'd light myself on fire.

If it was Lia, she would've cursed like a sailor the moment she saw me, reacting in the exact amount of time it took me to realize that I was now bound to spend an evening with her identical twin. What was her name ...?

Clarissa.

No, Clara.

I gave her a sideways look as she walked next to me, trying desperately to pretend she wasn't about ready to lose her mind.

Claire. That was it. Claire and Lia. I'd heard their names said in the same breath often enough by Golden Boy. As we walked in awkward silence, I racked my brain for what I could remember about her.

Not much, I thought with a frown.

A student. Somewhere. Majoring in ... something smart sounding.

I rolled my eyes. No wonder nobody invited me places.

“And you said Finn is sick?” she asked.

Humming my agreement, I stepped behind her so that I could open the passenger side door of my Jeep for her. With furrowed brows, she glanced from the open door, to my hand, to my face, and then did the loop over again.

“Deathly,” I told her. “Not even his mom’s famous chicken noodle soup will be able to cure what ails him.”

As I said it, I gave her a quick glance because Lia would know that Adele was a terrible cook.

“I wonder why he didn’t call,” she muttered.

Call her sister, was what she meant, but as she carefully held together the massive slit in the dress that almost exposed the entire length of her tan legs, I decided that this development made for a far more interesting evening than I’d planned.

Why was pretty Claire Ward pretending to be her sister?

Safely ensconced in the passenger seat, she folded her hands primly in her lap and stared straight ahead. Pretending badly at that. It was a wonder that either one of them thought they’d be able to fool Finn, of all people. Sure, their faces might have the same features, but the woman who looked like a princess was nothing like her sister.

And I was okay with that.

As I climbed into my seat and cranked up the Jeep, I decided that uncovering this mystery could be a hell of an entertaining evening. If she managed to make it past my dad and Adele, I’d be impressed.

From my peripheral, I saw her shoulders rise and fall as she took a deep breath and let it out. It made me grin.

“What?” she asked, with a bit more heat behind her tone.

“Just find it funny that you need breathing exercises to spend the evening with the other Davis brother.”

“I wasn’t doing breathing exercises,” she explained calmly. “Just ... wasn’t expecting,” Claire paused, and her dark blue eyes flicked briefly in my direction, “you.”

“Not many people are, princess.”

“That is not my name,” she snapped. Now she sounded like her sister.

“I am aware of that.” I gave a brief glance of my own, careful not to use the name she was wearing for the evening, and not nearly as well as she was wearing that dress. “But you look like one, so it fits.”

Her brow furrowed, but she didn’t answer right away.

We drove in silence, heading into downtown. I sighed when all I saw in front of me was red brake lights.

“Was that a compliment?” she asked. This time, her gaze wasn’t brief. It didn’t move away from me. It pinned me in place, like a bug under a light.

My eyebrows popped up. She might not have Lia’s snark, but this was a banked heat I wasn’t expecting. “Depends on if you like princesses.”

Claire didn’t roll her eyes, but she did let her eyelids fall shut before lifting them slowly. Hiding her reaction made her even more fascinating in my book, which didn’t bode well for her. This stodgy evening, one I’d normally avoid like boiling acid if it wasn’t for my own predicament—was far more interesting with her in it. Even more so than if Lia had been in the seat next to me.

I hooked a wrist over the top of the steering wheel. “I happen to. For the most part. Of course, I have favorites like any red-blooded male.”

She didn’t take the bait, just stared through the front windshield with her hands still folded neatly in her lap.

“Ariel is in my top three, hands down,” I continued.

Claire exhaled slowly.

“As is Jasmine.” I looked over at her.

“This is so very original. I’m not even sure how I’m supposed to react right now.”

At her dryly spoken reply, my grin was instant. “Aren’t you curious who’s in the number one spot?”

“I don’t know if curious is the word I’d pick,” she muttered.

A laugh burst out of me.

I glanced at my blind spot and pulled around the car in front of me. Claire’s face angled in my direction, and I saw her staring at the clover tattoo on the side of my hand. She wasn’t being very careful, the princess in the yellow dress. Lia had seen my tattoos before, so nothing about them would interest her.

For reasons I refused to look deeply into, I threw her a bone before we arrived at the dinner. “Remember when I got this one? I feel like I got mocked for days.”

She blinked a few times at the subtle reminder of who she was supposed to be. “I still want to,” she said smoothly. “Just trying to decide if they’ll kick you out for exceeding the maximum amount of visible ink at an event like this.”

“Nah.” I pulled my cuff up and glanced at the bottom edge of the compass that I’d added about six months earlier. “Enough athletes will be present tonight that they’d be pretty damn hypocritical if they had a problem with me.”

Claire sniffed delicately, and I caught the way her fingers tightened in her lap. Pondering that as I brought us closer to this little performance, I expected her to fail, it only took me a few seconds to place it. Athletes.

Of course.

Princess was an apt name for her when I thought of her in terms of her upbringing. The Wards were absolute football royalty. More than likely, this dinner would have more than one player from the Washington Wolves present. Maybe some

front office staff as well. It was a who's who of the Pacific Northwest philanthropic scene, and that included players from every major professional team in the state. People who'd known Claire and Lia since they were toddlers could be there. Wouldn't that be interesting?

Yet she was risking that for reasons I couldn't fathom.

She cleared her throat as I pulled up to the Four Seasons. The crisply dressed valet opened Claire's door, and I caught the way his eyes widened appreciatively.

Yeah, tell me about it, buddy.

I left the keys in the ignition for him, giving his hand a brief shake as he stood by my side of the Jeep.

Claire was paused just under the lights strung across the entrance to the hotel, and the wavy length of her deep brown hair caught those lights in the fading sun. I tilted my head and watched her for a moment.

It had been a while since I'd spent an evening like this with a woman, especially someone like Claire. Dressed up and out on the town, with a good girl to boot. It almost felt like I was someone else because I'd managed to find myself in such a strange situation.

She was incredibly beautiful in the unaffected, natural way that heavily made-up women hated. There was something about the way she was staring up at the tall slate-colored building with its sprawling view of the sound, something I couldn't define. She had a hint of childlike wonder as her eyes touched on the Ferris wheel on the pier and in the slight curl of her lips.

Watching her, I felt my chest swell with something foreign and warm at the thought I was the man who'd walk into that room with her on my arm.

No one else.

Not Golden Boy or any of the other peacocks under that roof.

Just me.

I came up behind her quietly as she continued to stare at the view with awe.

In every way, Claire Ward was too good for me. She was neat and clean and innocent with no trace of a scar or ink on her skin that I could see. It was obvious in her eyes that she was loved and happy and secure, and that was the kind of woman I had no place feeling any sort of attraction to, but very slowly, I reached my hand out and cupped her elbow with my hand, just so that I could feel her skin against the pads of my fingers.

She startled but didn't pull away.

"Ready for your entrance, princess?" I murmured next to her ear. The edges of her hair tickled my mouth; that was how closely I was standing next to her. Why was she here?

Claire didn't answer right away, but she took another one of those deep, fortifying breaths and turned to catch my stare.

My heart turned uncomfortably in my chest.

"Ready as I'll ever be," she answered seriously.

My lips hooked in a smile, and I held out my elbow. This protective instinct to help her through the evening took me by surprise, more than even her presence had. As her small hand curled around the crook of my arm, I grinned more widely.

"Let's go raise some hell, shall we?"

I was gifted a wide, unaffected smile in answer.

As we walked through the modernly decorated lobby, I felt like a king next to her with the way eyes followed her.

The ballroom doors were opened wide, and tuxedo-clad men and beautifully dressed women filtered in and out, mingling in groups and chatting and laughing loudly. The massive white floral displays topping the tables had sprays of flowers and branches that were probably taller than me. The far wall was made entirely of windows overlooking the water, and in the distance, it was easy to make out the mountains.

Every time I saw a mountain, no matter where I was, my entire soul vibrated with the desire to be hurtling down its

paths. Instead, I had to breathe through the claustrophobic feeling of being trapped in a ballroom.

I felt Claire's fingers curl further into my arm. When I glanced down to see what caused the increase in pressure, I noticed my dad and Adele approaching.

If I was waiting impatiently for Adele's reaction, I was about to be sorely disappointed. Her face, as well as my dad's, showed zero shock at my appearance.

Fucking Finn. Couldn't lie to save his life.

So I pasted a polite smile on my face and glanced at my date.

To Claire's credit, she was far more prepared for this portion of the evening than she had been for my surprise appearance.

"You look incredible, Adele," she said, leaning forward to give my stepmom a brief hug. "That color is killer on you."

Adele preened under the attention. "Thanks, hun. I feel a lot more comfortable in jeans and a sweatshirt, but it feels nice to dress up from time to time, doesn't it?"

Claire grinned, looking so much like her sister that I had to blink.

"You're telling me you don't wear that gown to the center? Come on, you wouldn't need my help getting any donations if that was the case."

My dad laughed, sliding his arm around Adele's waist.

"Bauer," Adele said, her smile slightly more strained.

"You look beautiful," I told her dutifully. I shook my dad's hand.

"Finn told us you offered to step in his place, son," he said. "I know this isn't your scene."

Claire gave me a sideways glance when I laughed.

"No, it's not." I met her midnight blue eyes. "But I can think of worse ways to spend the evening."

An awkward pulse of silence fell in our little group until Adele cleared her throat. She and my dad shared a brief look.

“Lia, would you like anything to drink?” my dad asked. “I was just going to head to the bar.”

She smiled. “I won’t say no to that.”

It was disconcerting how easily she’d slid into her sister’s persona at the appearance of my parents. They walked away, leaving me with Adele.

“We’re honored that Finn’s *best friend* was willing to join us this evening.”

I gave her a small smile. “Lia would do anything for him, wouldn’t she?”

Adele exhaled heavily. “Please don’t make a scene, Bauer. Tonight is important for the center, and your father and I. Lia is a big part of that.”

For the second time that day, someone in my family felt the need to remind me that I better not screw this up for them.

All I did was stare at her.

She stared right back. “Considering what you’ve already managed to accomplish this week, I figured you should be reminded.”

There it was, the ding I was waiting for.

“There are always two sides to a story, Adele.” I kept my tone light.

Her laughter was airy and unaffected, and anyone walking past us would think we were having a grand ole time. “With you? Of course, there is. But tonight, your problem of maintaining a sponsor is not on my list of concerns. Just don’t offend anyone, especially Lia, okay?”

It was a sharp reminder that Lia was off-limits to me, simply because I was the unwelcome stepson.

Always unwelcome.

Always a nuisance.

And unfortunately for Adele, that just made me want to remind her of all the ways I could ruin an evening.

Just as I opened my mouth to do that, I heard Scotty's voice in my head telling me not to be a dumbass, so instead, I smoothed a careful hand down the black tie around my neck. As fun as pissing my stepmom off might be, it wasn't the reason I was there. Keeping my eyes peeled for someone from Burton was.

She narrowed her eyes, more attuned to my thought process than I realized, because even my ability to keep my mouth shut made her wary.

"You've nothing to worry about, Adele. You'll hardly know I'm here."

CHAPTER FIVE

CLAIRE

HAVE you ever been invited to a costume party? You take the time to plan your outfit, you buy the supplies, perfect the look, and then arrive, only to discover that you're the only one who wasn't in on the secret.

Yes, like Elle Woods in *Legally Blonde*.

Sitting at the innocuous round table with overpriced food in front of me and a massive floral display blocking my view of the person directly across from me, I was Elle in her bunny costume.

Everyone had been in on some secret that I was unknowingly dumped into, left flailing without a single person to grasp on to for support.

I always knew, abstractly and from vague hints over the years, that Finn and his half-brother weren't close. That he was kind of an outsider, though I figured Lia was prone to exaggeration when she'd said he was an actual delinquent. From what I could remember, Bauer Davis was at least five years older than Finn and from their father's first marriage. It was a strange thing that Lia had always had in common with Finn, a half-sibling from a parents' first try at matrimony. But if this dinner was any indication, that was where the similarities ended.

Our half-brother raised us after Brooke split. He was our brother, our father, and until he married Paige, he had to fill the mother role occasionally. Logan was the most steady, solid

presence in our lives, and all four of us knew he'd take a bullet before letting anything happen to us.

But in front of me was playing out a completely different type of family.

Bauer was the outsider.

The black sheep.

The rebel.

In a sea of black ties and decorum, he was covered in ink and attitude.

What I didn't know, and what I couldn't stop trying to uncover as I watched his parents to my right, and him to my left, was whether Bauer had chosen that role, or if it had been chosen for him.

"This chicken is bullshit," he said as he leaned toward me. I caught a whiff of the same scent from the Jeep, spicy and clean and male.

The bite I was currently working on, and had been for a while, lodged in my throat when I choked.

"Bauer." His dad sighed.

He shrugged. "It is."

I tried to keep the smile off my face at the exchange because Lia would not have found it funny. My initial shock at seeing someone other than Finn at the door had morphed into quiet reluctance, then begrudging fascination.

That fascination was why I studied child development in the first place.

What made children become the people they were?

How much was biology? A coding in our genes that we couldn't fight.

And how much was the environment they were raised in? The words spoken to them, the rules they were given, the praise they received, or didn't as was sometimes the case.

Next to me was a grown man. He was tall and strong, unashamed in who he was as a person. But in front of the people who raised him, I watched the flip in his personality like someone had changed the channel on a television.

It was impossible for me not to imagine what it had been like for Bauer as a kid because two things were abundantly clear as I chewed on the chicken that tasted like cardboard.

His brother, Finn, was beloved by his parents. They were proud of his educational prowess, and the field of medicine he was pursuing. They raved about what kind of man he was turning into, all the things I'd known before walking into the dinner. That he was intelligent and kind, with a huge heart for serving others.

And Bauer was their other son.

There was a clipped way that Adele spoke to him.

A quickness in her glances, like she was put out by having to engage with him for too long.

But she was also clearly bothered by the attention he received from others.

The woman on Bauer's left was far more interested in him than Adele, judging by the way she stared at his biceps straining his suit jacket, the width of his shoulders under the black material, and the hard line of his jaw under all the scruff covering it.

"Snowboarding," she purred, leaning toward him until her cleavage practically fell out of her red dress. "That's so interesting."

He gave her a dry look. "I've always thought so."

"You must have to work out *constantly*."

"I barely have time to eat or sleep," he answered seriously.

My lips rolled tight over my teeth, and I focused very hard on taking a sip of the sweet white wine that Finn's dad bought for me.

Adele scoffed quietly under her breath, and I fought against a flare of annoyance.

Lia wouldn't have been annoyed, I reminded myself. I knew my sister as well as I knew myself, and holy camels, it was harder than I thought to think like her all the time.

"Finn was so sick, honey," Adele whispered conspiratorially. "Otherwise, he never would have stuck you with Bauer for the night."

WWLD?

Lia would've rolled her eyes, so I did. "I've survived worse."

She laughed in delight.

Being in on that joke with her felt slimy because no, he wasn't Finn, but he was still a person. Her stepson.

It was the delight that pushed me just enough over the edge to say something. "But he's not that bad, you know. I could do a lot worse for my date for the evening than a professional snowboarder."

I thought I spoke quietly enough, but Bauer went still beside me.

Adele blinked at my gentle reprimand but waved a hand. "Of course, of course. He's just not used to events like this. Not his crowd," she said delicately. "Finn was practically born to impress people."

Unfortunately, she wasn't wrong. Finn was impressive. He was well-spoken and intelligent. He listened so well to what people were saying and what they didn't. But one thing had nothing to do with the other, and if I thought about Bauer and what that kind of constant comparison could do to a child, it made that part of me that longed to help kids who dealt with things like that light with a righteous fire.

"Don't we all know it, Adele," Bauer interjected. "Trust me, I never would've suggested it if he hadn't included *something* to sweeten the deal." As he said it, clearly taunting her with his tone, he stretched his arm along the back of my

chair. His thumb dipped dangerously, and I felt it brush the edge of my spine. I held very, very still.

Adele's eyes narrowed dangerously, so I cleared my throat. "He could only wish, Adele. Just ignore him."

Bauer withdrew his hand with a low chuckle that made the hair lift on my arms. Normally, it was the kind of male insinuation that would make me want to twist his balls up in a knot—I knew how, too—but it was so obvious that he was baiting her, trying to garner any sort of reaction from this woman, even if it was her contempt. Contempt, when you've been ignored and overlooked, was a preferable alternative, sometimes.

"So," I continued, "the guy with the deep pockets, do we know where he's sitting?"

Adele perked up. This I could understand about her, and why it pained me to see her treat her stepson the way she was. They ran a wonderful community center, helping at-risk youth with access to sports and arts and activities they might not normally be able to experience. I'd scoured their website with glee because some of their programs for kids were amazing. Speech therapy for children who couldn't afford it out of pocket. Tutoring for students with dyslexia who weren't getting the support they needed at school. Expensive tutoring, if their parents had to pay the bill.

"He's at the table behind us," she said quietly. "Don't turn around, though. It's too obvious. I'm trying to figure out how to go over there without being ..."

"Obvious and desperate?" Bauer supplied.

Adele's smile was tight at the edges. "Something like that."

Remembering something Lia told me, I touched Adele's arm to redirect her. "I checked with someone in the front office, and he's been a Washington ticket holder for the past five seasons."

Adele nodded. "He's a huge fan of your brother's."

My smile felt like the first natural one of the evening. “I can understand that.”

“Mr. Harper would be perfect,” she explained. “He owns a Canadian team, and while he’s starting to dip his toe into philanthropic endeavors here in Seattle, he hasn’t made a major step yet. I think with his connection to sports, and how much we work on getting kids involved in athletics at the center, it would be a win-win.”

“Why wouldn’t he partner with a player? There are so many foundations set up for that specific purpose,” I said. Off the top of my head, I could count six current players on the Wolves roster who focused on exactly that and did a damn good job. My sisters and I had taken part of so many fundraisers over the years for various foundations, I’d never be able to count them all.

Adele froze, giving me a strange look.

My heart pounded uncomfortably. Lia didn’t ask questions like that, apparently.

“Well, that’s why you’re here, honey,” she said. Her voice was sweet and smooth, her face guileless, and her eyes wide. “I’ll make my way over there and say hello, and you come bring me my drink. I’ll introduce you, and voila!”

Voila, I thought.

Voila, because of who my brother was, this guy was going to hand over a check with a lot of zeros? As a plan, it felt about as stable as a toothpick trying to hold a Volkswagen, but I was keeping my lips firmly shut.

Oh, my sister owed me so, so big for this night. But that, of course, was the irony. Before she asked me, all I could think about was my annoyance that Finn hadn’t responded to whatever it was that made me so different from Lia. And that was held up in strange juxtaposition with our interchangeability in all this.

I could’ve been any of the four Ward sisters, and Adele probably wouldn’t have cared. Who I was didn’t matter to her

in the slightest. The dishonesty in what I was doing faded slightly when I thought about the evening in those terms.

Because even if I'd introduced myself as Claire, told her I'd come in Lia's place, it wouldn't have mattered. Probably to Finn either, sadly.

All I wanted was to have some time with Finn, and now I was basically being pimped out because of my last name. Who I was didn't matter, and sitting at that big table, I suddenly felt very alone.

I took another sip of my wine as Adele turned to speak with her husband. Up on stage, they were explaining ... something. About works of art for sale, displayed around the ballroom. But I couldn't hear a word over the yawning sense of disappointment unfolding behind my chest. I tried to stop it, but it was inevitable. From the moment someone else turned around, to that conversation with Adele, I was just ... disappointed.

Bauer leaned in again, and I gave him a sideways look.

His voice was low, meant to be intimate and secretive. "Now why did that make you look so sad, princess?"

I cleared my face instantly. "I'm not sad," I disagreed. "Just wish it was time for dessert so I could forget this chicken ever existed."

His eyes, a deep greenish gray, searched my face. "Mm-hmm."

What did he see that made him look at me like that? My heart thumped once, twice. Hard.

When Bauer was looking at me like that, I didn't feel alone. I felt exposed.

I found myself pushing my chair back. "I'll be right back."

Adele glanced up at me. "Don't be gone long, honey."

She meant well, and I knew it. This was important to them. Important to Finn.

WWLD.

She'd wink and then promise that it was in the bag. She'd get it done for them simply because they'd asked it of her, this family she was a part of because of her best friend.

And all I wanted to do was leave.

I couldn't dredge up whatever words my sister might have used. "Excuse me," I said softly and walked away from the table, clutching my purse in my hand like it could teleport me away from that place.

Weaving steadily through tables of well-dressed elite who were laughing and drinking, I felt like I couldn't breathe deeply until I was clear of the doors. My hand pressed against my stomach as I felt my diaphragm expand with a slow breath to calm my strange reaction. A few people were milling through the hallways, looking at large black and white photos displayed artfully along the stretched-out hallway outside of the ballroom.

They were a perfect distraction because I didn't really want to dissect why I was so bothered by Adele's—and Tom's—interactions with Bauer. I'd come for Finn. To spend time with Finn. And instead of being disappointed, my wheels were spinning as thoughts of stepchildren and unwanted children and some strange quarter-life crisis about not being seen as my own unique person tangled through all of that.

My steps slowed as I reached the first photograph, and I froze. It was beautiful and sad. Strangely appropriate for what I'd just been thinking about.

A small boy sat on a broken curb, looking down at a dirty, smudged ball in his hands. It was worn from play, clearly overused. His hair was dark and messy, his lashes long against the pale skin of his cheeks. You couldn't see his eyes, but in the background, two other kids played together. They were out of focus, not meant to be the focus of the shot.

Staring at his shoes, also dirty and worn from use, I found my eyes welling up unexpectedly.

"Goodness, that's depressing, isn't it?" a deep voice came from next to me.

I glanced over my shoulder. A gentleman with a shock of silver and brown hair was staring at the photo, his head tilted to the side as he frowned at the image.

I clasped my hands in front of me. “It’s moving, I think.”

He hummed, tucking his hands into his pockets.

The disbelieving sound made me smile. “You disagree?”

“I’m shit with figuring out art, young lady.”

That made me laugh. “I’m sure you’re not that bad.”

He was the kind of man who was hard to gauge how old he was. His face was gently lined, like he laughed a lot, and his brown hair was streaked liberally with gray. But he was tall with broad shoulders, a strong nose, and a wide smile.

“What do you like about it?” I asked him.

He grimaced, staring again at the image. “Not much. It makes me uncomfortable.”

That made me give his face a second look, a longer, assessing one. “Strong reactions aren’t bad, though. The point of good artwork is to make you feel something.”

The smile he gave me was lopsided. “Fair enough. What do *you* feel when you look at it then?”

Staring at the little boy’s face, I answered without thinking. “The role of perceived maternal favoritism in sibling relationships in midlife,” I answered without thinking. I felt my cheeks flush hot when he gave me a curious look. “Sorry, that was terribly specific.”

His gaze sharpened. “And I’m terribly interested in why.”

For the first time since Lia handed me that yellow dress, I felt like myself. My ribs expanded easily as my heart settled into a normal rhythm.

“It’s a, a study that I read recently for school,” I told him.

He nodded, a gentle nudge to continue.

There was no expectation to be someone else or talk like someone else. Just a genuine interest in what I had to say, and

that made the words come easily.

“There’s something very lonely about him,” I said. “There are people—other kids—right behind him, yet he’s separate. That ball, his shoes, he’s obviously very active. Loves sports. But he’s sitting in stillness for some reason. It makes me wonder what his family life is like. How he’s loved, if he feels separate when he goes back in that house too. Or if being outside,” I paused, and Bauer’s face flashed in front of me, “if finding something he’s good at, something physical and tangible and independent, gives him the affirmations he’s craving.”

In the silence that followed, I felt a slow flush of embarrassment crawl up my skin. I might as well scream *Beware of Psych Major* for everyone in the hallway to hear. When I grimaced, he stepped closer to the photo, assessing it carefully.

“No wonder you looked like you were about to burst into tears,” he mused.

Under my breath, I laughed and felt my embarrassment wash away. “I can’t help it, unfortunately. I’m about to start my master’s in developmental psychology.”

“Ahh.” He grinned and looked younger when he did. “An art connoisseur masquerading as a therapist. You’ll be able to fix the world with that brain, young lady.”

I ducked my head, unsure what to say.

“No, no, don’t be embarrassed. It’s a wonderful thing, that you can look at that child and see all of that.” He sighed. “He probably makes me uncomfortable because he reminds me of myself as a young boy.”

His face was distant now, not seeing me or the photo, and I watched him carefully in silence. A few people milled around us, but no one interrupted.

“Maybe if I’d had someone like you helping me understand those sorts of things when I was younger, I wouldn’t be so damn stubborn now.”

“Stubborn isn’t a bad thing,” I said. “Determination is a wonderful trait, especially if you’ve found success.”

“Everyone in this overpriced room has found success, haven’t they?” he asked dryly.

“I suppose.”

He blinked. “My manners, where have they gone.” He turned, his hand held out in my direction. “Richard.”

I opened my mouth, then paused just before I formed my own name. I swallowed heavily. “Lia Ward.”

Richard smiled. “It’s been a genuine pleasure to meet you, young lady.”

Another voice joined us, just as his big hand slid around my waist, settling easily on the bare skin where my dress gaped open.

“There you are,” Bauer said. He grinned widely when I slowly lifted an eyebrow. “Thought you got lost.”

Richard moved his eyes between us. “It’s my fault entirely. I’ve been monopolizing her. She’s quite intriguing.”

Bauer’s eyes touched briefly on my lips when he answered. “That’s one word I’d use.”

I felt my mouth open slightly. What was he doing? Lia had barely mentioned Bauer, except in passing, and always negatively, and he was staring at her lips—my lips—like he wanted to devour them in one bite.

“Bauer ‘the Hawk’ Davis,” Richard said, snapping his fingers together. “I knew I recognized you.”

Bauer’s face lit in surprise at his performance name. “Not many people do.”

“Shame what happened with Burton.”

The man currently holding my waist tensed slightly but nodded. “Indeed.”

“They’ll regret it someday, I have a feeling.”

Bauer's eyes sharpened. "Not many people are this well-informed on the snowboarding scene."

"I have a place in Vancouver, so I'm your neighbor to the south." Richard held out his hand. "If you don't make the next Olympics, I'll riot."

Hand still firmly in place along my back, Bauer smiled. I blinked at the sight of it. It was wide and bright and happy. This was the real him, talking about something he loved.

"Thank you." He tilted his head. "I didn't catch your name."

"Richard," he answered. "I should be getting back in. Horrible small talk must be made, unfortunately."

I smiled as did Bauer.

Richard glanced back and forth between us. "Keep hold of this one, Bauer. She's a keeper."

Neither of us answered, for entirely different reasons, but as Richard walked away, I took a cautious step away from Bauer. His hand slid off my back as I realized we were alone again. Just me and the wrong brother.

CHAPTER SIX

IF I WAS A HUNTER, pulling back on my bow, then Claire was the deer about to bolt into the safety of the trees.

Before she could move a single muscle to do exactly that, I nodded in the direction of the guy who just left.

“That was him, you know.”

She blinked rapidly. “Who was?”

“Richard.” I tucked my hands into my pants pockets. Maybe it would make me appear non-threatening or some bullshit. “That was him.”

“Yes, it was,” she answered slowly.

I grinned because she clearly thought I was an idiot. “No, that was the guy my mom has been eyeing. Or his money, rather.”

Claire’s face flushed a pretty pink. She wasn’t even trying to act like Lia now, and that felt like a small victory.

“That was Mr. Harper?”

Nodding slowly, I watched her expression change as she processed that.

“Oh.” Claire’s brow furrowed. “Well, I guess that makes it easier to meet him later.”

Under the lights of the hallway, her hair gleamed. Her cheeks were still pink, and she needed to touch up her lipstick after eating, but damn if I didn’t want to mess it up just a little

bit more. It might have been crazy, but I got the feeling that Claire Ward didn't like wearing that blood-red color.

“What'd you two talk about, princess? He seemed awfully smitten.”

Vaguely, she gestured to the photograph next to her, one of many lining the hallway. They were black and white, all boasting ridiculous price tags. The one in front of us was really depressing, if you asked me, but they'd certainly been staring at it like it was a freaking Van Gogh.

“That's it?” I asked.

Claire chewed on her lip as she studied the image again. Ahh. She was nervous to answer.

Everything about this was strange, and inside the safety of my tux pockets, I found my thumb drumming a rapid beat against my thigh as I tried to figure this woman out.

Every woman, from the age of four to ninety-four, was a puzzle. Some were easier to put together, with better guides of what went where, and some were a bit tougher to assess. Honestly, I loved that about women. The beautiful variety of each one came in the pieces that you clicked into place.

And Claire, with her yellow dress and deep brown hair and blue eyes, was as intriguing of a puzzle as I'd seen in a long, long time.

The strains of music drifted out of the open doors of the ballroom into the hallway where we stood, and when I looked over my shoulder into the room I'd just left, a few couples started filling the dance floor, swaying in each other's arms.

She was doing her best to ignore my presence entirely, or maybe she was that lost in thought. I approached slowly, sheathing whatever weapon that might spook her, giving her a small smile as I held my hand out.

“Dance with me?”

Claire's chest fell and rose on an inhale as midnight eyes snapped to my face. “You *want* to?”

“Ouch.” My hand rubbed at the spot above my heart, and I saw her gaze flicker to the tattoos again. “Yes, even social reprobates like myself enjoy dancing with a beautiful woman.”

Even as the pink deepened on her high cheekbones, she was clearly undecided. Time to see if this first corner piece would click into place, or if I was completely off-base.

“Come on,” I said quietly, “the Lia Ward I know is fearless.”

Oh, no, she didn’t like that. Her eyes flashed like an impending lightning storm, and I felt the surge of electricity gather around me like a cloud.

Claire set her small purse down on a decorative table just next to the photo, slid her hand in mine, and stepped closer. But not quite close enough.

Bracketing her feet with my own, I slid my free hand around her waist and brought her flush against me. Just close enough to be improper, considering we were alone in the hallway.

If someone walked past, they would stare. They might gawk at the way I was holding her. And damn if I didn’t want them to.

I knew what they’d see, how they’d judge. The bad boy and the good girl, a strange pairing maybe, but if they saw us like this, swaying in a quiet hallway, they’d assume we were crazy for each other. That something about her had me obsessed. Something about me made her feel dangerous.

And maybe that was true, even if just for this one night.

In my arms, Claire Ward felt incredible. Her body was warm, her skin soft, and she smelled like oranges.

But she was holding herself a little stiffly, so I backed off just a couple of inches as I gently led her in a slow circle. When I directed her in a slow turn out and spin, she smiled.

“I’m full of surprises, too,” I told her.

“Apparently.”

“So ...” I watched her face. “Shall I tell you what else I know about Lia Ward, and you tell me if I’ve been wrong for all these years.”

Her jaw set stubbornly. “That doesn’t sound like a very fun game.”

“No?” I turned her again, pulling her back into my chest. “Agree to disagree.”

“So you’d want me to dissect you right now?” she asked, face flushed from the way I’d just tilted her back.

“Hell no.”

She bit down on the smile that threatened to spread. Oh, I wish she hadn’t.

I wanted to see that smile unfold and know that I was the one to make her do it.

“But I’ll tell you one thing I know is true, and if you want to do the same to me,” I conceded, “then I’ll allow it.”

“Deal.”

We danced quietly for a few moments of the song, and I thought about how to say what I wanted to say, without showing my hand that I damn well knew she wasn’t her sister.

“What I know to be to true,” I started slowly, “is that my stupid brother has never danced with you like this.”

Her eyes flashed again, but I couldn’t pinpoint the emotion behind it. “How on earth could you possibly know that?”

I shifted my hand, brushing my fingers against the knot of bone that I could feel under her soft, soft skin. She shivered.

Instead of giving her the answer she wanted, I lifted my chin. “Your turn.”

As we swayed together, her hand tightened slightly in mine. Forgetful of what it might do to her lipstick—another sign that I was right about her not usually wearing it—she chewed on her lip and thought carefully before saying anything.

“I know that you’ve accomplished pretty amazing things if someone like Richard Harper recognizes you immediately.”

I smirked. “Yeah, recently my biggest accomplishment is getting my ass fired after a drunken tirade that someone caught on camera and uploaded to Twitter.”

She watched my face carefully. “Social media is a double-edged sword for most athletes.”

“It is indeed, princess.” We swayed again, my fingers moving against her skin as we did.

“But that one moment doesn’t negate the career you’ve built.” She glanced over my shoulder into the ballroom, almost refusing to meet my eyes. “I hope you know that.”

Idly, underneath the swell of unstoppable pride that she said it at all, I wondered if she realized that it was the most un-Lia thing she could have said to me.

But she still said it.

God, I wanted to ruffle this girl’s feathers and see her in her full glory when she wasn’t afraid to hide whatever she kept simmering under the surface.

“I do,” I told her, executing another gentle turn. “Not everyone does, but ...” my voice trailed off. “My family just sees it as another piece of proof to indict me, no matter what I did before it.”

“Which is hypocritical,” she interjected immediately.

I stopped our swaying. “Is it?”

“Of course.” She shook her head. “If they care so much about getting kids involved in sports and teams and activities, how could they not be proud of you for achieving what you have? Teaching kids perseverance and grit is one of the most valuable lessons we can give them.”

Laughing under my breath, I pulled my hand from around her waist, sliding it up her arm and letting it hover in the air, just before I used my thumb to tip her chin up.

Claire's breath caught. "Why are you looking at me like that?" she whispered.

"You're not even trying, do you realize that?"

Her tongue darted out to wet her lips. "W-what do you mean?"

I dipped my head and took a deep inhale of her hair, before letting my nose graze along her cheekbone so that I could whisper against her ear. Before I did, her hand curled into the lapel of my suit jacket, and I waited to see if she was going to push me away.

"You're not even trying to pretend that you're her anymore, princess."

She was out of my arms before I could blink, her eyes wide and startled, a hand pressed to her heaving chest.

"I don't know what you're talking about." Her voice was steady.

"Yes, I think you do." My eyes never left hers. "Why did you come here tonight?"

Her inhale was sharp, and she blinked rapidly. "Because I'm Finn's best friend."

"Don't lie, princess," I said gently. "That's not very nice."

"And what you're doing right now is?" she tossed back, not so gently.

I grinned.

That grin, innocent though it might have been, was what made Claire snatch her purse and walk quickly away from me. The swish of her dress and the toss of her hair had me chuckling under my breath. The rest of the night would be even more interesting now.

But then she veered away from the restrooms and headed straight toward the hotel entrance.

"Shit," I whispered. I turned toward the ballroom to grab my phone and keys from where I'd left them on the table and almost ran straight into Adele.

“Where’s Lia?” she asked, eyes bright with excitement.

Probably requesting an Uber, but I didn’t tell Adele that.

“Why? What’s up?”

“She met Richard Harper,” she gushed. “We were talking when he came back to his seat, and when I mentioned Lia, he told me they’d met out here! They spoke, and he was so impressed with her.” Her eyes flicked over my face. “He met you too, apparently.”

“My apologies,” I said, “if I managed to screw that up by existing. You’ll be happy to know that he walked away before I could offend him terribly.”

Adele ignored me.

“You won’t believe this. He’s only in Seattle for one night, and he’s booked solid, so when I told him about the center, he invited us—including you and Lia—up to his place in Vancouver for the night!” Adele smiled so widely, I hardly recognized her face. “He wants to hear about our plans for the center, but ...” She paused, her voice fading as she realized exactly what she was asking, and who she was asking it of. The kid she tolerated. The man she basically ignored.

“But he wants the smart girl and the crazy snowboarder to be there too,” I finished for her.

She nodded slowly. “He does.”

I stared down the hallway where Claire had left a trail of dust in her wake. She’d need a hell of a lot of convincing, and I probably blew my chance by calling her out like that.

“Why should I help you, Adele?” I asked. Simply because of the time I’d get with Claire, I’d go, but I sure as hell wasn’t about to make this easy on my stepmother.

While she tempered her excitement, I crossed my arms and tried to decide if I should feel bad for being such an asshole to her.

She slicked her tongue over her teeth, and I saw the moment she decided on truth, not bullshit.

“There’s probably no reason,” she admitted. “You and I have never gotten along, have we?”

“Well, I was four when you showed up, so yes,” I drawled, “I’m sure I was a giant prick from day one.”

My sarcasm wasn’t appreciated.

Adele took a deep breath. “You were never easy, Bauer. Even before you got arrested, you made it painfully clear that you had no room for a replacement mother.”

“Especially one who wasn’t clamoring to fill the role,” I said. The edge in my voice was as sharp as I’d allow, considering we were in public. Wisely, she heard it, acknowledged it, and tried a different tack.

She held up her hands. “This is not the time for family therapy.”

“No shit? That’s why I got all dressed up. Just for you, Mom.”

Her eyes went flinty. “I don’t even know why I try with you.”

“Me neither,” I said. “Didn’t you know I’m a lost cause?”

She rubbed at her temples. “Bauer, please. I’m not asking you to pretend to be some big happy family, but will you come with us? He wants you there ... for some reason.”

“One night,” I said. Not because I cared. If he wanted to shove me and Claire together, I probably would’ve gone for a week, but I sure as shit wasn’t going to tell Adele that.

“One night.”

I set my jaw and stared down the hallway. Claire was probably safely ensconced in her Uber, thinking she’d seen the last of me.

“I’ll go talk to Lia in the ladies’ room where we have some privacy,” Adele said.

“She left.”

“What?” she hissed.

I lifted my chin and held my stepmother's gaze. "She left because I said something that pissed her off."

"Oh Bauer," she murmured. "Of course, you did."

"I know, I wish Finn were here too."

Her eyes lifted. "I didn't say that."

"You're all wishing it. And that's fine. I won't argue he does better in situations like this." I nodded toward the exit. "I'll go and fix it."

"You will?" She shook her head. "Why would you—"

"Why would I help you?"

She nodded.

"Isn't that what families do?" I asked with only the slightest edge to my voice. "We support each other, through thick and thin."

Adele rolled her lips over her teeth and didn't say anything.

"I need to grab my phone and keys," I told her. "Text me the details, if you wouldn't mind, and I'll see what I can do."

It took her a moment to compose her face, but when she did, she actually attempted a semblance of a smile. "Thank you, Bauer."

I looked at the exit again, figuring that by the time I got my car and made it back to her apartment, she would've had enough time to cool down. Hopefully.

"Believe me," I told her, "it will be my pleasure."

CHAPTER SEVEN

CLAIRE

“GET OFF,” I tugged, then tugged again for good measure.
“You stupid, stupid dress.”

My voice cracked, and I absolutely refused to look at my reflection in the mirror. Earlier, I loved what I saw.

A princess.

Now, I could only hear that word spoken in Bauer’s stupid, deep voice next to my ear.

The zipper refused to move underneath my shaking hands, and I let them drop so I could try to regain control of myself.

My eyes welled up with the frustration building inside me. Like a bucket had filled to the brim and couldn’t contain anything more than what was currently inside, that stupid effing zipper was what tipped it over.

I felt stupid.

Stupid for saying yes.

Stupid for thinking I could pull off being Lia for the night.

Stupid for being excited about time with Finn.

Bauer’s face, so close to mine, flashed through my head, and I pinched my eyes shut. That especially made me feel stupid. How ridiculous he must have thought me.

He probably laughed after I left, the silly sister who tried to pull off a switch and failed. Because she wasn’t fearless like her sister. That was what he’d said, right?

Oh, the irony. I wanted someone to see me for who I was on my own, and he had to choose the one word that would make me feel like the biggest fraud. She was the fearless one, and I faded into the background.

My eyes flashed up, and unwittingly, I caught my reflection in the mirror.

“You didn’t fail,” I said quietly. My chin lifted. “You didn’t fail,” I repeated.

Adele and Robert thought I was Lia.

Okay, so I scored a seventy-five percent, which ... technically, was a passing grade. But to the girl who always got A’s, a C sure felt like a failure. Especially in something like this.

My hands steadier, I wrapped my fingers around the metal of the zipper once again and finagled it past the jam, all the way down, until I could step out of the dress. By the time it pooled onto the carpeted floor of my small bedroom, I went from frustrated to pissed. At everyone.

At Bauer, for seeing through me so easily, which made zero sense.

At Lia, because where the hell was she? She should’ve been home by now.

And Finn. Oh, *freaking* Finnegan Davis.

How could Finn not warn Lia?

So fricken what if he was sick and it was Bauer’s idea to step in tonight? Did he lose the ability to text? Could Adele’s chicken noodle soup not fix his arms?

The ungracious thought—especially about Finn, who’d never done anything to deserve it—brought me up short.

“One night with that man,” I muttered. “One night, and I’m talking crap about Finn.”

Finn, with his beautiful eyes and big smile. Finn in his stupid scrubs. I laid a hand on my stomach as I thought about it, forced it into my head.

I stepped over the pile of yellow satin and yanked open the top dresser drawer with barely restrained violence. I tugged on some cotton shorts, a tank with a built-in bra and my U Dub T-shirt, worn through in spots from being washed so many times.

When I flipped on the bathroom lights, I took a second to remember, again, what I'd felt like before the night began.

Happy. Terrified. Excited. Out of my league.

Now I just felt exhausted.

A makeup remover wipe took care of my face, bringing it back to its normal state.

A brush did the trick for my hair when it was tugged high on top of my head and off my neck.

My hand was just about to flip the light switch off when the door buzzer rang.

I froze. "Nooo," I moaned because I knew. Oh, did I know who it was.

It rang again, and I swore under my breath. It was the kind of language that would've cost me a fortune in our family swear jar.

With a brick of nerves lodged in my throat, I hit the speaker button. "Who is it?"

"Let me up, princess."

"Shit, eff, dammit," I mumbled. I cleared my throat and pressed the button again. "I'm sorry, who is this? Lia is gone if you're looking for her."

I pinched my eyes shut at how utterly ridiculous I sounded. He called me out right before I fled. Like a coward.

"Princess," he replied patiently, the smile evident in his voice. "Let me up, please. I need to talk to you about something."

"I don't think that's a good idea."

"Trust me, it's a great idea."

I rolled my eyes but hit the buzzer. The faster he came up, the faster he could leave.

The faster he left, the faster I could put this entire evening behind me and pretend it had never happened.

His heavy footsteps approached the door, and I pulled it open, one hand perched on my hip. “Say what you need to say and go.”

Bauer slowed to a stop, his fathomless eyes tracking from the top of my messy bun, across my sleep clothes, and stopped at my naked toes. A grin covered his face when he met my gaze. “This is the real you, isn’t it?”

I shifted uncomfortably. “What do you need, Bauer?”

He didn’t answer right away, which allowed me some studying time of my own. His jacket was gone, as was the tie he’d been wearing. The white shirt was unbuttoned, just at the top, and there was another line of ink under the notch of his throat. Honestly, what was he trying to compensate for with that many tattoos?

“May I please come in?” He held up his hands. “It’ll take me five minutes.”

“You have three.”

“Ouch.” When I pulled the door open and moved to the side to let him in, he grinned down at me when he passed. “You know, you’re a lot nicer to me when you’re pretending to be Lia.”

I shut the door with a frustrated huff, briefly leaning my forehead against the cold surface before I turned to face him.

“I’m sorry,” I told him. “I shouldn’t be taking my frustrations out on you. It was stupid to even try to pull it off.”

He was studying the small family room.

It was a small apartment, as most were for students like Lia and me. But Logan refused to let us live somewhere without a secure entrance or seventy-five locks on the apartment door. Our décor was eclectic because while Lia’s taste was obvious in the teal, pink, and yellow pillows, and the

colorful throw rug, I'd picked the neutral couch and the tasteful prints hanging on the wall.

My face burned when he picked up the small plush kitten sitting on the arm of the couch. I'd always wanted a cat, but I'd yet to get Lia to cave. Watching Bauer study the stuffed animal, I felt invaded by his presence.

With a smile, he set the cat back down.

The lighting was dim because I liked it that way when I was home alone, so only two table lamps illuminated the room. Because of that, when Bauer finally faced me, hands tucked into his pants pockets again, it cast shadows under his cheekbones. He looked dark and terrifying even though his lips were still smiling in my direction.

His head tilted. "Why are you talking as if you didn't pull it off?"

"You knew," I explained. "Eventually, at least."

"Right away, actually."

That had my mouth falling open slightly. "Seriously?"

He leaned in to study the framed pictures on the bookcase next to him, candid shots of me and my three sisters. "Seriously. Lia wouldn't have been so shaken by it."

Great. The unflappable Lia. A girl always *loved* to be called The One Who Was Shook.

"I don't mean that in a negative way, princess."

"Can you stop calling me that?" I asked wearily.

Bauer took a few steps toward me, and I had to fight every instinct to back away.

"Even in those pajamas," he murmured. "You've got that look to you. I can't help it."

"Spoken like a true man. *I can't help it,*" I mimicked his deep voice.

He tipped his head back and laughed deeply.

That laugh made me unaccountably nervous, and I couldn't pinpoint why. Maybe because I didn't want to make Bauer Davis laugh. I didn't want to have him in my apartment, looking slightly ruffled and more casual than he had earlier when he picked me up.

"What do you want, Bauer?" I asked.

His eyes warmed slightly at my use of his name. I didn't want *that* either.

He scratched the side of his scruff-covered face. "Right now, I want to know why you're looking at me like that, princess."

I tipped my head back and sighed. "For some reason, I feel like the quiet little girl on the playground who just caught the attention of the mysterious cool guy in class who never pays attention to anyone."

My honesty took me by surprise.

Not because I wasn't a generally honest person. But I'd barely given the thought any time to process, and boom, there it tumbled out of my mouth.

Bauer hummed. "Not far off, I guess. But you have to admit, the fact that I met you because you inexplicably showed up to a public event trying to pass yourself off as your twin sister makes you pretty intriguing."

I rolled my lips together.

"And you're not going to tell me why you did that?"

"My sister asked me to," I answered honestly, after only the slightest hesitation. "She had a lecture she couldn't miss tonight, but she knew how important this was to Finn and your parents."

The way his gaze searched my face, I felt like I was being subjected to the human equivalent of a lie detector test.

"So you only did this because Lia asked you to." His tone was chock-full of skepticism, and I couldn't blame him.

"Yup."

“Okay then.” He picked up a framed picture of the two of us taken at Logan’s last game as a player. We were just barely stepping into our teenage years, a phase when absolutely no one could tell us apart if we didn’t want them to. It was taken before Finn came into our lives, before there was a single thing my sister had that I wanted. Even if she didn’t have Finn in the way I wanted him, he was still hers.

And I was ending the night exactly the same way as I started it, without any firsthand knowledge of what it was like to be the sole recipient of his attention. My lips pinched tight because I hated the self-pity. It was pointless and ineffective.

Nothing, absolutely nothing was gained from feeling sorry for yourself when it came to circumstances outside of our control. That was a valuable lesson I’d learned from Brooke leaving, and Logan stepping up to take care of us.

What was the point of bemoaning Brooke’s leaving? There wasn’t one.

What was the point of feeling sad because the one boy I liked didn’t look at me that way? There wasn’t one.

Bauer carefully set down the frame. “It must be strange to look at someone else and see your own face looking back at you.”

Was it? I looked at Lia and saw Lia. I knew our family was the same. Finn probably was too. But to someone like Bauer, who didn’t know me at all and really didn’t know my sister well, it must have seemed strange. But that was the thing about being a twin, wasn’t it? We were a novelty.

“I guess I’m pretty used to it by now.”

He nodded.

“Bauer,” I said gently. “What do you want? I know you didn’t come to talk about the ins and outs of being an identical twin.”

“Well ...” He paused and gave me a lopsided grin. “I kinda did.”

My brow furrowed. “What do you mean?”

“I need you to pretend to be Lia again.”

“You ... what now?”

He squared his shoulders and opened his mouth to say something when Lia burst through the door.

Her eyes widened dramatically at the sight of Bauer, then they flipped to me and blinked a few times at the sight of my pajamas.

Bauer crossed his arms over his chest and leveled a dry look in her direction.

She slipped her backpack off her shoulder and let it fall with a thump on the floor. “Shit,” she whispered.

“Welcome home, Lia,” he said quietly. “I bet your night wasn’t half as exciting as mine.”

CHAPTER EIGHT

AS FRUSTRATED as I was with these Ward sisters and the conversation I was about to have with both of them, I'd never been so happy to see Lia in all the years I'd known her. Because if she hadn't walked through that door, I might not have been able to keep myself from reaching for Claire again just to see what she'd do.

If I thought she was smokin' in the yellow dress, what she was able to do with cotton sleep shorts and a T-shirt was a fuckin miracle of fabric.

But instead of staring at her like I quite desperately wanted to, I kept my gaze pinned on her twin sister. The one meeting my stare head-on, quite unapologetically.

"Where have you been?" Claire asked her twin. "I thought you'd be home hours ago."

Lia tore her gaze from me. "I-I met Catherine Atwood, and we got to talking ..." She pointed a hand at me. "Can we discuss why this person is in our apartment who's never been in our apartment, please?"

"Yes, let's do that," I agreed. "I'd love to talk about why I'm here."

"Why did you go in Finn's place?" Lia asked, trading a loaded glance with her sister. It was a twin-look if I'd ever seen one, something I was completely unable to decipher. Claire could, though, because she gave a slight nod.

I grimaced at the exchange. “Oh no, I don’t think that’s the first question that will be answered tonight.”

Lia grimaced right back, but she didn’t argue.

With both of them standing in front of me, I had to fight how disconcerting it was to have that mirror image in front of me.

I’d practiced what I was going to say under the assumption that Claire would be my only audience. Add in her sister, who I got along with about as well as a root canal, and this just got a touch more complicated.

“Not that I owe you this explanation,” I said, “since I was the one who got the switcheroo, but Finn is home with a man cold.”

Lia tilted her head. “Can a man call it a man cold? I’m pretty sure that’s just for the women who have to deal with them.”

“Why’s that? I don’t curl up under the covers like a little bitch when I have the sniffles.”

She blew a hard breath out of her lips. “No? What’d you do the last time you had a cold?”

“Won an invitational and got handed a fat ass check.”

Lia rolled her eyes.

Now it was Claire’s turn to grimace, except interestingly enough, she didn’t grimace at me. It was aimed at her sister.

That had a smile spreading wide over my face. “Princess, no need to get upset at her. Lia has always been my biggest supporter.”

“Princess?” Lia asked in disbelief.

Claire’s face colored. “Okay, Lia knows why Finn bailed. Now if you care to tell us why you’re here, we can let you continue with your evening.”

“You won’t like it,” I told her.

“What is it?” they said in perfect, perfect unison. The tone, the tilt of the head, the slight narrowing of the blue eyes.

“That is so freaky.” I shook my head. “No wonder you fooled Adele and my dad.”

Lia beamed at her sister. “I told you you could do it.”

Claire gestured at me. “He knew right away, though.”

“You did not,” Lia said.

“I absolutely did.” I gestured right back at Claire. “You two may look alike, but when someone is put into a surprising position, you can’t mask that immediate reaction.” They shared another look. Claire broke it off when her eyelids fell shut. “She was prepared to fake it in front of my parents. I, however, was the wild card.”

“That’s a role you’re comfortable in,” Lia muttered.

“Lia,” Claire said sharply.

Lia set her jaw stubbornly, her cheeks flushed a slight red at the reprimand, and I actually rocked back on my heels at what that one word did to me.

Her face didn’t give much away when I studied it, and Claire only allowed one quick glance in my direction after she did it.

I was given no smile of encouragement, no wink, no conspiratorial look.

But that word was enough to give me hope that she’d say yes to this crazy plan, and not only that, but we’d also be able to pull it off.

“Regardless of my role in this entire evening,” I continued, “the whole purpose of Lia’s presence was to impress one Richard Harper. And Claire did that in spades.” I held up my hand to quell whatever it was Lia was going to say. “So much so, that he’s invited us—my parents included—up to his home in Vancouver for a night so that he can learn more about the center.” My eyes cut to Claire. “And learn more about us.”

Stunned silence filled the room. Lia's eyes were trained on her sister so intently that I almost felt ... protective of Claire. What was she trying to do? Glare the thoughts out of Claire's head?

And Claire ... her mouth hung open as all the color slowly drained from her face. "What?" she whispered.

"So I have to go with you overnight somewhere now?" Lia asked quietly.

Claire's face snapped closed, like she'd dropped a fence.

That Lia would come to that assumption wasn't surprising in the least. It was a logical place to land. Claire pulled off roughly one hour of pretending to be Lia in front of my dad and stepmom, but overnight was a completely different ballgame.

"You don't," I told her. I pointed at Claire. "She does."

Claire raised a shaking hand to cover her mouth.

"You can't ask that of her," Lia argued.

I cocked my head to the side. "Why not? You did."

The look on Lia's face at my answer was what snapped Claire out of her stunned stupor, and she stepped between us. "Okay, stop. That doesn't help anyone right now." She aimed a look at her sister. "You let him explain." She turned a warning look in my direction.

It was hot. So I grinned.

She was like a princess/teacher combo that was checking every damn box I could possibly conjure up in what made a woman attractive.

Maybe I'd never found that combination attractive before tonight, but hell, I did now.

I wanted to muss her hair. Push her buttons. Get her all riled up to see what she'd do. Maybe she wasn't far off about the playground analogy because something about her made me think of a little kid who tugged on a pretty girl's braids just because he liked her. And I wanted to tug those braids *hard*.

“Not much to explain, princess.”

“Oh my gosh, I’m gonna puke if you keep calling her that,” Lia mumbled. “She has a name, you know.”

Claire pressed her fingertips against her temples like she was stemming a headache.

I ignored Lia. “And there’s not much to explain because the nature of Claire’s conversation with Richard, and the portion of that conversation that I took part in, make it impossible for you to show up there as yourself, Lia.”

She narrowed her eyes. “Why’s that?”

Claire’s face was a sickly shade of white now.

“Do you want to tell her, or should I?” I asked Claire.

She gave me an incredulous look.

“Right.” I turned back to Lia. “Claire spoke to Richard before she knew who he was. And it’s my understanding that the thing she discussed, as Claire, positively blew him away.”

No one said anything because Lia could read the misery etched on her twin’s face and wisely kept her mouth shut. And Claire, she just looked like she was trying not to pass out because she knew she was well and truly stuck.

“Some child development thing, isn’t that right?” I asked. “I caught the tail end of your conversation as I walked up.”

Claire nodded slowly.

Lia’s eyes closed in understanding, and she muttered a curse under her breath.

“Apparently, you hit close to home with what you said. Reminded him of his own childhood, but the way you managed to talk about it had him intrigued how a young woman like you, paired with his resources and that of the community center, could make positive impacts in a child’s life who might have had the kind of upbringing he did.”

Claire’s face sharpened with interest. Pleasant surprise. “Really?”

“Really.”

Her smile was slow to start, slow to build, but damn, it was beautiful when it fully covered her face. “That’s amazing.”

“Adele certainly thinks so.” I winced. “Though I had to tell her which twin you actually were when she couldn’t figure out why an English Lit major”—I glanced pointedly at Lia—“would be referencing childhood development studies.”

“Was she mad?” Lia asked.

“Are you kidding?” I smiled. “At that point, she couldn’t even be upset at *me* for being present when your little twin swap brought her this kind of quality time with Richard.”

Claire looked calmer now, glancing back and forth between her sister and me. “So I get why I need to be the one there, but no offense, why do you have to be there? Can’t I just go with Adele and your dad?”

I rubbed at my chest. “Ouch, trying to pawn me off already?”

“N-no,” she stammered, “I just ... I’m trying to understand your role in all this.”

I pitched my voice low, like we were dancing again. “Don’t you remember what he said to me as he was walking away?”

Her brow furrowed for a moment. Then it dawned. Her mouth opened again.

“What?” Lia asked. “What did he say?”

“Son of a bitch,” Claire whispered so quietly, I could hardly hear her.

But hear her I did. And I started laughing.

“Someone tell me!”

“Nothing terribly exciting,” I told Lia. “I get to go as the boyfriend. The infamous snowboarding boyfriend who Richard is very excited to get to know.”

“You *what*?”

Claire looked desperate. “Why can’t he take a meeting with them like a normal person?”

“Because rich people do weird things, princess.” I shrugged. “He won’t be in Seattle tomorrow, and apparently, a little quality time with you, me, and the parents sounds like his idea of a rockin’ weekend.”

“Why are *you* saying yes to this?” Lia asked me. “You and Adele can hardly stand to be in the same room. You haven’t done a single thing to help your parents or Finn with anything since I’ve been around.”

Claire looked at me with quiet consideration on her face.

I felt it slide up, up, and over my entire body, a suit of iron that no one but I could see. “Who says I’m doing any of this to help them? Maybe I want a weekend at a big ass house in the mountains where I have the hardship of pretending to date a beautiful woman? There are worse ways to spend my time.”

“I’ve heard all about how you spend your time,” Lia tossed back. “The whole internet knows, and trust me, it’s not pretty.”

I answered with a perfectly straight face. “And everything you see on the internet is true.”

“Bauer,” Claire said, “let me walk you out. I need to talk to you about this alone.”

Lia started to argue, but Claire silenced her with a single look.

I whistled. “Damn, I need to learn that trick.”

“Not helpful,” Claire snapped.

Holding my hands up in surrender, I waited patiently for her to slip on a sweatshirt and some fuzzy pink slippers so she could walk me out to the parking lot. Lia picked up her backpack and gave me about as chilly of a look as I’d ever seen.

“Thanks for sending a replacement tonight,” I told her.

She flipped me her middle finger and walked out of the family room.

“She really likes me,” I told Claire as I followed her from the apartment.

Claire glanced at me sideways through long, dark lashes. “I think if you’d been the Bauer I saw tonight, she actually would.”

I rolled my neck. “Doubtful.”

“Why?”

“Too many years of establishing patterns make it hard to break them, princess. We all have our roles in that family, and I know exactly what mine is. Even Lia, as my brother’s friend, has her role.” I held the door open for her as we walked out into the evening air. It had cooled considerably, and even with her sweatshirt, she shivered. “Would you rather talk in the lobby?”

She shook her head. “It’s fine. Just didn’t think it’d be this cold.”

I glanced up into the inky black sky. It smelled cold, and it made me miss my mountains. “Cold front moving in, I think.”

We approached my Jeep, and her steps slowed while I leaned up against the hood.

“I don’t believe you.”

Her voice was so quiet and unassuming, I had to take a second and process what she’d said.

“About what?”

“That you wouldn’t do anything to help them.” Her gaze was direct. “I don’t believe you.”

I clenched my jaw. “It doesn’t matter whether you believe me or not. Making friends with someone like Richard Harper can only benefit me in my ... predicament.”

She hummed.

Internally I rolled my eyes because it shouldn’t surprise me that a nice person would try to pin nice motivations on me. “Will you do it?” I asked. “Because I’m only invited because

the man with the money wants me there as your athlete arm candy.”

Claire rolled her lips between her teeth and glanced beyond my shoulder as she thought.

After an impossibly long moment, she finally shifted her attention back to me. “One night?”

I nodded. “Just long enough for him to show off his mansion, study us like rare specimen, and decide if he’s going to make my parents incredibly happy.”

She let out a dry laugh, then rubbed at her forehead. “Bauer,” her voice trailed off.

What was it about her? Just saying my name like that had me wanting to drop to my knees in front of her and take whatever scraps she’d give me. Apparently, my good girl fetish was marrow deep, and I didn’t realize it until just now.

“I get my own bedroom.”

I blinked, not expecting that. “I will pass that request along to our host.”

“And you can’t grab my ass just because they think we’re dating.”

My smile was instantaneous. “Noted.”

She licked her lips. Her eyes were wide and nervous, and she tucked a stray hair behind her ear. “And you can’t kiss me.”

I tilted my head to the side and studied her. That was a promise I didn’t want to make. The words literally would not come out of my mouth. Pushing away from the Jeep, I took a step closer to her. She held her ground, lifting her chin at my approach.

“What if you ask me to?” I said quietly. “Then can I?”

Claire exhaled shakily. “I won’t do that.”

“No?” Carefully, I touched my thumb to the curve of her chin.

She shook her head, and my hand fell away.

“Maybe you won’t,” I told her. “But hear me right now, princess, I’d love it if you asked for a kiss.”

After a moment, Claire swallowed and stepped away from me. I felt the step, the distance it put between us, like a punch to the balls.

“We leave tomorrow?” she asked.

Ahh, so that’s how this would play out. I dropped my chin to my chest and had to exhale out a hard puff of disappointment.

“Yeah.” I lifted my head. “I’ll pick you up at eight.”

She started walking backward, but her eyes stayed steady on mine. “I’ll see you at eight.”

I didn’t move until she was inside, up the flight of stairs, and I saw her shadow move behind the closed curtains of their family room. I glanced at my watch. I’d see her in less than eleven hours.

Then I grinned. Hopefully, she didn’t kill me when she realized we were driving, but they were all flying.

I wasn’t stupid. If the three-hour drive to Vancouver was the most honest time I’d get with her ... then I’d be an idiot not to take it.

CHAPTER NINE

CLAIRE

FOR THE SEVENTEENTH time that morning, I rolled my eyes as I tucked my fourth unnecessary outfit into my backpack.

“You don’t happen to know his social, do you?”

I answered with the same level of patience that I had her previous sixteen questions about Bauer. “No, Paige, I don’t.”

Whatever she saw on her phone screen made her bring it up closer to her face. My sister Isabel, older than Lia and me by two years, peeked over her shoulder and hummed appreciatively.

Paige, our sister-in-law—but for all intents and purposes, our surrogate mom—glared at her. “We don’t make noises about men who are absconding with Claire overnight to mansions.”

“Yeah, but look at him,” Isabel murmured. “I’d let him abscond with me anytime.”

I swallowed carefully as she said it because it was easy to imagine Isabel with someone like Bauer. Of the four of us, Isabel was the most athletic. For the past four years, she’d managed a kickboxing studio and gym, doing personal training sessions for extra money, and she looked like the kind of woman who would date a professional snowboarder.

With her dry sense of humor, Isabel would easily be able to keep up with Bauer.

Carefully, without allowing myself a shred of curiosity at what they were staring at, I pushed my pajama shorts into the

top corner of the bag. “It’s not like this was his idea,” I told the peanut gallery. “Why is it necessary for you to be here again?”

“Moral support,” Paige said.

“Are you kidding? I want to meet Bauer,” Isabel interjected. “You get to pretend to be his girlfriend, you little punk.”

“Please stop saying that.” When I tugged the zipper closed with a bit too much force, I hissed in a breath. “It’s one night, and as long as I’m not walking around punching him in the throat, the extent of my pretending anything is that I answer to a different name than my own.”

“And if that is all you do with Bauer ‘the Hawk’ Davis”—the emphasis she put on his professional name made me want to gouge my elder sister’s eyes out—“with this one night, I’ll have you checked out for mental deficiency.”

Paige cleared her throat. “I’m right here.”

Iz rolled her eyes. “Like we haven’t talked about worse.”

“I know,” Paige said, “but it’s Claire. She and Lia are my babies. I refuse to believe you two have actually aged beyond the adorable little angels you were when I first married your brother.”

I froze.

Isabel froze.

Paige actually sniffled.

I approached her slowly, this woman we all loved so much. The woman who would fight the world for us if we needed her to, who was crying over a memory of my sister and I that was absolutely, horribly skewed.

We called it cognitive distortion for a reason.

My hand landed on her back softly, and I moved it around in soothing circles. Paige exhaled shakily, swiping her hand over her face. I mouthed, “*Why is she crying?*” to Isabel, and she shrugged.

“Paige?” I said.

She sniffled again.

“Do you ... do you remember me and Lia from when you first got married?”

From the kitchen, Lia burst into hysterical laughter.

Paige smiled, her shoulders sinking as her rare outburst of watery emotion dried up. “You were terrors, created for the sole purpose of destroying my sanity.”

I nodded. “Testing the boundaries of someone new to a parental role is completely developmentally normal and expected for situations like that.”

Leaning her shoulder against the doorjamb, Lia joined us, watching the scene with a grin. “I did some of my best work those first few months you were around.”

“Remember the lizard in the shower?” I asked.

My sister’s face took on a dreamy quality. “Her screams were a thing of beauty.”

Paige rolled her eyes, which made Lia laugh heartily.

At the sight of her smile, I felt something uncoil inside me. A cool sweep of relief because all morning, we’d danced around each other.

When she was on edge, I couldn’t help but absorb some of that energy. It was the same way with her.

Our unease might have been born from different places, but I could tell that we were doing this particular sidestep all last night and early that morning because we didn’t need to add to our current supply by unconsciously adding the other person’s.

Lia was uneasy because a relatively innocent plan had turned into something far larger. She couldn’t help these people she loved, and she was still annoyed at her friend for not giving her (and by extension me) a heads-up. All of that left her feeling uncomfortable and out of control.

I knew because I could feel the edges of it. Like she stepped into water, and that water was lapping up against me.

I was uneasy, because I was about to spend twenty-four hours with Finn's parents, who knew I lied to them. Because a rich dude was impressed with my random yet-so-far useless knowledge of childhood development. And because last night, standing in the parking lot, Bauer Davis basically told me he wanted to kiss me, and that it was entirely in my control to make that happen.

Yeah. *That* was nothing I needed Lia to absorb.

It was hard enough and took enough time to hone my ability not to be swayed emotionally when Finn was around because I didn't want her to feel it.

This was something else. Not bigger—because my crush on Finn, which was hardly the problem right now—but big in a different way.

Paige and Lia started swapping stories, and I slowly lowered my hand from where it was still resting on Paige's back because I hadn't thought about Finn once since Bauer left the night before.

Not once.

His half-brother, bold and unapologetic and tattooed and fearless and completely opposite of him in every way, wanted to kiss me and would probably have the opportunity to if I wanted, and I hadn't thought about Finn *once*.

It wasn't easy, but I tried to keep the confused furrow from my brow as I made my bed, simply to busy myself in a way that wouldn't show my face. My sisters chattered away, oblivious to the way my brain had started spinning in circles, wobbling dangerously off-kilter at the realization.

"Claire," Iz said. "Earth to Claire."

After tugging on one last wrinkle in my bedspread, I smoothed my face as well and turned. "Sorry, what?"

"Do you have thick socks packed?" Paige asked.

I blinked. "Umm. I have normal socks packed, why?"

"It's cold up there, and they're supposed to get snow."

Rubbing a hand across my forehead. “Snow? It’s spring.”

“It’s the mountains,” Paige said. “You should pack wool socks.”

“I’ll be in a mansion, you guys. I’m pretty sure it’ll have heat.”

Iz grinned. “Bauer can keep her feet warm.”

Speaking of warm, my face was probably bright-ass red.

Lia scoffed. “He better not.”

“Damn right, he better not,” Paige said.

Isabel grinned at me. “Pretty sure that’s up to Claire, not you two.”

“Claire does not go for guys like Bauer,” Lia argued. “She likes her men sane and kind and polite and not liable to drunkenly cuss someone out.”

I held up my hands. “Okay, enough. Bauer isn’t needed to keep anything of mine warm. I’ve been keeping my own feet nice and toasty, all by myself, thank you very much.”

Lia smirked. “If you say so.”

Isabel tapped a finger against her chin. “I need a new foot warmer. Mine broke last week.”

“I have your brother,” Paige said around an unrepentant grin.

“Gross,” the three of us replied in perfect unison.

I pressed my hands to blazing hot cheeks. “Okay, he will be here any minute. Please ... just ... don’t embarrass me, Paige.”

“Me?” Her eyes widened dramatically.

“There’s no chance you’d take Iz and leave before he gets here, is there?”

Isabel wrapped an arm around Paige’s shoulders. “She does not have a chance in hell of dragging me from this apartment.”

Paige glanced sideways at her. “I could still take you, you know.”

Iz patted her head. “No, you really couldn’t.”

Lia stared at Iz. “I don’t know why you’re so excited to meet him. It’s just Bauer.”

“Because he’s a *world-class* snowboarder,” Iz replied. “Did you see his triple cork at the X Games last year?”

Lia sighed. “Nope.”

“That’s not a reason to let him warm Claire’s ...” Paige paused with a grimace, “anything. We don’t idolize athletes in this family, remember? They’re just normal people—”

“Who do abnormal jobs,” we finished by rote.

Paige’s phone dinged, and she raised the screen up to read whatever was on it. “Case in point, your brother—the world-class football player and coach—can’t figure out how to use the washing machine.”

Paige was right. Normally, none of us fawned over professional athletes because we’d been around them our entire life. Between my brother and his years playing for Washington, and our oldest sister, Molly, who was dating another famed member of the Washington Wolves roster, Noah Griffin, we’d shared plenty of meals with people who made extremely generous livings by playing games.

When I glanced at my alarm clock, I let out a deep breath because he was a couple of minutes late.

The buzzer at the door went off, and the four of us froze.

“I’ll get it,” I said quietly.

Lia exhaled. “I’m going to hide in my room. I don’t need to witness this crazy.”

“The crazy that’s your fault, you mean,” Isabel whispered under her breath.

As she walked out of my room, she narrowed her eyes dangerously in Isabel’s direction.

Paige gave me an encouraging smile. “It’ll be fine. I promise to be nice.”

I snatched my backpack and pillow, mentally girding my loins for whatever circus show was about to unfold. For a moment, I felt bad for not preparing Bauer for the one-woman firing squad.

That only lasted a second because the other ninety-nine percent of me knew it would be awesome to see her knock him off balance. He’d sure as hell been knocking me off balance since the moment he turned around in that tuxedo.

“Come on up,” I said into the speaker.

“You didn’t even make sure it was him,” Paige hissed. “What if it’s a sex trafficker?”

“Ringing the buzzer at eight a.m. on a Saturday?” I asked. “Do you think a sex trafficker would ring the buzzer of our apartment early on a Saturday morning?”

She sniffed. “A polite one, maybe.”

Isabel was laughing when I opened the door for Bauer.

Then her laughter stopped.

Paige swore.

And my stomach tangled into forty-seven knots.

Because Bauer in a tux was nice enough but not the real him.

Now, I was seeing the real Bauer.

“Good morning, princess,” he said. His voice was gruff and grumbly, like he hadn’t used it much since he woke up.

In faded, ripped jeans, a dark gray beanie covering his hair, and a black Henley stretched tight across his chest, sleeves pushed up to reveal the sleeves of ink on his muscular forearms, I officially got my first taste of The Bauer Butterflies.

“Claire,” Paige whispered in my ear, “go put those wool socks in your backpack, or I will do it for you, young lady.”

I motioned for her to back up. “Come on in,” I told Bauer. “Ignore them.”

“Seems highly impossible.” His grin was wide and charming, and dammit, he had dimples I’d not noticed the night before. With an outstretched hand, I watched Isabel melt like butter, and Paige shift right the frick into overprotective mom mode. “Bauer. Who do I have the pleasure of meeting?”

“Isabel, one of the big sisters.” Iz gave him a friendly smile. “I’m a huge fan, Bauer. It’s nice to meet you.”

He dropped her hand and turned to Paige. “And you, I recognize. Paige Ward, wife of the big brother.”

Paige shook his hand, and I stifled a laugh when I caught the gleam in her eye. “It makes it easier that you recognize me.”

“Does it?”

She nodded pleasantly. “That way, if you hurt a hair on her head, you’ll know exactly who’s going to send you to your painful, bloody demise.”

Bauer froze. “Right. That does make it easier.”

Something about this entire exchange made me want to go hide in Lia’s room with her.

Bauer was too charming in the harsh sunlight that came with this brand new day. He was too big and tattooed and muscular and ... too *Bauer*, for me to go anywhere with him that involved sharing the same roof.

Now I was thinking about Finn. Because he would’ve been polite and sweet. Unassuming. He would’ve taken my bag and called me Claire, and it would be comforting because I knew what to expect from him.

As Isabel asked Bauer some questions about snowboarding, and he gave me a tiny wink, my head and my heart were screaming at me not to leave this apartment with him.

Instincts were blaring like a tornado siren. My hand tightened around the handle of my backpack until my fingers

started tingling from loss of blood flow.

I couldn't do this.

If I wasn't capable of one full evening around him, one full evening of pretending to be my sister, I definitely couldn't do this for an entire night. With him.

"And you have good snow tires?" Paige asked him. "Because you might encounter bad weather."

"That's going north of them," Isabel said. "Ignore her, Bauer. She's like this with all of us."

Bauer set a hand on his chest. "My Jeep can handle anything, I promise. I have excellent tires."

"Do you mind if I quickly grab a picture of your driver's license?" Paige continued. "Just ... in case."

He tilted his head. "Umm, yes?"

"Why? Something to hide?"

"Okay," I interjected. "Paige, I think he gets the picture."

"Believe me," Bauer said seriously, "I'm well aware of how precious my cargo is."

I rolled my eyes.

Paige, however, looked pleased. "You're damned right."

Setting a hand on my sister-in-law's shoulder, I squeezed in warning. "Thank you, Paige."

I gave her a look.

She gave me one right back.

If we didn't leave soon, she'd pull a shotgun out of thin air and start cleaning it in front of him.

"Ready?" I asked Bauer.

His wide grin held the slightest secret edge to it that was meant only for me. It made my heart race inexplicably. My head was still screaming in warning.

"Let's go, princess. I've been ready since last night."

CHAPTER TEN

CLAIRE

THE DRIVE from my apartment to Richard's place in Vancouver was roughly two and a half hours. I learned a few things in that relatively short span of time.

1- You could stare at the breathtaking scenery for most of it and live in abject denial about what was waiting for you upon our arrival to Richard's place. Memorize entire mountain ranges, each craggy, uneven peak, and imagine it to such detail that if you actually knew how to do something like ... paint or draw, you'd spend those two and a half hours thinking about how you'd paint or draw them.

2- Bauer was, regrettably, a very good singer. He favored classic rock and alternative as his music of choice, and it took everything in me not to jam my fingers in my ears as he sang along. His voice was low and smooth without frills or fancy embellishments, but it made the hair on the back of my neck rise, and therefore, I didn't like it.

3- He was also freaking relentless in trying to engage me in conversation even though I was doing my very best at ignoring his existence until I had no other choice. It took until the last thirty minutes of our drive before I finally cracked.

“So, princess, when did we start dating?”

Ignoring the unsteady gallop of my heart when he asked that, I kept my voice even and emotionless every time he asked me something that I felt forced to answer.

“Let's go with six months.”

“Six months, it is,” he agreed easily.

Two songs later—songs he knew the harmony to—he tried again.

“What changed?”

Tearing my eyes away from the mountains, I begrudgingly let my gaze turn in his direction. Which was a *mistake*, because Bauer, in the shirt and the jeans and the hat, with that scenery and that dark hair along his jaw, was like something ripped out of *Rugged Man Magazine*, and I was not here for that.

Not here for it.

At all.

He gestured back and forth between us when I didn’t say anything. “Between us. What changed? Six months ago, I mean.”

My mouth fell open. “I-I don’t know. Does it matter?”

Bauer’s shrug was careless. “Yeah, it matters. If I’m hanging out with a couple who interests me, and I start asking them questions about their relationship, I’d want to know what changed, considering we’ve known each other for years.”

“Well,” I hedged, “you and I just ... I don’t know ...”

“Thank you for proving my point about why we need an answer.”

I gave him a look. “I’d bet ten bucks that he won’t ask what changed between me and you.”

“Me and Lia,” he corrected lightly. “Remember?”

Swallowing, I nodded. “Right. You and Lia.”

“I mean, there must have been one moment,” he said. “Maybe you were spending the night.”

I closed my eyes. I didn’t want to play this game with him. Didn’t want to imagine whatever he had in his head because it was probably *vivid*. “I thought you never went home.”

“Rarely,” Bauer conceded. “They don’t exactly roll out the welcome mat for me.”

Staying quiet felt like a safer choice because my options were either contribute to the little story he was concocting or allow him to spin a tale of his own making.

“So I probably snuck in late since I needed a place to stay.” He tapped his thumb on the wheel, and the sun glinted off the solid silver ring he was wearing. “You couldn’t sleep, so I found you in the kitchen, staring into the fridge.”

Carefully, I tucked my knees up to my chest and hugged my arms around my legs. I didn’t want to imagine this. Because it suddenly, somehow seemed so much worse if he was placing Lia into his mind, instead of me.

My safe choice didn’t feel so safe anymore.

“No one will ask this,” I said quietly.

Bauer ignored me. “Maybe you offered me a drink because you were going to have one. One turned to two. Just enough that you were willing to lower your defenses around me, princess. First time you ever did that, I’m thinking.”

I raised an eyebrow. “Taking advantage, are we?”

“Hell no. We were relaxed. Not drunk. I don’t sleep with drunk women because trust me, that’s a whole different world of trouble when you wake up the next morning.”

“This story is leading to all sorts of romantic places.”

He grinned. “In my mind, you grabbed me and planted that first kiss on my very unsuspecting lips. A hot kiss too.”

I rolled my eyes, but my cheeks were flaming. “Of course, that’s how it would work in your head.”

Bauer licked his lower lip. “You tasted like cherries. After that, I was all but whipped. I was yours to command, and I’ve never looked back.”

Turning my face back to the window, I tried some deep breathing exercises at the thought of maintaining that particular façade for even one single day. My heart was racing

terribly. “I can’t imagine Richard Harper will be interrogating us.”

He laughed. “Polite conversation is not an interrogation.”

“It sure feels like it,” I muttered under my breath.

Oh, he heard me, and he thought that was hilarious. “You know, I like it when you’re just being Claire.”

No, no I would not feel a flush of warm, gooey happiness at that statement. When you were a twin, particularly an identical twin, there was a strange emotional tangle that went along with it. Inevitably, you’re linked with that person for the rest of your life. In a lot of people’s eyes, you come as a package deal. Friends in high school and even early college when we lived in the dorms were shocked if only one of us showed up to an event.

Claire and Lia.

Lia and Claire.

People taking a second to make sure they knew which twin they were talking to. Like we weren’t completely different underneath the surface of our skin. Half the time, I wasn’t even sure they cared if they knew which one was which.

For some reason, sitting in that car, following my brain along that path, made me think of something Brooke said to us about a year before she left.

We were driving to Logan’s house. It was hard to remember the details now, but she wanted to go do something, so she was dropping us off at his house so he could watch us. Lia and I were bickering in the back seat, and because she couldn’t hear her music over the noise we were making, she yelled back us to pipe down.

Because she was incapable of keeping her mouth shut, Lia sweetly asked which one needed to be quiet.

“Like it matters,” Brooke snapped. “I can’t even tell which of you sounds worse right now, or who’s more annoying. Which is the same as every other day, I guess.”

She'd gotten her wish because it shut us up in different ways. I'd felt like she'd punched me in the stomach. Lia's face went smooth instantly, but I'd felt her anger. I'd felt it humming under my skin.

Childhood wounds went deep, even if you didn't think about them all the time.

"You okay?" Bauer asked. "You went scary quiet on me there."

It was perceptive of him, and it made me give him a curious glance. I'd been quiet most of the trip, but even him, this man who didn't really know me, was able to tell the difference in my silence.

I gave him a small smile. "Just thinking about emotional trauma from childhood, if you must know."

He groaned, leaning forward to turn the music up. "Nope. Not going there, princess. We haven't been fake dating long enough."

After an hour and a half of him trying to engage me in conversation, that was the thing that did the trick. I turned in my seat to appraise his facial expression.

"Come on, I'll share mine if you share yours."

He snorted. "Yeah, right."

"We have an hour left," I said. "What else should we talk about?"

"Literally anything." He changed lanes after a quick glance at his blind spot. "I'd talk politics. Religion. Women I've slept with in the past because I've never done the dating thing. Let's hit one of *those* for fun."

My head tilted. "How old were you when your dad married Adele?"

Bauer blew out a hard breath. "Remember that one time my high school girlfriend cheated on me? With my best friend? Let's recap that in detail instead."

A smile twitched at the edges of my mouth, but I tamped it down. Being charmed by his reticence to talk about his family's obvious dysfunction would do me no good. Even if he was all but admitting he was a man-ho.

"You're gonna make a great kid shrink someday, princess," he said. "Badgering these poor children into sharing."

"You're very skilled at deflection, Bauer."

He sent me a crooked grin. "I'm skilled at a lot of things, trust me. Not talking about my family isn't even at the top of the list."

Rolling my eyes at the innuendo, I turned back to the window. Seattle was beautiful, but as we drove farther north, the views seemed to increase in grandeur. "No wonder you love it up here," I told him. "It's amazing."

Not that my comment necessitated a response, but Bauer didn't say anything right away. Then he let out a slow exhale, the kind you'd make after a good yoga stretch or when you slip into a bathtub full of hot water and it hits your skin for the first time.

It was the kind of sigh that said *my soul is at ease*.

"The mountains are the one place where I don't feel stuck in a cage."

Before I could comment on that, the soothing voice on his phone told us to take the exit. There were buildings off in the distance, the Vancouver skyline visible even from where we were heading off toward the water to where Richard had told us to go.

"When did your parents drive up?"

He glanced at his phone screen, and I thought I saw guilt in his eyes. "They, uh, they flew with Richard on his private plane a little bit ago."

My eyebrows slid up on my forehead. "And how come we didn't do that? We could've gotten there in, like, thirty minutes."

“Beeecause I didn’t want to be trapped in a flying metal tube with my dad and Adele just yet.” Bauer gave me an indulgent grin. “I needed time with my girl before our sleepover tonight.”

I pointed a finger at him. “I told you separate rooms.”

“And if I have any control over that, your wish is my command.” He pointed a finger of his own. “But you know as well as I that if you protest too much, it’ll look weird.”

With a groan, I dropped my head back on the seat. “This is so stupid. Can’t we just tell Richard about the mix-up?”

“Yes, sure we can.” Bauer gave me a look. “I’m sure he’d love handing Adele a check after he finds out we all lied to him, knowing exactly who he was.”

“Eventually, they’ll have to.”

“Why?”

“W-well,” I stammered, “if he’s a major benefactor of the center, won’t he come visit?”

“Sure. Does your sister visit the center often?”

I frowned, which made him laugh.

“Lying isn’t fun, Bauer. I don’t enjoy it. I feel like a fake and a phony and like we’re duping this nice man.”

“All you’re doing is answering to a different name,” he pointed out. “When you talked to him for the first time, were you pretending to be Lia?”

“No,” I admitted.

The houses grew as we traveled around the winding road surrounded by towering trees and glimpses of water.

“No, you weren’t. Listen, the worst part of this is that you have to pretend to like me for a day.”

He said it flippantly, but there was an edge to his words.

For a moment, I closed my eyes and tried to imagine that the night had played out the way I’d dreamt it would. What

would this feel like if Finn were driving us up to Vancouver, and I had to pretend to be his girlfriend for a night?

And my mind went ... blank.

My heart was quiet.

He probably would have been as uncomfortable with this as I was. And the longer I thought about it, I knew we never would've been in this position in the first place because he wouldn't have approached me and slid his arm around my waist as I spoke to Richard. He wouldn't have looked at me the way Bauer had. He wouldn't have danced with me in a quiet hallway.

Bauer turned the Jeep into the entrance for Richard's house, but my gaze wasn't on the stunning view or towering log cabin. It was on the man driving us toward it. The skin around his mouth had tightened a bit, and his eyes had lost some of the spark from earlier. This was hard on him, too, but in a completely different way than it was for me.

After taking a deep breath, I laid my hand on top of where his was resting on the gear shift.

Bauer's eyes snapped to me, then down to our hands.

His skin was warm and rough.

"I like you just fine, Bauer," I told him quietly. "I just don't know you at all."

His eyebrows lowered over his eyes as he studied my suddenly serious demeanor.

"Why did you say what you said when we were dancing?" The question was out of my mouth before I even realized it had been bothering me.

That sparked something behind his eyes. "What did I say?"

"That Finn had never danced with me like that." My face was probably bright red, but it felt ... important. If Bauer was being truthful, and he'd known the whole evening that I was Claire, then he was speaking to me when he said it. Not Lia. "Why did you say that?"

He had to disentangle our hands to move the Jeep into park, and he took a second to stare up at the house.

Then he cocked his head, angling in his seat to face me. “Why did you go to the dinner for Lia? If you hate lying so much.”

Stalemate.

That was what we were in. If I told Bauer right now, before walking into this performance we were about to attempt, then he’d shut down instantly. If I told him that for years, I’d looked at his brother like the perfect man, the prototype of everything I’d wanted, but the men I’d dated had always come up woefully short in comparison.

Not smart enough.

Not sweet enough.

Not kind enough.

Not ... Finn enough.

Here was a man who was the exact opposite of his brother in every single way I could possibly list. And in front of a bunch of strangers, I was going to pretend he was everything I wanted.

I took a deep breath. “I asked you first.”

Bauer smiled cryptically. “That you did, princess.”

The expectant look I gave him made his smile grow wider. I wanted to climb out of my seat and rip the answer out of him. The fact he wouldn’t answer made me feel edgy. like there was a vibration starting somewhere deep inside my body, spreading further and further until he’d be able to see it on the surface of my skin if he didn’t tell me.

“Why won’t you tell me?” I whispered impatiently.

“Why won’t you tell me?” he said back, his face leaning closer to mine in the quiet confines of the Jeep. His eyes fixed on my mouth. “You’re going to drive me insane before this is over, aren’t you?”

It snapped the tightening cord between us, and I sat back, flattening myself against the door of the Jeep. What was I doing?

Movement from the corner of my eye snagged my attention. Richard was standing on a massive deck, waving at us. “We have company.”

Bauer blinked. “Right.”

The air was heavy and strangely charged, though I couldn’t figure out which one of us was sending all that energy pulsing into the space between us.

He gave me a long look. “Showtime, princess.”

CHAPTER ELEVEN

CLAIRE, who was quickly becoming one of the most fascinating women I'd ever met, did not get her wish. Richard's housekeeper, a tidy woman in her late fifties, showed us our bedroom at the end of the upstairs hallway, and I tried not to laugh at the disgruntled look that Claire tried to hide.

The room, just like the rest of Richard's place, was, oh ... could I even think of the right word.

Overwhelming.

Though his place was hidden from the road, on the tip of West Vancouver, with trees crowding the lot and blocking the view of the house from the road, once we'd stepped inside, everything about it was overwhelming. And incredibly, mind-numbingly ugly.

Claire and I stood in our bedroom, absolutely speechless.

"It's ..." Her voice trailed off when her eyes landed, wide and round and shocked, on the bed dominating the space.

"It's terrible."

She let out an airy laugh. "I think Richard Harper is overcompensating for something."

"Is that your professional opinion?"

Her slow nod had me laughing.

It looked like a turn of the century French brothel puked up over every surface. Ornate gilded gold was everywhere, on

furniture and picture frames and mirrors. Deep, jewel-toned upholstery had me blinking in disbelief, just like I had been from the moment we walked in the door.

“I don’t know what I expected,” she said. Her hand gestured weakly at the king-size, four-poster bed, complete with blood-red velvet curtains that would completely enclose the sleeping space. “But it wasn’t this.”

I peeked inside our bathroom and let out a low whistle. “Close your eyes real tight before you walk in this room, princess. It’ll make your eyeballs bleed.”

“Rich people are strange,” she said, then glanced over her shoulder at me. “Isn’t that what you told me?”

“Something like that.” I scratched my head and slung my duffel onto the couch framed in the large span of windows. Windows that would fully be covered by the heavy black and gold striped fabric, so overpowering in pattern, I almost felt claustrophobic looking at it.

“That couch looks comfy.”

I glanced back at her, caught the smirk on her face, and shook my head. “You trying to tell me something?”

The moment we walked in the room, I knew I’d be spending the night on that damn couch covered with a horrible, horrible floral pattern. It would be small and uncomfortable, and I’d do it, because as much as I wanted to kiss Claire, do all manner of things, if she was amenable, I’d never forced my attentions on a woman, and I sure as hell wouldn’t be starting with this one.

Besides, I’d caught the look in her sister-in-law’s eyes when she told me she’d destroy me, and I abso-friggin-lutely believed her.

Claire didn’t answer me because she probably knew all of the things I was thinking.

“At least give me one of the good pillows,” I told her. Holding up the small one from the couch, one of those weird pointless ones shaped like a hot dog, I tossed it in her direction. “Because I am not using that.”

She caught the pillow with a smile and climbed up onto the gargantuan bed. “I think I can manage that since he’s given me, oh, let’s see ... fourteen on this one.”

I looked away so that she didn’t catch me checking out her ass, but come on, she was on all fours on a bed, and I was already struggling to keep my hands off her. That was why the pillow hit me in the side of the head.

Her peals of laughter were so damn adorable, I’d probably let her throw a concrete block at my head if I could hear them all night.

“Shit,” I muttered. I was in trouble with this one, and I knew exactly why. My lifestyle didn’t lend itself to being around women like Claire. Don’t get me wrong, I had friends who were girls in Whistler. Snowboarding chicks were strong and badass, and I counted plenty of them as friends. I’d never slept with any of my fellow competitors, just the snow bunnies. The visitors to the mountain who had no trouble with the bartender for a night.

But Claire was different.

Smart, sweet, no-nonsense, and way, way too good for me. Claire checked every box on the hypothetical list that I never paid too much attention to in my head—the Keeper list, which is why it wasn’t hard for me to pretend with her for one night.

Looking down at the couch, I tried to figure out a way to convince Richard that he needed a full-week immersion into learning about the community center because I’d gladly give up seven nights of sleep to that embroidered nightmare if I got more time with Claire.

There was a soft knock on the door.

“Come in,” Claire said.

The housekeeper popped her head in. “Dinner will be served in about fifteen minutes if you’d like to join the rest of the party downstairs.”

“We’ll be right down,” I told her.

After the door closed, Claire flopped back on the bed and covered her face with her hands. “This is insane.”

“You know what’s insane? You could fit fifteen of you in that bed and there’d still be room.”

She sat up, and her hair, shiny and dark, slid out of its ponytail. “True. Which means I’ll sleep very well tonight,” she said primly.

I gestured to the door. “Let’s go, princess. I know you’re excited.”

When she hopped off the bed, fixing her ponytail as she walked, my hand hovered over her back as we left the room. It wanted to fall to that curve, the one just at the hem of her shirt, but I tucked my arm back into my side.

My parents were waiting expectantly at a monstrosity of a formal dining table, the kind that could easily seat twelve people.

“Sweetie,” Adele said in greeting, leaning in to kiss Claire’s cheek. “Just be yourself,” she whispered. “But, you know ... answer to Lia.”

Claire gave her a weak smile. “Got it.”

Richard joined us, handing Adele and my dad full glasses of wine. “What do you think of my humble abode?”

“It’s astounding,” I told him seriously. “I’ve never seen anything like it.”

He puffed up like a peacock as Claire echoed the sentiment.

“I’d spend all my time here if I could,” he said. “I feel like a king.”

I nodded. “Understandable.”

Adele gave me a warning look, and my dad swiped a hand over his mouth.

We sat for dinner, Claire to my right, and when she almost knocked over her water glass pulling her chair closer to the table, I laid a hand on her thigh and squeezed.

I gave her an encouraging smile, which she returned weakly.

Richard, from his gilded, ornate chair at the head of the table, caught the gesture and winked at us.

“So, Bauer, what’s this nonsense about you losing your sponsorship? You were spectacular at your past few events.”

Adele’s face turned a pasty shade of white that I was the first up in Richard’s eyes. I swallowed, giving the housekeeper a smile as she set some bread and soup in front of me and Claire.

“Oh, I don’t know if that’s enjoyable dinnertime conversation, sir.”

It certainly wasn’t for me because I’d be scrambling to regain any sort of competitive traction without a primary sponsor. Scotty was working on it, but this crowd was the last one I wanted to dissect it with. Especially in front of Adele.

“It’s such a fickle career,” Adele interjected. “So stressful for the whole family, really.”

I raised my eyebrows at her. “Yes. I can’t imagine how helpless you must feel. You can help all these kids who need you at the center, but your son is beyond your reach.”

Claire pressed her foot on top of mine under the table.

Richard smiled between us, completely oblivious. “My parents wrote me off long ago,” he said. “You’re fortunate to have a family who cares that much.”

My answering nod was grave. “Indeed I am.”

“Speaking of the center,” Richard said between sips of the soup, “why don’t you tell me a bit about it, Adele?”

She let out a relieved breath. “I’d love to.”

And that set the tone for the rest of the three-course dinner. Richard and Adele dominated the conversation with occasional interjections from my father as necessary.

Claire watched it all unfold thoughtfully, nodding a few times when Adele would say something about the positive

impact a place like the center could have on children who wouldn't normally have the opportunities.

"You're quiet, Miss Ward," Richard said, a bit more astute than I'd given him credit for.

She smiled, and I stretched my arm behind her chair. Her hair brushed against my hand, and against my better judgment, I toyed with the silky ends.

"Not much to add, I guess."

"Oh, I find that hard to believe. This is the same young woman who took a simple picture and about made a grown man cry at what she observed in it."

I twirled her hair over my knuckle, and Claire shivered. "Umm, well, Adele and Robert have done such a thorough job, I can't imagine what I'd be able to contribute."

"But you think their reach could be greater," he said. "Help more kids."

She inhaled quietly before she answered. "I think there are a lot of philanthropic endeavors that fall into that category. Services for underserved youth need to be talked about; they need to have the opportunity to reach the kids who need them the most, and that's not always the kids who live in the immediate vicinity to the physical location. That's why a lot of athletes, for example, coordinate with different school districts to bus kids in for larger events. If you're limited to one geographical area, you're limited in the number of kids you can help."

My dad nodded. "She's right. We seem to be plateauing the past few years. We'd love to broaden our reach, but we've just lacked the resources to be able to do so."

Richard watched them both, and his eyes tracking back and forth between the two with interest. "You've probably been to hundreds of those events over the years, haven't you, Lia?"

She blinked at the use of her sister's name, and my hand slid down to her shoulder. She relaxed slightly.

“I have. My brother never started his own foundation, but we’ve supported so many of his friends’, it’s hard to keep them straight.”

“I’d wager he was pretty busy raising you and your sisters,” Richard said. “With your mom leaving like she did.”

Claire swallowed carefully. “He was. Not many people know details of our background, though. He kept our life very private for that reason.”

I increased the pressure of my fingers on her shoulder, just letting her know I was there.

I knew a little bit of what the Ward sisters had been through from Finn, but it sounded like Richard knew even more. Logan practically raised them, and his brother—Claire’s other half brother—wasn’t really in their lives much because he and Logan didn’t get along. But the reasons, well, they’d never interested me much.

Until now.

Richard’s tone was sympathetic, but I still gave him careful study at the fact he knew about it in the first place. He must have seen something in my eyes because he held up his hands and smiled. “Sorry, didn’t know I was stepping into anything I shouldn’t. I thought it was common knowledge, if one cared to dig deep enough.”

“It’s not,” I told him quietly. “And not everyone enjoys talking about the things in their childhood that sucked.”

Claire exhaled slowly and gave me a small smile.

“It’s okay, Bauer,” she said. “And there’s no reason to apologize, Richard. If someone dug enough, they’d know that Brooke decided being a mother wasn’t what she wanted to do. My sisters and I were fortunate to have someone like Logan who loved us enough to be exactly what we needed. But not all kids have that. And I think it’s admirable for people like Adele and Robert to try to help children who don’t have another family member to do what my brother did.”

Richard relaxed back into his seat. “And I’m guessing that influenced your educational choices.”

She nodded. “It did.”

“What do you hope to do someday?”

Adele gave me a look that I couldn’t decipher. Claire shifted uncomfortably in her chair.

Right. Lia Ward was not a developmental psychology major, and the further he got to Claire as her sister, the more tangled the knot might become.

“She’s going to save hopeless wretches like you and me, Richard,” I said, easing a hand up Claire’s back.

He smiled, as intended, spreading his arms wide. A king showing off his kingdom. “Do I need saving?”

“Maybe from your decorating skills, but that’s about it,” I told him.

Adele sucked in a breath, and Claire rolled her lips between her teeth.

After a beat of silence, Richard’s booming laughter echoed off the cathedral ceiling.

And thankfully, that broke the mood while we wrapped up dinner.

Everything stayed fairly surface level with small talk about Seattle and Vancouver as we moved to the family room and the roaring fire. As Richard regaled Adele and my father with tales of his outlandish, over-the-top life, I stared out the windows. Outside the wall of glass, you could practically see the cold front move in.

The water took on an eerie stillness when the air went frigid. Sitting next to Claire on a puffy, horrible loveseat, I kept my arm across the back of the furniture and tried to block out everything except the view out the window and the woman next to me. Her legs were curled up into her chest, so we weren’t touching, but almost.

Almost.

I never should have concocted my little tale about our first kiss. All I could imagine now was a dark kitchen, Claire

tugging me down with fists clenched in my shirt, pushing my back against a fridge door and having her way with me.

Because of that fantasy running through my head, this almost was killing me.

Everywhere, we were *almost* touching. Her hair, again, was just beyond my hands. Her shoulder blades were less than an inch from my forearm. Her hip was close enough to mine that I could feel the heat of her body. And it was torture. For two hours, we sat there, each of us occasionally entering the conversation that flowed easily between my parents and Richard.

For all intents and purposes, we were as useful as all the gaudy decoration that Richard had up on the walls, but he wanted us there, nonetheless.

When the sun was fully set, and the skies dark, Claire yawned behind her hand.

“Ready to head upstairs?” I asked, leaning my head toward hers.

She nodded, turning toward me to meet my eyes, not realizing I’d moved. Her breath caught when my thumb moved to brush a stray piece of hair off her cheekbone.

“You have freckles,” I whispered, quietly enough that no one could hear us.

Her nod was jerky, but she didn’t pull back. “J-just when I get some sun.”

I hummed. “I like it.”

Richard cleared his throat, and his intrusion felt harsh and unwelcome in that little space I was occupying with Claire. “Well,” he said knowingly. “I think it’s time to wrap up the evening.”

Adele stood, giving me a warning look. “Yes, it looks like it.”

Claire got off the loveseat before I did because I had to take ten seconds to recite the Pledge of Allegiance in my head before standing or else I risked embarrassing myself.

“Good night, everyone,” Claire said.

I followed her up the stairs and down the hall.

Neither of us said a word.

The walk to our bedroom was tense, and I imagined all sorts of scenarios as soon as we were behind closed doors.

Her, yanking me against her soft, warm body and asking me to kiss her.

Me, digging my hands underneath the cotton of her shirt and finding out if her lips were as soft as I’d imagined, if her tongue was sweet and cool.

She pushed open the door, and I sucked in a breath, closing it quietly and then resting my back against it while she marched straight for her backpack, pulled out some pajamas, and without a single glance in my direction, walked into the bathroom.

My entire being deflated.

Yeah. *Everything*.

“Of course,” I whispered. “What did you think would happen?”

By the time she came out of the bathroom, clad in another set of cotton shorts, and a well-loved T-shirt, I was sprawled on that stupid couch and staring up at the ceiling.

Of the two of us, I knew who was being smart, and as usual, it wasn’t me.

She could probably sense my aversion to any sort of serious relationship. I wasn’t kidding in the car. I’d had one attempt, and it ended with me feeling like a chump. It was easier with no strings. No repeat faces or expectations. That way, I didn’t even have to worry about a messy fallout, whether caused by me or someone else.

Claire quietly climbed into her too-big bed, and I heard her sigh. “That wasn’t so bad.”

I smiled at her tentatively spoken words.

“No, not too bad.”

“Are ...” She paused. “Is the couch terribly uncomfortable?”

It was worse than uncomfortable.

By morning, my back would be bent in half, and my neck would be so jacked up that the best chiro would need seventeen appointments to fix the damage. Plus, it smelled like mothballs.

“It’ll be just fine.”

“You’re lying to me, aren’t you?”

I turned my head to look at her. Her eyes were wide in her face, and something about being in this room with me made her visibly nervous.

“Good night, princess.”

Her smile, the one she gave me before she disappeared under the blankets, did such strange things to my heart that I knew I’d sleep on that couch a hundred times over just to get a glimpse of it.

And me and Claire, we had no idea that our little adventure hadn’t even begun yet.

CHAPTER TWELVE

CLAIRE

WAKING in that monstrosity of a bed was disorienting, to say the least. It was so, so dark in the room that it took me a solid thirty seconds to get my bearings.

At some point, after he sprawled his big body on the little couch, Bauer must've woken to tug the heavy velvet curtains shut. The tiniest sliver of light came through the separation of the two pieces of fabric, and the way it fell, it cut straight across the middle of the room. Almost like a line had been drawn between the bed where I was lying and where Bauer was sound asleep.

It was impossible to look at him and not smile because his long legs were dangling off the edge of the couch, and he had one muscular, inked arm slung over his face.

The blanket covering his body was a dark color that I couldn't identify, but it was pulled up over his chest. Listen, maybe I hadn't taken Bauer up on the blatant invitation in his eyes, but I was a red-blooded female who hadn't gotten laid in over a year. And the last time had been fast and forgettable, the byproduct of trying to see if anyone could measure up to Finn in my mind.

And the human, red-blooded woman in me leaned up as far as I could, trying to see exactly what Bauer was hiding underneath that cotton Henley from the day before.

When he groaned, the arm covering his face lifting in a stretch, I quietly ducked back down and laid my head on the pillow.

The disappointment I felt at not seeing just a bit more of him was surprising, and I rubbed at my forehead, trying to figure out where the hell it came from.

Bauer was ... fine. He was funny in a clever and self-deprecating way. But I knew a lot of funny men. Guys I'd had classes with or met when I was out with my sister and our friends. That didn't make him anything gawk-worthy.

But he also clearly respected me because he hadn't pressed his luck even though we were sharing the same room. Listening to the undeniably intimate sounds of him waking up, that was the fact that I couldn't ignore.

Beyond his looks, which were ridiculous, if I was being honest, the way he held himself over the line I'd drawn in the sand ... well ... it piqued my curiosity.

The bad boy who maybe wasn't as bad as he liked to pretend to be.

My phone dinged from the bedside table, and I quickly reached over to grab it.

Paige: Tell me when you and the bad boy are heading home. I don't like the weather system turning your direction the way it has. They're already delaying flights out of Vancouver.

Paige: Better yet, let me track your location PLEASE. I've only asked seventeen times, and I don't know why you and your sisters feel like I'm invading your privacy.

Curious, I pulled up my weather app and grimaced at what I saw. *Weather Advisory* in bright red letters scrolled along the top, and when I read what was headed in our direction and north of Vancouver with possible record levels of snow for April, I sat up in bed, not caring whether Bauer was looking or not.

He was.

"Good morning, sunshine," he said. Even though I should have known better, I glanced up at him and then immediately regretted it.

I wanted to know what the blanket was hiding, and now I knew.

Muscles. And ink. And more muscles.

My eyes went *straight* back to my phone. Sort of. “Morning. Have you seen this forecast?”

He shook his head. “Nope. Why?”

“We should head back as soon as possible.”

Bauer stretched, unfolding his body like a great big cat that had just woken from a nap on a sun-warmed rock. The sound he let out from deep in his chest made my skin feel two sizes too tight, and I stared extra hard at my phone.

“It’ll be fine. They always act like it’s the end of the world if we get a big snowfall in April.”

I gave him a skeptical look. “Bauer, it says it could be well over a foot of snow.”

He yawned. “We’ll get two inches max.”

The radar looping across my screen begged to differ in ominous shades of blues and purples.

“Has anyone ever told you that you look gorgeous when you first wake up and have that worried frown on your face?”

I sighed, tucking my phone under the blankets. Responding to Paige would have to come later because dealing with the flirty man sharing my room apparently had to be dealt with first.

“I can’t say that they have.” Carefully tucking the blankets under my armpits to cover ... anything, I gave him a patient look. “Can you please get dressed? I want to see if there’s coffee downstairs.”

Bauer stood off the couch slowly, and it was pure instinct that had me slapping a hand over my eyes when I caught sight of that big body unfolding, and his black boxer briefs that were the only thing covering him. Slapped a *hand* over my eyes. Like a child.

His booming laughter made my face go hot.

“If you want to look, princess, go right ahead. I’m here for your perusal.”

Behind the protection of my hand, I rolled my eyes. “I’m going to use the bathroom, and when I come out, you better be clothed.”

“I’m clothed now,” he protested. “All the important parts are covered.”

I slipped from the bed and kept my eyes straight ahead as I got to the privacy of the bathroom. When the door was shut, I sank against the closed door with a sigh. Sharing a bedroom with Bauer was hazardous for my health.

But as I’d requested, he was in a T-shirt and gray sweatpants when I exited the bathroom with brushed hair and brushed teeth. Honestly, though, the sweatpants might have been worse—or better, if I looked long enough—than the boxer briefs.

Bauer wasn’t looking at me, but at his phone screen. It was his turn to wear a frown, though I refused to tell him he looked adorable. Men that hot could never, and would never, be described as adorable.

“What’s wrong?” I asked.

His face cleared instantly. “Nothing. I just have to make a phone call real quick before we head down. But don’t feel like you need to wait for me.”

I shrugged. “It’s okay. Go ahead, I won’t eavesdrop.”

One hand rubbing the back of his neck, Bauer actually looked ... worried. “Okay.” He shook his head and brought the phone to his ear. After a few moments, he smiled. “No, I didn’t storm the offices. Tried a different tactic, but ... it didn’t pan out exactly like I planned.” He nodded. “Don’t tell me you’re extending your trip.”

He glanced at me.

“Yeah, I’m actually in West Vancouver right now, so I’m about an hour away from your place. Why?” He shook his head. “No, I was going back down to Seattle.”

I grabbed some clothes and walked back to the bathroom but kept the door cracked. Quietly, as I slipped my shorts off and tugged leggings up over my legs, I heard him mutter a curse under his breath.

“Scotty, I have a passenger with me, and she will not like this.” He paused. “No, it’s not like that.”

I tugged my sweatshirt on and walked out of the bathroom, giving him a questioning look.

He scratched the side of his jaw. “I know, Scotty, but I’m sure she’s okay.” He grimaced. “Yeah, I heard it could be bad, but come on, we’ve lived by those mountains for how long? You’ve been there a hundred years. Don’t tell me they don’t always exagger—”

Whatever Scotty said on the other end of the phone had Bauer letting out a slow exhale.

“Does she have food?”

My hands lowered slowly where I had started packing away my pajamas. Oh geez, was someone stranded? Lost? My mind started racing, my heart hurting for whoever might be in trouble.

“She’s tough, okay? I’m sure Agnes will be fine. Besides, I’m the last person she’d want to have check on her. She hates me.”

I would’ve smiled, if the name Agnes hadn’t conjured mental images of a sweet, little old lady, and now I wasn’t even sure if she had *food*.

“We can check on her,” I heard myself say.

Bauer’s face dropped in shock. He blinked. “Yeah, Scotty, that’s her. But—”

“Tell him we’ll check on Agnes,” I said, more firmly this time. I lifted my chin for good measure. For some reason, that made Bauer grin widely. “We can bring supplies from Richard, if he’ll let us part with some canned goods and produce. We’ll make sure she has food.”

The person he was talking to said something that made Bauer chuckle. “Yes, she is definitely a better person than me. Though she may regret this when she meets Agnes.”

My mouth fell open. Everything nice I said about Bauer, I took it back. He was horrible. And rude. And mean to little old ladies without food stuck in the middle of nowhere before a blizzard.

His eyes were glued to my face, full of mischief and fire. “Okay, Scotty. We’ll leave now, but all I can do is check on her, make sure she’s inside with some food, and then turn right back around. I have a precious package to deliver safely back to Seattle.”

“Oh geez,” I mumbled, ignoring his unwavering gaze as I zipped my backpack a bit harder than necessary. “Laying it on a little thick, don’t you think?”

Bauer said goodbye to whoever he was talking to, probably Agnes’s husband or son or grandson who was worried sick about her, and then watched me quietly. I fidgeted with my backpack until I could fidget no longer.

“Who’s Scotty, and why does Agnes hate you?” I asked.

He smiled slowly. “Scotty is the man who taught me everything.” Bauer sat on the couch, shoving his feet into the hiking boots he was wearing the day before. “I owe him my entire career, and he damn well knows it, which is why he calls me for this horrific task of checking on Agnes. Which I probably would’ve said no to, if you hadn’t piped up and given the poor old man hope.”

“That’s terrible,” I wailed. “You’d leave her out there, completely defenseless?”

Bauer tilted his head to the side. “Yes. Because she’ll be just fine. She always is.”

“Bauer whatever your middle name is Davis, you should be ashamed of yourself.” I propped my hands on my hips. “She’s a little old lady, and she needs supplies. I know you act tough, but come on, even you’re not so coldhearted.”

“I almost don’t want to warn you,” he said cryptically. He leaned forward, letting his forearms rest on the tops of his thighs, and his hands dangle between his knees.

“Why are you looking at me like that?”

“Because you are the most frustrating, adorable, mystifying woman I’ve ever had the pleasure of meeting, and that’s the only reason I’m going to tell you what you just signed us up for.”

It was impossible not to want to reach my hands up and cover my face. I’d never been called any of those things. Okay, frustrating maybe, by my sisters. But I was an open book. Literally. I spent my life in open books, trying to absorb everything I found there. But for some reason, this man looked at me and saw a version of myself that I never knew existed.

Something about me drew him in.

“What did I sign us up for?”

Bauer stood and sauntered toward me, those gray sweats hanging off his hips in a way that I was *not* looking at, and he stopped just out of arm’s reach. “Agnes is a cat.”

I blinked up to his face. “What?”

“Agnes is Scotty’s horrible, evil, mean-tempered cat that hates every human being except him. And he can’t remember how much food he put in her automatic feeder, so he’s afraid she’s going to starve to death before he can get home.”

“Oh,” I said weakly.

Bauer smiled. “Yeah, oh.”

“So, we’re ... driving out into a snowstorm to check on a cat who lives out in the middle of nowhere.”

His nod was slow. “It looks like it.”

I walked over to the window and carefully pulled back the heavy curtains. Snow was already sticking to the ground. Tree branches were coated white, lending a magical air to the already stunning vista. Like a winter wonderland. Except not wonderful, not anymore.

“He lives about an hour away?” I asked weakly. An hour wasn’t so bad. No reason to freak out.

“Yeah. We better grab some coffee and hit the road if we want to get back to Seattle on decent time.”

I pinched my eyes shut. “I’m sorry. This is ...” I paused. “I should’ve waited until you were off the phone.”

His hands landed on my shoulders, and he gently spun me to face him. He didn’t speak until I pried open my eyelids. “Princess, it’s fine. I still think this storm will blow past like a sweet little kitten, unlike Agnes, who is an awful, awful bitch of an animal.”

My smile came quickly, and he hummed deep in his chest at the sight it.

“Killin’ me,” he whispered.

“Sorry.”

He squeezed my shoulders. “No, you’re not. You just can’t help it.”

Fifteen minutes later, coffees in hand, and breakfast sandwiches wrapped up for us by Richard’s housekeeper, we were bundled into Bauer’s Jeep as big, fat snowflakes hit the windshield in soft little pats of sound.

“You told Paige this wasn’t my idea, right?” he asked, watching me tap out a message to my sisters so they didn’t think I’d been kidnapped. “Because she looked very serious when she threatened my life.”

“She was serious.”

“Helpful,” he said dryly. He cranked the engine to life and sat back in his seat.

Me: Long story, but we have to detour north a bit to check on something for Bauer’s coach. We’ll be fine.

Lia: OMG, don’t let him talk you into something insane. Like he cares about a freaking blizzard.

Paige: THIS IS WHY I SHOULD BE ABLE TO TRACK YOUR ASSES. I’m making Logan learn how to hack your

phone.

Isabel: *fist bump* Don't do anything I wouldn't do.

Molly: Who's Bauer? WHERE ARE YOU? WHAT DID I MISS? I hate traveling when exciting things happen *sad face emoji*

I sighed at the immediate barrage, tucking my phone away into the front of my backpack. "Don't worry, she's never actually killed anyone."

Bauer shook his head, pulling the gear shift into reverse. "You Ward women, you should come with a warning label, princess."

As we pulled out of the driveway and headed into the ominous looking storm, I couldn't believe it, but I was laughing.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

SOMEDAY, I might build a shrine to Agnes, commemorating the fact that Claire thought she was a sweet old woman stuck in a snowstorm as opposed to the devil cat she actually was, thereby granting me more time with Miss Ward.

But today would not be that day because when the drive to Scotty's cabin took almost three times longer than I expected, due to the combination of zero visibility, slick, icy roads, and blustering wind that even had me white-knuckling the steering wheel, I just wanted to get to our destination safely.

April.

It was fucking *April*, and I was not okay with the storm of the century hitting Western Canada while I had to be out on the roads with a woman I didn't really know, checking on a cat that I hated to the depths of my soul for the man who meant more to me than anyone else on the planet.

Claire was quiet in the passenger seat, and this time, I didn't push her.

I'd hit the irrational stage of driving about an hour earlier, where you turn down the volume on the music just in case it helped you magically see the roads better.

When I caught sight of the red mailbox signaling the turnoff to Scotty's place, I breathed out a huge sigh of relief.

"We're here," I told her.

She jumped a little at the sound of my voice. "Oh, good."

I glanced in the rearview mirror, and the swirling blanket of white that obscured my vision. It had been years since I'd driven in something like that, and it occurred to me, with Scotty's place close, that we'd probably be hunkered down for at least one night.

"You doing okay?" I asked her. If I was stressed ... I couldn't even imagine what she must be feeling.

Claire was quiet for a second, and then she exhaled shakily. "I don't think I breathed properly for a solid hour."

"We're almost there," I promised.

She nodded.

I smiled. "You can say it now."

Claire looked over at me. Her face was pale and drawn. "Say what?"

Lifting my eyebrows, I waved a hand at the windshield.

"Ahh." She cleared her throat. "I'll save the *I told you so* for when we're safely inside his place."

The back end of the Jeep fishtailed when I turned down the long driveway. Knowing not to overcorrect, because the last thing I wanted was to end up sliding off the drive and down the slight ditch that I knew lined the first fifty feet or so, I lessened the pressure of my hands on the wheel until the vehicle righted itself. Now that we were protected slightly by the trees that crowded Scotty's property, the visibility increased to something more manageable than it had been on the roads leading us here.

"You gonna miss anything important tomorrow?" I asked her.

She rubbed her forehead. "One class but ... I'll email my professor when we're inside." Claire groaned. "And my family because they are probably freaking out."

Visions of Paige bearing down on me had me shivering. But staying at Scotty's place and risking her wrath for one night was preferable to attempting any stupid-ass drive back down to Seattle too soon.

“I can’t believe how fast this hit,” I said. The peak of his A-frame cabin came into view, and the band of tension around my chest relaxed even further. All I had to do was navigate the long, slight curve to his driveway where there were no tracks to follow. Using the bend in the trees as my guide, I pushed us forward through the snow, easily six to seven inches deep given that it was untouched. When the tires, without snow chains, spun at my acceleration, I cursed. Mightily.

“I can’t believe a world-famous snowboarder is afraid to drive in the snow,” she teased unexpectedly. Amazing how it loosened our tongues to have shelter in sight, even if we’d be stuck with freaking Agnes, who’d probably claw our eyes out the second we walked in.

“I’m not afraid to drive in the snow.” I gave her a look as I pulled up as close to the cabin as the drifting snow would allow me. “But I didn’t exactly want to slide off the road when I have you to think about.”

“You’re a closet sweetheart, Bauer.”

“I am no such thing,” I replied, completely affronted. “No one has ever called me such a terrible name.”

She giggled, and it made my sudden rush of defensiveness worth it.

“Why does that bother you so much?”

It was on the tip of my tongue to say that just because I didn’t want to carry her admittedly fine ass through the snow didn’t mean I was a sweetheart. I was a badass, thank you very much. I was an inked, pierced, snowboarding badass who’d never had a woman giggle because she called me a sweetheart, and she could have that etched on my tombstone because that was how much I believed it.

Shoving the Jeep in park and exhaling heavily, I yanked the hat off my head and speared a hand in my hair. “It doesn’t bother me; it’s just not true. Ask my parents.”

She nodded slowly, tilting her head ever-so-slightly as she studied me.

I pointed a finger at her. “Nope, none of that. No psychoanalyzing. I don’t care how you look in your sleep shorts. That’s not allowed.”

Claire smiled slowly.

“Stop it.”

It spread even further, wide enough that her white, even teeth showed behind her pink lips. A dimple popped out. And against the blinding white of the snow, with her dark hair and deep blue eyes, she looked like Snow White.

I huffed. “Let’s go inside, okay?”

“Okay.”

Her agreement was too quiet, too pleased with herself, and that made me swear as much as the shitty drive had.

“The snow will be deep. Do you want me to carry you in so you don’t get your shoes wet?”

Claire’s eyes glowed. “That’s incredibly ... sweet ... of you.”

“Fine. Get your shoes wet, get your pants wet, get hypothermia, see if I care.” I leaned toward her in the cab of the Jeep. “Don’t come to me in the middle of the night and beg me to warm you up when your body temperature drops because you didn’t take me up on my *practical, logical* offer, princess.”

It was a lie because if she came to me and asked that, I’d strip so fast.

Everything.

My thoughts must have been betrayed on my face because the blush spread slowly across her cheekbones.

“I’ll risk it,” she said quietly. “But thank you for being so practical and logical and not sweet.”

I rolled my eyes. “Overkill but you’re welcome. You wait here. I’ll make sure my key works first.”

After trudging my way through the snow and up onto the equally snowy deck, I peered inside the dark cabin to make sure Agnes wasn't sitting in waiting, claws unsheathed and fangs bared.

Underneath the overhang of the A-frame, there was a large stack of firewood, which made me breathe a bit more easily. At least we'd stay warm overnight until we could head home the next day. To the right of the wood was a heavy-duty shovel.

"God bless you, Scotty," I murmured. Quickly, I shoveled the area by the door clear so snow wouldn't fall into the cabin as soon as I opened it. The key worked easily, despite the metal of the lock being cold as shit. Knowing we could get in, I turned and shoveled a single strip so she'd have a clear path once she got on the deck.

And I wasn't doing it to be sweet, but I just didn't want her to have soaked socks when she got in. I hadn't packed for more than one night, so I didn't imagine she had either. And definitely not more than one night that included a record-breaking blizzard.

I turned and waved her in. While she grabbed her backpack and pulled the hood of her sweatshirt up over her hair, I thought about why it bothered me so damn much that she'd said that.

Maybe because I didn't want Claire to look at me like I was a sweetheart. People called Finn sweet all the time, and if that wasn't the kiss of death to getting laid, I didn't know what was.

I'd been reminded my entire life, or all but five years of it, that Finn was the superior specimen in every way that mattered to our parents, and even though I'd moved on from being bothered by it, I didn't want to be lumped into his category either.

As Claire hopped onto the deck and made her way along the path I'd shoveled for her, I knew that being stuck with her in this cabin would undeniably be worse than that gaudy bedroom in the mansion where we were being watched.

She could be herself.

I could be myself.

And we had nowhere to go while she sat there categorizing me as a harmless, fluffy teddy bear.

“Brrrr,” she said as she huddled next to me. “That wind is frigid.”

I shoved the door open and motioned her in. “Let’s go. I’ll get a fire going.”

She preceded me into the dark cabin, lit only by a small lamp along the small stretch of kitchen counter. Of course, Scotty left a light on for that damn cat.

When I shut the door, Claire blew out a hard breath. “This is ...”

“Tiny?” I supplied.

She exhaled a laugh. “Yeah.”

Scotty’s cabin was one room, kitchen counter stretching along the back, a bathroom tucked next to it without much more than a serviceable shower, toilet, and sink crammed into the small room. Separating the sitting area was a tiny, beat-up table with two chairs tucked against it. I’d had my fair share of meals at that table.

The couch and chair—basic and brown leather—faced a small TV on an equally small console table because when Scotty was home, he was outdoors. His property was probably more than five acres of heavily wooded forests, and the entire square footage of his cabin couldn’t have been more than five hundred.

The soaring ceilings of the main room is what made it feel bigger than it was. The old-fashioned wood-burning stove set into the back corner gave it a warm, inviting feeling, which would get even better once I had it lit.

“Bedroom upstairs?” she asked.

I nodded. “The loft.”

She eyed the staircase warily.

“Don’t worry,” I told her. “I have a long history crashing on that couch, and I’ve had much worse nights of sleep than that.”

Claire turned and faced the part of the cabin that was all windows. It was Scotty’s, and my, favorite part of his cabin. Yeah, it was small, but one whole side showed the beauty of this place we lived.

Right now, it looked cold and a little savage with nothing to block it from our view.

She shivered. “I feel like we’re being swallowed whole by that storm.”

I tilted my head. “You okay, princess?”

She was quiet, slowly rubbing her hands up and down along her upper arms. “I think, in my head, I imagined that the drive would be the worst part. But there is something terribly disconcerting about being stuck inside a stranger’s home for who knows how long and just praying we don’t, I don’t know, freeze to death or something.”

Approaching her carefully, I set my hands on her shoulders like I had just, shit, done one day earlier at Richard’s. “We won’t freeze to death. Even if his propane runs out, there’s plenty of firewood for the stove, and it gets pretty toasty in here.”

Her eyes were so big and trusting. Trusting that I could help us through this.

Instead of making me feel panicked or trapped, like I might normally, my chest warmed at how quickly she believed me. My hands gently tightened, and I felt the muscles relax under my palms.

Claire nodded. “Okay, so we won’t freeze, but is there food?”

“Oh, yeah.” I squeezed her shoulders again and went to investigate the kitchen. “One thing I know about Scotty is that his freezer is always full of terrible bachelor meals.”

I pulled the small door open and wasn’t disappointed.

“See?” I told her, pulling one black and red carton out. “We might hit a week’s worth of sodium in one meal, but we have plenty to eat. And that pantry will be good and stocked too. He doesn’t run to the store much unless we’re training and he’s in Whistler every day with me, so we won’t have much in the way of fresh food.”

She sighed in relief, and I felt her come up behind me, close enough that her body heat warmed my back. “He likes chicken pot pies, I see.”

“Who doesn’t?” I glanced at her over my shoulder. “Hopefully you do too because that’s what you get for dinner if I’m cooking.”

Claire smiled. “I’ll check the pantry for other options. Maybe I can whip something else together.”

A flash of movement caught my eye, and I turned, hands propped on my hips. “There’s the little asshole herself.”

Claire clucked her tongue. “She can’t be that bad.”

Agnes poked her head out from behind the couch, bared her fangs, and hissed at me.

“Look at those green eyes,” I murmured. “So much violence hidden in those depths.”

My companion laughed, then crouched down and held her hand out. “Hey, pretty girl.”

Agnes gave her a disdainful look and disappeared back behind the couch. I shook my head. “I’m telling you. She’s awful.”

“You shouldn’t talk about her like that. Pets understand your tone, even if you don’t think they do.”

I laughed. “Oh, she understands all right. All evil things can understand the mayhem they leave in their wake.”

Claire straightened. “Where does Scotty keep her food? I can make sure she’s got enough.”

After explaining to her what Scotty had said on the phone, I ducked back out to the Jeep and got my bag along with the

pillow Claire had left in the back seat. Did I tuck it close to my face so I could smell her shampoo on the walk back into the cabin?

Too fucking right, I did.

If I had to be trapped in a small space with a woman I really, really wanted to sleep with but who seemed to overlook me entirely, then I would take the moments where I could get them. Including random pillow sniffing to catch just a little whiff of whatever fruity concoction she used.

More lights were on when I got back inside, and Claire was coming down the narrow staircase that led up to the loft, tucking her phone into the waistband of her leggings. “He doesn’t go crazy living in such a small space?”

I shook my head before I tugged my jacket off and hung it on the coat tree next to the door. “He’s a simple guy. Give him outdoors to explore and a mountain to descend at a rapid pace on a small piece of fiberglass, and he’s happy.”

She smiled. “Does that describe you too?”

Looking around, I realized that my condo in Whistler did look an awful lot like this. The space was small, my furniture serviceable, and there was not much in the way of decoration.

“Yeah, I guess.” I shrugged. “Why spend money on pictures and trinkets and crap that collects dust when I could use it to experience the world instead?”

Claire stopped and stared at the wall next to the stairs. A small framed picture hung crooked of me and Scotty after my first big win.

He was almost a foot shorter than me, tufts of silvery-white hair sticking out from underneath his lucky black hat, but his grin was so big, so proud, it was almost hard to look at now. His arm was around my shoulders, and I was clutching the medal in my hands, a giant-ass grin on my face and goggle marks lining my wind-whipped cheeks. That was two years after I met him for the first time, when my wrists had been in handcuffs, and he’d told the cops he wouldn’t be pressing charges.

“You love him,” Claire observed.

I found myself answering honestly. “He’s my best friend. The only person who’s ever ... believed I could make something of my life.”

Claire didn’t look at me, just kept her eyes on the photo. I wanted to do something, anything, to shock her. Because for some reason, all of this felt too intimate, and she felt too intriguing, too fascinating for me to even contemplate.

“The first time I met Scotty, I was in handcuffs because I’d just wrecked the hell out of the side of his garage.” I kept my voice even as her shoulders tensed visibly. “It wasn’t hard for the cops to find me because the blue spray paint I’d used on the side of his house was on my hands. I’d cut myself breaking the windows on his garage.”

She inhaled. “Why’d you do that?”

“Who knows?” I admitted. “I was seventeen and bored, and my friends probably thought I’d be too chicken shit to do it. Adele was really happy with me then, when the cops brought me home and told her it was only because of Scotty that I wasn’t going to have a misdemeanor for destruction of property and vandalism on my record.”

Claire was a loud thinker, I was coming to realize. Especially when she was trying to figure something out. And right now, she was trying to figure me out. She stared at that picture so hard, I was surprised it didn’t jump off the wall.

“No wonder,” she murmured.

I stepped closer behind her and took a slow inhale. It was stronger than it had been on the pillow, that incredible scent. I had to fight not to bury my nose in her hair, wrap my arms around her from behind, and glory in how warm and soft she’d be tucked into my body.

It was so clear she wanted to put me together like a puzzle that no one had sorted. But eventually, she’d see that it wasn’t as complicated as all that.

I was what my family thought. A screwup and a disappointment.

I was what Scotty thought too. A hothead who didn't think things through.

"No wonder what?" My voice sounded rusty.

She turned and faced me, and I refused to budge even a single inch. But then again, Claire didn't move either.

I inhaled deeply, and my chest almost brushed hers, that's how close we stood. I wanted to kiss her. For a lot of reasons.

Because of how she'd looked in that yellow dress.

Because she still wouldn't tell me why she lied in the first place.

Because she was trying to find something inside me that didn't exist, something good and sweet and thoughtful that meant my parents hadn't completely jacked me up.

"No wonder you turned out to be a good man," she said quietly.

The breath caught in my throat.

She gently laid her hand over my heart, and I slid my palm up her arm to anchor it there. Her skin ... it was so, so soft.

"I'm glad they didn't ruin you, Bauer."

Claire tugged her hand out from under mine and brushed past me, stopping to fiddle with the radio on the kitchen counter.

I braced a hand on the wall, pinched my eyes shut, and tried to figure out what was happening inside my chest after just a few words from her. Because that simply, that quickly, she'd completely ripped the rug out from underneath me.

The station she turned on was news, and she turned a few knobs to lessen the static.

"Well, everyone," the disembodied voice said. "This is shaping up to smash the previous record snowfall for April in Vancouver, and it won't be stopping for the next twenty-four to thirty-six hours. So stay safe, stay warm, and enjoy the snow."

I turned my head to stare at her. Looks like I had some time to figure out the answer to my own puzzle—what the hell to do with Claire Ward.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

CLAIRE

WHEN I WOKE the next morning, I was hot.

And for the second morning in a row, completely disoriented. No blood-red curtains, no sprawling bed. Instead, muted gray light, a wood plank ceiling slanting up over my head, and when I tried to move and felt something warm on my chest, I blinked down.

Green eyes set in a patchwork face stared down at me from where she was lying and looking quite comfortable on top of me.

“Good morning, Agnes,” I whispered.

She opened her mouth for a plaintive meow, which made me smile.

Her brown and orange spotted tail twitched behind her, and her ears angled over her pretty face.

“I knew he was exaggerating.” Carefully, I lifted my hand and ran it from the top of her head down her back. Agnes shifted into my touch.

“You up, princess?” A voice called from the family room.

“Mm-hmm. A friend joined me in bed sometime last night.”

“No shit?” I heard his feet cross the hardwood floor and take careful, quiet steps up to the loft. Bauer’s head appeared, dark hair ruffled from sleep, and his jaw even heavier with growth, and he grinned sleepily. “Well, I’ll be damned.”

Slowly, so, so slowly, Agnes turned her head in Bauer's direction, flattened her ears and hissed.

My laughter was so loud that the cat took off from the bed like a brown and orange cannonball, disappearing behind the dresser tucked into the corner.

He came up a few more steps until his bare chest was visible.

"Of course, you slept without a shirt," I mumbled, turning on my side and tucking the comforter against my chest.

"Are you kidding? I was roasting by the middle of the night. I told you that fire would keep us warm." His eyes traced my face. "Sleep okay?"

I nodded. "I woke up hot too."

Bauer wagged a finger at me. "See, you leave yourself wide open for comments, princess. I'd like it to be noted when I don't take the bait."

At my groan, he laughed, head disappearing back downstairs.

"I'll make coffee," he called out.

From my vantage point upstairs, my view of the outside didn't suffer at all. Scotty's cabin was small, yes, but there was something incredible about rolling over to see the wild expanse of tall, spindly trees, whipping, white wind, and the large, fluffy flakes that relentlessly fell.

What a strange, strange turn of events my life had taken in the course of one week.

It made me think about school as most things did. One of the most fascinating parts of what I was learning was about the consequences of one's actions and how they could affect the people around you.

Children bore the consequences of how the adults in their life spoke to them, treated them, taught them, loved them. Or didn't love them. For each action, there was a reaction. Sometimes it was big, and sometimes it was small.

I agreed to do something for my sister. In the grand scheme of my life, it was a small decision, fueled by feelings that had lingered for a span of time that could only be considered big.

The consequences of that small action were huge.

And I was still puzzling out in my head what they meant, and how my heart couldn't quite decipher what to do with them.

The sounds of Bauer in the small kitchen, looking for grounds and trying to figure out the "stupid, ancient piece of shit machine" had me smiling, which was a starting place for what I knew in my head.

I knew that our evening had been quiet but still fun. We ate sodium and fat-laden chicken pot pies in front of the fireplace while he searched for something for us to watch in the small drawer of DVDs that Scotty owned. We settled on *Tombstone*, and Bauer knew every single word. Occasionally, I caught a glimpse of him in the firelight, mouthing the lines.

He'd stayed on the chair, and I'd taken up residence under a blanket on the couch.

I knew as I laid in the relative privacy of the loft that I'd felt a twinge of disappointment when he sent me upstairs to bed without anything more than a "sleep tight, princess."

"What exactly do you want, Claire?" I whispered.

Bauer's head popped up again, and I jumped, afraid he'd heard me. "How do pancakes sound? I found a box of mix in the pantry."

I sat up slowly, back aching slightly from the dip in Scott's mattress that I wasn't used to. "I can make some, sure."

"Terribly sexist of you to assume that I meant you'd cook, not me." With a wink, he disappeared.

When I stood, careful not to bang my head on the slope of the ceiling, I caught a glimpse of myself in the dusty mirror hanging over the dresser. My cheeks were flushed and my hair tangled from sleep.

Honestly, I looked like I'd just gotten laid. Well.

Laying a hand on my chest, I took a deep breath, held it in my lungs, and exhaled. Sometimes, you could move forward without worrying too much about the consequences. You could leap without knowing what laid beneath your feet.

Maybe this time with Bauer, unexpected and unplanned, was a chance for me to practice that.

Crumpled on the floor by the bed was a bright red blanket, and I picked it up, wrapping it around my shoulders before I made my way downstairs.

Bauer was expertly pouring pancake batter onto a sizzling griddle that looked like it was older than both of us combined.

“Those smell good,” I told him. “Thank you for doing that.”

He glanced over his shoulder—now covered with a black-T-shirt—and grinned crookedly. “That’s the beauty of having low expectations of men like me, huh? Follow a simple set of directions on the side of a box, and I have the undying gratitude of a beautiful woman.”

“Men like you?” I repeated as I poured a steaming cup of coffee. “Who’s dangling bait for compliments now?”

His answering laugh was a short bark. I watched as he deftly flipped the pancakes. When two were ready, he slid them onto a waiting plate and jerked his chin at me. “Go ahead.”

The pancakes were perfect. Fluffy and sweet and warm, and I watched Bauer make himself a stack double the height of mine. I raised my eyebrows meaningfully before he took his first huge bite.

“What?” he muttered around a mouthful. “I need my energy.”

“For what?” I waved my fork around the small cabin. “We’re stuck.”

His eyes took on a devilish gleam.

“What?”

“How long has it been since you’ve worn snow pants, princess?”

ABOUT AN HOUR LATER, Agnes watched me with green eyes full of judgment and disdain. Her tail flicked lazily as I turned sideways, looking at myself in the bathroom mirror.

“This is not my best look.”

She meowed.

“I know. I know I look ridiculous, but trust me, it wasn’t my idea.”

Bauer came back from outside, stomping his boots on the towel he’d laid by the cabin’s entrance. “You’re still getting dressed? Come on, Claire Ward, this snowman won’t build itself.”

He was so excited about his idea. Even though going out in a snowstorm sounded awful, I knew the fresh air would probably keep him sane.

“These snow pants are huge on me,” I told him.

“For what we’re doing, you’ll be fine. I’m just glad Scotty had something that worked for you.”

Disgruntled, I looked at his perfectly fitted attire. I was drowning in a set of brown snow pants and winter coat straight from the seventies while Bauer looked like he’d jumped from *Snowboarding Magazine* with what he’d rummaged out of the back of his Jeep.

“I don’t know that I’d go so far as that,” I mumbled. While he laughed under his breath at me, I struggled to figure out how to tighten the strap on the waistband of the pants. “But you keep laughing, mister. When these fall off and you have to carry my ass back inside so I don’t freeze to death, you won’t think it’s so funny then.”

The sound of Agnes's disgruntled mewling was my warning that Bauer had slipped his boots off and was approaching me. She held her ground this time, though her ears flattened slightly as he came closer.

I sighed and dropped my hands. "I give up. I think this style was retired before I was born. I'll just have to moon the forest."

"Don't be so dramatic. You're wearing leggings underneath." He stopped and tugged his gloves off with his teeth. His eyes met mine, and I felt an involuntary flip in my belly. "May I?"

I found myself nodding slowly.

Bauer smelled like cold and ice and fresh air, and there were flakes of snow caught in the dark stubble lining his jaw. His hands tugged on the inside of the waistband of the snow pants, and I sucked in a sharp breath when his knuckles brushed my stomach.

He was so much taller than me, he had to dip his head to see the tiny flap of fabric that had evaded me. Though his fingers were larger than mine, thick and long, he found a small slit inside the lining of the pants and twisted his wrist.

My entire body was on fire.

Flames. All over.

If I thought I was hot when I woke up, when he did that wrist turn thing, it felt like Bauer tossed me straight onto the burning logs. To keep my raging thoughts at bay, I focused on his hands. On one hand was a clover. For luck, I was sure.

On the other hand, a lion. My fingers—I wasn't entirely sure when they decided it—started tracing the line of its mane.

Bauer froze.

"Wh-why a lion?" I asked.

His breath was uneven, and he carefully grasped the edge of the elastic strap that would tighten the pants around me. "Lions are the top of the food chain. They fear no one and nothing in their natural environment."

The skin on the top of his hands was warm from his gloves, and the veins that ran along the surface were pronounced. Such a weirdly masculine thing to have veins like that.

“Every time I see it,” he continued in a rough voice, slowly tightening the pants, which tugged my hips closer to his, “I’m reminded to channel that kind of fearlessness.”

My eyes lifted to his, which were trained on my face was such focused intensity that my face flushed instantly. He wouldn’t kiss me unless I made the first move.

He’d channel the lion as he moved through life, except with me.

This, he’d leave in my hands, and it was a heady rush of power to know that I was capable of something like that from a man like this.

Bauer searched my gaze deeply, then moved from my eyes to my lips. “Be sure, Claire.”

I blinked slowly at his rough command.

No, not command. It was a plea.

Since night one, he’d been completely honest with me that this was what he wanted. That was how certain he was.

Exhaling slowly, I broke the gaze and felt the slim tips of butterfly wings as they fluttered through my whole body. Was I ready to leap?

Not just yet. But I also wasn’t sure what I was waiting for.

But what I did know? What my head and heart could agree on was that our time here wasn’t done yet.

“Do you wanna build a snowman?” I said with a small smile.

Bauer clenched his jaw and then dropped his forehead to mine with an exhaled laugh. “Yeah, princess. I do.”

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

THREE HOURS—AND an entire snow family—later, I did something I'd never done before.

I took a cold-ass shower after being outside in the snow.

Eventually, I'd have to start calling this strange reaction to Claire Ward *The Princess Effect* because holy hell, the woman was killing me slowly with one look, one touch at a time.

In that tiny bathroom, fixing those ridiculous snow pants that were about five sizes too big for her, I almost lost the shaky grasp on my control. Because while she might not have asked me to kiss her, she wanted me to. Everything I saw in her big blue eyes was almost certainly reflected in mine.

Maybe I knew what held me back because I wasn't a guy who forced himself on a woman, no matter how she was looking at me, but for the life of me, I couldn't figure out what the hell was holding her back.

For hours, we played in the steadily falling snow, using ridiculous props to make a four-person snow family, and for hours, she avoided prolonged eye contact or accidental touching of any kind.

Not that I would've felt anything good, layered up like we were.

And as the frigid water beat down on me, I had to laugh at myself that I still needed a cold shower. Because no matter how little eye contact or how little touching, I wanted Claire

so badly I felt like I could've melted every inch of snow coating the forest outside of that cabin.

Goosebumps popped on my skin, but still, I braced my hands against the shower wall and took a few deep breaths. My reaction to her defied any common sense unless it was just the fact that she seemed so unattainable. That she evaded me just enough that I wanted to reach out and snatch her to me, hold her close, and feel everything about her that I hadn't felt yet.

Taste her lips to see if they were as sweet as I imagined them.

Grip her skin and see which parts of her body felt the best under my impatient hands.

Not the thoughts to be having when she was less than fifteen feet away from me, cuddled up under a blanket on the couch, which was where I'd left her when I ducked into the shower.

With a violent shove, I turned the water off and shivered. A threadbare towel was hanging along the back of the door, and I scrubbed myself dry as quickly as possible. By the time I'd tugged on my clothes, I felt a bit less crazed and a hell of a lot colder.

Thanks to the fire I'd started again after our time outdoors, I opened the bathroom door to a wave of warm air.

Fragrant, warm air.

"What is that smell?" I groaned happily.

No longer cuddled on the couch, Claire was in the kitchen, stirring something in a large cast-iron pan over the small stovetop. She smiled at me. "I raided the pantry, and he had some pasta and just enough to make a decent tomato sauce. So ... Italian it is. I hope that's okay."

"More than okay." I came up behind her, keeping a few inches between her back and my chest. Her hair was pulled up off her neck, wisps of dark brown hair trailing down the length of her neck. "Paige teach you how to cook?"

Over her shoulder, she gave me a chiding look. “Maybe Logan did.”

I held up my hands with a laugh. “Touché, Princess, touché.”

She shook her head. “It was Paige. Logan managed fine while we were younger, but when he married Paige, dinners got a lot better. She was living as a full-time model in Milan right before moving in with us, so we benefited greatly from her cooking skills.”

Tugging a chair out from the table with my foot, I took a seat and shamelessly watched her navigate around the small kitchen area.

“How old were you when Paige and your brother got married?”

Her smile was barely visible as she stirred the sauce. “Just turned twelve.”

I thought about the picture of her and Lia from their apartment, decked out in Washington gear. “It must have been every girl’s dream to have a supermodel for your new mother figure.”

She snorted. “Not exactly. We were ... oh,” she sighed, “how do I put this? Lia and I were in our boundary testing phase when Paige showed up.”

Watching as Claire tasted the sauce, then added some salt, I laughed at that picture. “Like what?”

Carefully, she set the salt down and turned to face me, one hip hitched on the counter. “I’ll make you deal, Bauer.”

“What’s that?”

“A question for a question.” One eyebrow raised slowly in challenge. “You deflect every single time I ask about your past, so if you want to know about mine, then I’ll make it an even trade.”

I crossed my arms over my chest and held her stare. “Some people feel more comfortable than others talking about their

childhood. Mine wasn't traumatic or anything, but that doesn't mean I want to spill my guts over spaghetti and candlelight."

At my answer, which was meant to be flippant and casual, Claire's face flashed with disappointment, and a small seed was planted behind my ribs. Something uncomfortable and unwanted. But it found someplace to stick, dig itself beneath the surface of whatever armor I'd erected around the parts of myself that still felt like I needed to prove how unhurt I was by my dad and Adele's treatment.

"Truth or dare," I amended. My version of a peace offering. "I'll play, but I can't guarantee I'll answer everything."

Claire weighed that for a long moment, face thoughtful, body language relaxed. "Deal."

While she finished dinner, I set the table with two dark blue plates I found in the pantry and added some wood to the fire. Outside, the wind picked up, whipping through the trees until they swayed side to side. Still, Claire hadn't said I told you so for the fact that we were stuck here. Because into day two of this ridiculous storm, we were poised to get over thirteen inches. The accumulating snow wasn't even what kept us stuck until it died down. Right now, it was the fact that they were so focused on clearing main roads that places like Scotty's along Lion's Bay were way down on the totem pole.

Claire drained the pasta, releasing a cloud of steam into the air. I got up to find us something to drink.

I crouched in front of the pantry, watching Agnes warily as she slinked across the wall in my direction. "Do you know if he has any alcohol hidden in this place?" I asked the cat.

She sat on her haunches and started licking a paw. But she didn't hiss at me, so I shrugged. I gave it one last look but decided Scotty must hate himself since there wasn't so much as a single bottle of anything in the entire place. Maybe that's why he still managed to do what he did physically even though he was over sixty.

“I couldn’t find anything fun to drink,” I told Claire as she set the bowl of pasta in the middle of the small table. “So water it is.”

“I find proper hydration fun.”

“As do I.” I took a seat opposite her and gave her a smile. “Thank you for making dinner.”

Her cheeks flushed pink. “No problem.”

The food was delicious, and I groaned happily at my first bite of the sauce-covered noodles. “This is incredible.”

“Why don’t you ever go home to Seattle?” she asked without any preamble.

The noodles lodged in my throat when I coughed in surprise. After a hefty drink of water, I was able to swallow. When I was finally able to speak, my voice was rough. You know, from almost choking to death. “Jumped right in, eh?”

“It’s my turn.”

I sat back in my chair and studied her. “Seattle isn’t my home anymore. It hasn’t been for a long time. I moved to Whistler when I was eighteen and never looked back.”

“Why don’t you and Adele get along?”

“Oooh, no dice, you don’t get two questions in a row.”

Claire tilted her head. “You asked me at least four before we agreed to this. I think I’ve earned two.”

Bracing my elbows on the table, I leaned forward and held her gaze. “Why does it bother you so much to figure me out?”

Claire didn’t brush off my question like I expected her to, blaming it on her major or her own background with a mother figure that was no relation, she just searched my face. “I think sometimes I’m just as curious about the people who inflict the damage on children as the children themselves. So, while I don’t know Adele very well, I’d never have pegged her as someone to hold the sins of another woman onto an innocent child.”

“I was never innocent,” I answered easily. “I did some boundary pushing of my own when she and my dad got married, not to mention my absolute hellion years in high school. So don’t think I made it easy on Adele to walk into our family.”

She pointed her fork at me. “And now you defend her. See? This is fascinating to me.”

I exhaled heavily. “Can we move to a dare yet?”

“She was obviously rude to you at the dinner and even at Richard’s, despite the fact that his opinion of her is incredibly valuable to her. I don’t understand how an adult can act like that.”

“You’ve met me, princess,” I said with a shrug. “Everything about me bugs Adele and has since day one. Maybe someone else would’ve tried to gain her approval or love, but the last thing I wanted to do was sit in the shit and dwell on it all the time.”

Reading between the lines of my forced casual reply was easy enough for someone as smart as Claire. And wisely, she dropped it.

We ate quietly for a few minutes until I felt like a complete asshole. It wasn’t her fault, not really. I mean, no, Claire didn’t have to try to understand why my stepmom and I had the relationship we did, and how that bled into my relationships with my father and brother.

I opened my mouth to apologize, but Claire spoke first.

“I don’t like thinking too hard about why our mother left us.”

This didn’t feel like the time to say anything, so I held her gaze across the table and waited.

Claire twirled some pasta on her fork and took another bite. When she was done chewing, she set the fork down. “I’m not angry with her, not really. But when I stop and think too hard about the fact that she left four girls with their thirty-something-year-old brother, I get really, really pissed off.”

Her face was so calm when she said it that I laughed.

“That’s funny?” she asked.

“Not really,” I admitted. “I don’t get angry with Adele. I just have a million other things I could be doing with my time, so why would I choose to dwell on that bullshit?” That was an answer she could understand, judging by the look on her face in the muted light of the cabin. I lifted my chin in her direction. “Truth or dare.”

“Truth, I guess,” she sighed.

Like she was trying not to be seen, I watched as Agnes wound her way around the edge of the kitchen and found a dark corner to sit in to watch us. I decided to go easy.

“Why is there a stuffed cat on your couch?”

She blushed. “I told Lia I wanted a cat once, and since we were still in the dorms at the time, she got me that instead.”

“I bet Agnes would go home with you,” I mumbled.

Claire laughed. “I would never do that to Scotty. But if I did get a cat,” she sighed, “I’d want her to look just like this little angel.”

I rolled my eyes, much to Claire’s delight. When she didn’t immediately ask me a question, I decided to press my luck.

“Why did you go to that dinner as your sister?” I asked her quietly.

After only the briefest pause, Claire stood and grabbed her plate. “I told you, I was doing Lia a favor.”

I took another bite of the spaghetti and watched her jerky movements as she washed off her plate and set it on a towel to dry. “I don’t believe that’s it.”

She whirled. “Well, tough shit, you don’t have to believe me.”

My eyebrows popped up.

Her face immediately smoothed out, and she rubbed at her forehead. “That wasn’t ... I’m sorry. Maybe I should’ve done

a dare instead.”

Why would pretty Claire Ward not want to answer that question? Whatever seed planted behind my ribs started unfurling, spreading wider, spreading further, as though she was imprinting something of herself inside me, and I wasn't sure how I felt about it.

If this had something to do with Finn ...

I brushed the thought aside instantly, an absolute refusal to entertain the idea. Finn, the Golden Boy who everyone loved. He'd known Claire as long as he'd known Lia, and there was nothing between them.

I smiled slightly. “I don't think you want me to give you a dare,” I told her.

We both damn well knew what I'd dare her to do.

She rolled her lips between her teeth and tried to stem her growing smile. Pushing back from the table, I ignored her when she tried to take my dish. Instead, I nudged her aside with a bump of my hip, and she slid down the counter but didn't leave.

As I rinsed and washed my dish, the fact that we still had an entire night laid out in front of us, and probably at least a good chunk of the next day, stretched ahead of me like one painful exercise in frustration. Like sitting at the bottom of a mountain of fresh white powder but not having a board to ride down it.

“Maybe I do.”

My hands froze in the soapy water at her quiet words. It felt very much like the thing I wanted most was being dangled just out of reach. I could see it and smell it, maybe even brush it with my fingers if I tried hard enough.

I finished rinsing the dish carefully and nudged into her again so that I could set it down by hers. Claire didn't move this time, her head angled in my direction. My hands were gripping the edge of the counter tightly, and I looked at her in the same way.

“Why can’t you just ask?” I stared at her lips, open and inviting and incredible. “Because you can’t lie to me anymore and pretend this isn’t something you want just as badly as I do.”

Claire exhaled shakily. “You’re right, I can’t.”

I dropped my chin to my chest and swore. “What are you so afraid of?”

Her inhale was large, not shaky, but the kind of big, deep breath you took when you were trying to fortify yourself before a giant leap off the edge of a mountain. It’s what I did every single time I strapped on a board before I started moving.

“Will you look at me, Bauer?”

Pinching my eyes shut for a moment before I did, I desperately searched for every shred of self-control that I had, if this turned out to be another night where I laid by myself on a stupid couch. When I felt steadier, I turned away from the counter and faced her, eyes zeroed in on hers.

“I’m not afraid of *you*,” she insisted. Her hands carefully, slowly, softly slid around my hips, up my waist and onto my back, where she curled her fingers into my shirt.

I blew out a slow breath and allowed my hands to coast up her arms until my palms cupped the sides of her neck, my thumbs brushing the edge of her jaw. Inside me, something snarled dangerously, and I barely kept it at bay. But I was able to because of the way she was looking up at me.

“But this,” she continued, her fingers increasing the hold she had on me, like she was afraid I would be going fucking anywhere right now, “this is the most terrifyingly unexpected thing I’ve ever wanted.”

My smile came easily. “Princess, you have no idea,” I murmured, lowering my head over hers.

Just before our lips touched, I paused, and she let out the most insanely erotic whimper, something hoarse with longing.

“You still haven’t asked me,” I told her, lifting my chin just enough my bottom lip brushed against her mouth.

Now I felt the edges of her fingernails in my back. I grinned.

“Bauer, you stubborn pain in my ass,” she whispered. “Pretty, pretty please with sugar on top, will you kiss—”

My mouth took hers before she could finish her sentence, and I knew, unequivocally, how wrecked I was.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

CLAIRE

BAUER KISSED like he was put on this earth for that one singular purpose alone.

My bones melted like slowly heating metal, and he wrapped his strong arms around my body to keep me firmly against him. His lips were sure and firm, and he sucked on my bottom lip like it was candy, growling when I licked into his mouth.

He was strong and hard and warm, and my arms went up around his neck as he tasted me deep, deep, deeper. This was no typical first kiss where he danced around me, or I danced around him.

We moved together perfectly, slick and sweet, as he took my lips again. And again.

His hands were tight against me, fitting along the curve of my rib cage and down, down until he filled his palms with my ass. I rolled closer to him, inhaling through my nose when I couldn't even dream of pulling my mouth away from his to get a breath.

My fingers curled around the back of his head as I held him to me, and he smiled against my lips.

“So good,” he murmured. “So sweet.”

Bauer ran the edge of his nose along mine, and I tried not to whimper pitifully that we weren't kissing because why, why weren't we kissing?

I wanted this feeling to last forever. It was the closest I'd ever come to skydiving, to bungee jumping, free-falling through the air, and my blood sang violently in my veins at how heady it all was.

He went back in with a growl, tilting his head so he could sweep his tongue against mine. We were wound so tightly around each other; my leg curled around him when he used his hand, gripping possessively around my thigh to hitch it higher.

The way that he fit my hips to his, I broke away from the kiss with a gasp.

Shooting, sparking little fires erupted when he rolled against me, pressing my backside against the counter.

It was a thousand degrees in that cabin, and I had the indistinct, hazy thought that with one press of his hand, one movement of his body between my legs, I'd explode like a lit bomb.

His mouth trailed down my neck, sucking kisses that would surely leave a mark, and I hissed my pleasure. My fingers found their way up underneath the soft cotton of his shirt, and I purred at how hot and smooth his back was, how unbelievably strong those shifting muscles felt underneath my hands.

He licked up the side of my neck, stopping to drop a gentle bite against the line of my jaw, which made me smile. "Since the moment I turned around," he murmured in a dark, rough voice, "and saw you in that yellow dress, I've wanted this. And shit, Claire, it's so much better than I thought."

I blinked, so caught up in the maelstrom of what he was making me feel, of how everything that had happened in the past couple of days had led to this inevitable moment that I'd forgotten about why I was here in the first place.

It wasn't really because of Lia. She was the catalyst, not the reason.

For years, I'd imagined what it would be like to kiss Finn. But never once had my imagination conjured something like this.

And I didn't feel guilt, not precisely. Because I was nothing to Finn, and the man holding me like he could hardly keep himself in check, he was touching me and tasting me and looking at me like I was *everything*.

This man, who was the opposite of anything I'd ever imagined.

Bauer paused and pulled his head back, clearly sensing the way my errant thoughts ushered tension into my body.

It just ... wasn't the kind of tension he probably worried about, when he'd cautioned me to be sure.

Kissing him, it made me more sure.

More certain.

This ... him, that was what I wanted.

But I saw the moment he read something on my face he didn't like.

"No, Bauer," I begged, sliding my hands from his back and up the rigid lines of his abs. "I'm not stopping."

Gently, he tapped my forehead. "Something happened here."

I glanced down because I wouldn't lie. "I know, but ... I'm still here. I'm so here with you."

Going up on tiptoe, I sipped on his lush bottom lip, trying to draw him back into that decadent moment with me. His eyes fell shut, and he allowed it.

"So good," I told him. "It's so, so good."

My hands curled up behind his neck, and I pulled his head back down, sucking at the tip of his tongue when it dipped into my mouth. His chest reverberated with a hungry sound that had the hair on my arms lifting.

Bauer slowed the kiss and rolled his forehead against mine. "Princess, I would love nothing more than to take you up into that loft and rip off every single article of clothing between us."

My mouth fell open because *yes, please*.

His eyes bored into mine, and I knew what he was saying to me was important.

“And if you regretted it tomorrow because you got caught up in being stuck here with me, I’d never forgive myself if I felt like I pushed you into this.”

I laughed under my breath, but his face stayed in that serious mask. My palm cupped the side of his face, and I relished the way his dark facial hair felt under my skin.

“Bauer, you’ve done nothing but tell me how much you want this,” I said.

“I do.” He turned and pressed a kiss into my palm. “Trust me, I’m past a hundred percent even though it drives me insane when people say things like one thousand percent because it’s mathematically impossible.”

My loud laughter took us both by surprise, but it broke his face into a small grin.

“Why are you so sure I’d regret this?” I asked him.

He used the tip of his finger to trace a line across my forehead and down along the edge of my cheekbone. My eyelids fluttered shut at the gentle caress, so different than how he’d been kissing me. “Because of how your face looked about two minutes ago. Something stopped you. Something you can’t mute”—he tapped my forehead again—“in here.”

How had I not noticed how observant he was? My mouth fell open slightly at how quickly he’d picked up on the unraveling of my thoughts. The inability to get out of my own head was usually my downfall anyway.

To think and think and think about something until I knew exactly what I felt about that thing. Until my head and my heart were on the same page.

Right now, with Bauer, was the first time that I could remember when I just let myself feel without needing to know how everything might work out, and how this might look

when the sun rose over the small cabin insulating us from reality.

When he pulled away, his hands falling from my body, I instantly felt cold even though the cabin was warm.

“Bauer,” I said quietly.

The firelight in the cabin threw a magical glow on his profile as he paused, and I saw the desire there in the tight line of his jaw, the way he held his hands so carefully at his sides. His big body, so much stronger than mine, was all but vibrating in the dim, flickering light.

“It’s okay,” he said slowly. “I’m not mad. I just ... I can’t handle it if you wake up and look at me with disappointment in those blue eyes, princess.”

My heart broke for him for the first time since I’d met him. No matter what else he’d revealed, what snippets of his past he’d given me, this was the first time I felt just how deeply he’d learned how to protect himself. Him pulling away was so much more about him than it was about me.

“And do you normally give speeches like this to the women you sleep with?” I asked. But I asked it tentatively, with a gentle voice free of censure. “Make sure they won’t regret a night with you?”

Bauer swallowed hard. His eyes searched my face. “They know what they’re getting into. They’re not thinking past one night, trust me.”

“But you think I am?”

The tip of his finger tilted my chin up, and his thumb brushed my bottom lip. “I think you look at me differently than they do, Claire. And if you can’t quiet those things holding you back, I don’t want to be the man they all think I am. Not with you. The one who’ll push where you let me, who’ll convince you with my lips”—he dropped his thumb but still stared steadily at my mouth—“and my hands until you convince yourself.”

My mouth opened to argue with him, but no words would come. Bauer had convinced himself that he was only capable

of casual transactional relationships, maybe for a hundred different reasons that had nothing to do with his upbringing. Reinforced beliefs were hard to break down, and I wasn't expecting this from him. Not once we kissed. A kiss like that, especially.

He was trying to do what he thought was right, what was honorable. The man who tried so hard to pretend he didn't care what people thought of him was placing my own reservations so far ahead of his needs that I couldn't think of a single intelligent response.

Which was why I let him walk out of the kitchen and fall back onto the couch with a heavy exhale.

The sound was so rife with unspent tension that my lips curved into a sad smile.

What a predicament I'd found myself in.

I walked up the stairs to the loft slowly, not because I was ready for bed—it was still early, the light outside the cabin a muted gray as evening fell—but because I just needed a little space to think.

As I perched on the edge of the bed, I touched my fingers to my lips. What a fine time for Bauer to allow his chivalrous side to surface, I thought ruefully.

After *that* kiss.

Twenty-one years suddenly felt like an impossibly long time to go without experiencing a kiss like that. Sure, I had some experience, probably the least of my sisters, but it was a sad state of affairs that even when I had fantasized about kissing someone important to me, my brain had never conjured that kind of furious, fierce hunger. An unrepentant want seizing both of us until we couldn't touch enough, taste enough, or push our bodies closely enough.

I didn't want Bauer to hold back.

I didn't want him to worry that I was overthinking or would regret my time with him.

But I was overthinking. And it needed to stop.

Normally, I'd ask Lia what I should do, but I grimaced when I thought about how patently unhappy this would make her. She'd hate it.

No, for this one, I picked up my phone and tapped out a text to the sister who, above all else, would give me honesty and pragmatism alongside her always blunt delivery.

Me: On a scale of 1-10, how stupid would it be to sleep with Bauer when we're trapped in a cabin until at least tomorrow...

I pinched my eyes shut as I hit send. My phone buzzed almost immediately.

Isabel: IF YOU DON'T, I EXCOMMUNICATE YOU AS MY SISTER.

Isabel: Are you seriously questioning this???? That man looked at you like you were an entire MEAL that he wanted to devour, and I cannot fathom one reason you wouldn't.

Isabel: Wait. Unless you don't want to. IF YOU DON'T ACTUALLY WANT TO, say no, and if he doesn't listen, I'm strapping on my snow boots and I'll rip his balls off and run them through A MEAT GRINDER.

My laughter was soft, and immediately, my eyes pricked with overwhelmed tears. It was a rare gift to be surrounded by women in my life who would commit such violent acts on my behalf without thinking twice.

Me: No, no ripping and grinding necessary.

Isabel: Do you even realize how wide open you leave yourself for explicit comments after texts like that?

Me: Ha. Sorry. You know what I meant.

Me: I like him. More than I thought I would.

Isabel: Listen, C, if you're looking for someone to give you permission to quit overthinking and just DO THE THING, then I'm your girl. He's gorgeous, funny, and there's no denying he's into you. The better question is why wouldn't you?

Isabel: Don't think too hard about what happens when you come home. Okay? If today is what you have with him, then let him teach you all the wonderful things that he undoubtedly knows. And if that's impossible for you, then ask HIM out on a date when you AND the roads have been plowed, because holy shit, women can do the asking and there's nothing wrong with it. He'd probably friggin love it if you did.

I chewed on my lip, trying to stop the smile at the way her advice lifted the slight pressure on my chest at Bauer's self-imposed distance. She was right. He did want this, and he'd wanted it longer than I had. And no matter how badly we tried to ignore the way the bruises deep in our souls affected our relationships, this was the perfect example.

I wanted him.

He wanted me.

But I was overthinking because I wanted to know that everything would turn out okay.

He was pulling away because of how strongly he avoided possible rejection. Yes, he was protecting me, but he was protecting himself too.

We were products of our circumstances, but we didn't have to let those circumstances steer the wheel of every choice we made. A lot of people did, but sitting there in the slowly darkening loft, I didn't want to anymore.

When the sun rose in the morning, there was no way I'd look at Bauer with regret or disappointment. No, I couldn't guarantee how this would play out, but what I knew about him and how he was making me feel was enough.

I stood and turned on the small lamp on the dresser, casting the loft in a soft yellow glow. With careful movements, I pulled off my sweatshirt and smoothed my hands down the front of my simple T-shirt. As seductive outfits went, it wasn't my top choice, but so far, that hadn't been an issue for Bauer.

The elastic in my hair came out easily, and my hair fell around my shoulders, messy waves left behind from the way

I'd had it pulled back after my shower. The girl staring back at me in the mirror wasn't overthinking anything. She knew exactly what and who she wanted.

I took the stairs quietly and paused when I saw Agnes sitting on the corner of the bottom one. She licked her paw and watched me with slitted eyes. Carefully, I scratched the top of her head as I passed, and she gave me a happy, rumbling purr in response.

That had me smiling as I walked around the edge of the couch.

Bauer was still lying there, his long legs sprawled out and one arm flung over his face, his chest rising and falling in an even rhythm. Briefly, I paused because oh geez, had he fallen asleep?

But as quickly as I thought it, he dropped his arm and pinned me with an inscrutable look as I stood over him.

Okay, so this part was one that I hadn't thought out. Like the choreography of my little gesture.

No second thoughts, I reminded myself.

With both hands, I reached for the hem of my shirt and tugged it up over my head.

Bauer sat up slowly as I let it drop to the floor, his jaw tightening, eyes burning furiously over the skin I'd just exposed. Left in my leggings and simple bralette, I took a step forward and swung one leg over his hip so I could settle onto his lap.

His hands slid up my back, and he dropped his head into the crook of my shoulder while he seemed to try to get his breathing under control. Underneath me, he was big. Hard. Ready.

My hands wandered up his shoulders and over the back of his head. I kissed his temple, then licked along the edge of his ear, insanely gratified when his fingers tightened painfully on my back. They moved then, started to tug down the strap of my bralette. His mouth trailed along the skin on my chest, small sucking kisses that he soothed with his tongue.

When he reached the tops of my breast, he used the edge of his thumb to work me into a rolling mass of want. Still, we hadn't kissed. Still, we hadn't spoken a single word.

His head came back, eyes almost black in the dying firelight, and he searched my expression carefully.

I gripped the sides of his face firmly, so he wouldn't—couldn't—look away.

“I want you,” I told him. “I want this, with you.”

Bauer surged forward and took my mouth. Oh, he took it deep and sweet and hot and hungry. Endless, wonderful kisses that had us panting and sighing and moaning as my hands ripped at his shirt.

He took pity, breaking away to tear it off. My hands slid over his skin, wonderful and gorgeous and stacked with muscles.

Using his hands underneath my ass, he picked me up and turned us so that I was underneath him on the couch. Once I was settled, those hands moved onto the waistband of my leggings as he peeled them off. They landed in a heap with his shirt and mine. My underwear came next, his tongue coming out to lick along his bottom lip in a way that had me writhing helplessly while he stood and shucked off his pants and boxer briefs.

Before he came back between my legs, Bauer snagged his wallet from the side table and pulled out a condom.

I widened my legs so that he could settle his hips between them, and our hands greedily swept over all the places now bared to our eyes. After only a few minutes, I cried out because that wrist thing he'd done earlier in the day, the twist of his hand that felt so dirty when I was fully clothed, had me damp with sweat and my toes curling against the couch.

“You're so perfect,” he murmured against my chest, kissing down along my ribs.

My hand found him, and he hissed loudly in pleasure from the pressure of my fingers and palm.

“Bauer, please,” I begged, arching my hips up.

“Soon, princess,” he growled, pushing himself into my hand again. “I have one condom and no intention of rushing through a second of this.”

“Please, please,” I whispered against his mouth. “I can’t handle this anymore.”

He sat up, and I raked my fingernails down his abs as he ripped open the condom.

“I guess we’ll have to get creative once I get you upstairs, eh?”

I grinned, sitting up to drop a kiss on the edge of his hip bone. “I guess.”

Bauer came down over me again, hands bracketing my head on the couch. I pulled my leg up, my knee braced against his chest while the other wrapped around his hips.

Slowly, he moved forward. So slowly, I thought I might die, in wordless, helpless, incredible agony. My mouth was open, my neck arched back, a moan of pleasure trapped somewhere in my throat when he cursed so hoarsely that I found myself smiling.

For a moment, he wrapped me up in his arms and stayed like that. Just ... unmoving and frozen on a precipice that felt dangerous in how big it was. Like neither of us felt like we were ready for what might unfold when he finally started moving.

He lifted his head, and for a moment, I saw the bewilderment of what I was feeling mirrored on his face.

This is different.

This is big.

Gently, he kissed me.

And then, oh, and then, it wasn’t so gentle.

It was perfect, full of rough hands and rough hips and seeking kisses and nips of my teeth along his shoulder.

My body fell apart, a blinding, shattering, explosion at the exact moment that Bauer shouted my name.

He slumped against me, his back sweaty, his arms tight and shaking around my overwhelmed body as I clung to him.

When he finally lifted his head, his dopey grin had me laughing out loud.

Bauer shook his head slowly. “We’re about to get very, very creative upstairs.”

“Are we?” I could hardly form the words around my beaming grin.

“Oh, yeah.” He kissed me. “Or we will, when I can move my legs.”

I kissed him back. “I hope you know you’ll be carrying me up those stairs, big guy.”

His eyes were so happy, so satisfied, that my heart burned bright and warm like a coal. “I think right now, I’d give you just about anything you asked for.”

“A bed and you,” I said simply.

He hummed against my lips. “That I can do, princess. Hold on tight.”

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

SOMETHING out of the ordinary woke me the next morning.

It wasn't the sun streaming brightly through the wall of windows, and it wasn't Claire's delicious body draped over my chest. It wasn't that I needed coffee, or even that Agnes was sitting up on the dresser staring at me with her creepy green eyes.

Yeah, that cat probably saw things last night that she'd never seen before.

I grinned as I thought about all of them.

We'd gotten creative all right.

There were so many things the human body was capable of that didn't end in sex. And for hours—I shit you not, hours—we'd explored all those things until she was limp and sweaty and begging me to keep my hands off her.

My back was sore. My thighs were sore.

And if I pulled back the covers, I'd bet good money that Claire had beard-burn over half of her body from the things I'd done to her after we'd moved upstairs.

Honestly, it wouldn't surprise me if, on my death bed, I remembered the sounds she made when I feasted on her entire body until she was cursing at me, clawing at me, begging without an ounce of pride to pull her over the edge.

And turnabout was fair play because once her mouth and hands turned the tables on me, I was just as shameless in the

things I'd begged of her.

But no, none of that was what pulled me out of exhaustion fueled slumber late the next morning.

The sound happened again, and I felt my brow pull down in a grimace when I placed it.

Thump.

Scrape.

Thump.

Scrape.

Claire inhaled slowly as she woke, rolling over onto her back, arms stretching over her head.

I turned to my side and grinned at the picture she made. All her dark hair was tangled beyond hope, there were marks all over her chest and neck from my mouth, and the lack of sleep from the night before showed in the dark circles under her eyes.

She was perfection.

I'd never felt this way after spending the night with someone. Not even by half. Somehow, I wanted her even more. Even as my errant thoughts tried to break through, take root, and convince me that there was no way she'd want more with me.

"Morning," she mumbled, giving me a sleepy grin that had my heart twisting painfully in my chest.

"Morning." I leaned down to give her a kiss.

She scrunched her face adorably. "I bet my morning breath is lovely."

"I don't give a shit," I told her. With my thumb, I traced along her bottom lip. "These are worth it."

In the bright morning light, it was a delightful discovery that Claire was unashamed of her nudity because she didn't even attempt to cover her equally delightful breasts using the sheet draped around her waist.

“I hope Scotty has Advil downstairs,” she said.

I hummed. “You sore today, princess?”

“Wipe that smug ass grin off your face.”

My laughter had her smiling.

The smile was the best thing I could’ve woken to. Not only was Claire not ducking out of bed, avoiding eye contact or explaining to me why it could never happen again. Explaining why she hadn’t been thinking when she’d let me do all sorts of filthy things to her incredible body.

Thump.

Scrape.

Claire frowned, looking up over my shoulder. Her mouth fell open in comprehension.

My palm slid up her arm and cupped the back of her neck. My fingers tangled into that hair and she finally looked at me with a sigh.

“The plows are out,” I said.

“So I hear.”

Which meant we’d have no problem getting back to Seattle.

We both fell quiet, and her eyelids closed when the sound happened again.

If I thought my heart pinched when she smiled at me, it was doing a veritable fist-pump at the disappointment on her face.

“Pancakes for breakfast again?” I asked her, smoothing a hand down the sleek line of her back.

Claire’s fingers traced the clock face inked on my chest. “Why a clock?”

Her evasion made me smile. “Time eventually runs out for everyone. Better make the most of it while it’s on your side.”

That lifted her head, and she stared at me so intensely that I fought the urge to fidget uncomfortably.

Whatever she had turning around and around in that brain of hers, which, in truth, intrigued me just as much as all the other parts of her, had the power to ruin this little pocket of paradise we'd found ourselves in.

I found myself holding my breath at what she'd say next.

"What plows?" she said.

My brow furrowed in confusion.

"I didn't hear anything out there," she continued. "In fact, I'm pretty sure they won't be coming until tomorrow morning."

A slow smile curled my lips, and I not-so-gently gripped her hips and pulled her over me. Claire settled on my lap, the sheet pooling around her waist as she straddled me like a freaking dream I'd conjured.

"Is that so?"

She bit her lip and nodded. The picture she made was so tempting, I could only shake my head in disbelief.

No woman, not a single one, had made me think about the future. About dates and anniversaries and popping out babies and rings and lace.

But after just one night with her, something had me cycling through every single one of those. It made zero sense, but damn if I would waste my opportunity while time was on my side.

"I didn't hear a thing either, princess."

The smile that spread over her face was victorious, and I sat up to take a taste of it with my lips. She kissed me deeply, tugging my hair with her hands.

We turned over, and I yanked the sheets back up over our heads, blocking out the world just for a little while longer. If she was going to give me this day, I'd take it without an ounce of guilt.

And I think I knew, buried underneath whatever physical pleasure she was giving me, I'd give Claire a hell of a lot more

than that if she wanted it.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

CLAIRE

FOR THE ENTIRE DAY, I allowed myself to be immersed in what was unfolding between me and Bauer. Nothing else existed, and there was a strange, beautiful feeling of suspended reality that I'd never experienced.

We ate breakfast slowly in front of the fire, no rush to get dressed.

Once we did, we bundled up again and added two figures to our snow family. The sight of the freshly plowed driveway was summarily ignored by both of us.

There was a brief snowball fight, where I clocked him straight in the side of the face, and he tackled me in the snow.

What I learned in the aftermath was that making out in the snow was a lot like making out on the beach. In theory, it was romantic, something Instagrammable. In reality, the offending natural elements ended up places you'd never want them. Snow ended up down the back of my coat and down my boots when he tried wrenching my snow pants away from my body to get his frigid hands on my skin.

That was about when we went inside.

On the counter of the kitchen, I saw my phone light up with notifications. Those, I also ignored. My family knew I was safe and would be coming home the next day.

Lia and whatever freak-out she was having about me being stuck with Bauer could wait.

I'd never made a decision like this, to purposely pause every single responsibility that waited for me. The sense of liberation it gave me was like bottling the highest high. This was a decision for me. About me.

And Bauer.

The look on his face when I told him I didn't hear the plows still brought a giddy grin to my face. How no one had uncovered that heart of his buried underneath the façade blew my mind.

I wanted to know more. I wanted to see more. Hear more. Touch more.

And so did he, even if he wasn't ready to admit it.

The sound of running water made me smile for a different reason, the heated look he'd given me when we swapped places in the bathroom. He and I decided to shower separately from a purely logistical standpoint—Scotty's shower was tiny.

It was while I was towel-drying my hair and he was taking his turn to warm up that I fought against the thoughts of what would happen when we got back to the real world.

Bauer lived a very different life than I did, and he lived it a few hours away from where my own life was anchored—where my school and family and friends were.

Under normal circumstances, I would've ignored every gut instinct telling me that this man was worth a risky leap and convinced myself that I was better off not even allowing one kiss to tempt me.

The water turned off in the bathroom, and I felt a shiver go through my body, thinking about him naked, wet and just ... naked. I couldn't stop the ridiculous grin that spread over my face because this feeling was so incredibly delicious, so addicting, I could understand why people chased it with two grasping hands once they knew it existed.

I knew why my sister Molly had risked her job to be with Noah when they had every reason to stay away from each other. Sure, it turned out well for them, but at the time, it

mystified me a bit that she'd have knowingly broken the rules to be with him.

Bauer came out of the tiny room with a white towel wrapped around his trim waist and a dangerous glint in his eye.

"You're gonna get cold," I said, pointing at his towel.

"I have someone to warm me up now."

"Agnes wouldn't warm you up if you were dying of hypothermia in front of her."

He laughed, leaning over me to drop a kiss on the top of my head. "True. But she's getting used to me."

"She's not actively hating you," I amended. "Let's not get carried away."

"Thoughts on dinner?" Bauer asked, opening the bare fridge and frowning at what he found.

I stood and approached him, wrapping my arms around his waist, kissing between his shoulder blades while my hands smoothed over the damp skin of his abs. "We'll have to get creative. It'll be a sad picnic, but if you're willing to split the last freezer meal, we'll have enough."

Which was what we did, and after Bauer dragged the mattress down the steps, shoved the couch backward to make room, and laid it on the floor in front of the fire, we decided that for our last night, we'd spend as much time as possible in that bed, including eat dinner there.

With the fire roaring happily, cracking and popping with the firewood that Scotty had wisely stored up, Bauer held up the last bite of a truly bland Salisbury steak frozen meal, and I ate it off the fork.

"Delicious," I mumbled.

He chuckled and moved the plate off the bed, turning on his side to watch me. So far, we'd kept clothes on during mealtime, which was almost necessary, given our condom-less state.

But the way he was looking at me, I felt my internal temperature slowly tick, tick, tick upward. One small degree at a time.

“I never go to Seattle because it sucks staying in that house,” he said quietly.

Carefully, I lowered the fork and set it on the empty plate on the floor, but I kept my eyes on him.

“Adele was never abusive to me, so don’t misunderstand. And as I got older, I was just as much to blame for how things are. But I was always aware of how much I wasn’t her child. Even before Finn was born.”

My heart squeezed painfully, but I stayed quiet.

“She loves children who aren’t her own; she found her calling in that center,” he continued. “But for some reason, I was the one she couldn’t love. And when you have that in your face your entire life, even if it’s unspoken, it takes a toll.”

“I’m sure it does.” I slid closer, picking up his inked hand and kissing the knuckles. I had a thought but rolled it around in my head a couple of times before I said anything. “It must have been hard for your dad when your mom died. Cancer, right?”

He nodded. “We don’t really talk much about those years. He married Adele about a year after my mom died.”

“You don’t look much like your dad,” I hedged.

His eyebrows lifted in surprise. “No, not that I remember my mom—I was too young when she got sick—but from pictures, I look exactly like her.”

“Maybe,” I said slowly, “I could be wrong, but maybe Adele hated that reminder, and that’s why she never let herself treat you the way you should have been treated or loved you the way you deserved to be loved.”

Bauer’s eyes searched my face carefully, and I held my breath that I hadn’t said the wrong thing.

He swallowed. “I never thought of it that way before. I usually just tried my best to piss her off once I got old

enough.”

I smiled. “Color me shocked.”

Flopping onto his back, Bauer pulled me next to him so that I was tucked into his side. My fingers traced that clock tattoo on his chest. As he spoke, the rumble in his chest was a delicious rumble under my ear. “I hate that that makes sense to me, princess. I don’t want to understand because it was easier to just ... dislike and avoid.”

I propped up on my elbow so he could see my face. “There’s nothing wrong with reacting the way you have. And I don’t say it to suddenly make you love Adele or want to have a relationship with her.” I shrugged a shoulder. “I just like to figure people out. Why they do what they do, what the consequences are for the people in their life.”

“Adele doesn’t have much in the way of consequences, considering she never has to see me.” He sighed. “And I think my dad and Finn are just so used to me not being around that they don’t care much either.”

A rebuttal of that statement was right on the tip of my tongue, but I swallowed it down because I didn’t want to push too hard.

“Did you figure out your mom?” he asked quietly. His hand found my hip, and he squeezed. I loved that he did that. At Richard’s house, when he could sense I was uneasy with our little charade, he’d give me one small press of his hands to let me know he was there, that he was on my side.

Maybe the fact that he did it again at that moment was why I could answer. “Sometimes I think I have.”

“Raging narcissist?” he asked.

My body shook with laughter, and I leaned down to give him a quick kiss. Bauer didn’t even attempt to deepen it, which somehow endeared him to me even further, another fraction of my heart that he claimed by letting me talk about this serious thing. And talking about his own without prompting.

“There’s probably a lot of truth to that,” I agreed. “Brooke was a lot younger than our dad—who we share with Logan. It was a second marriage for him, and I think, I don’t know, Brooke liked the idea of his old-money enough to overlook the age thing. When my dad had his heart attack, she was suddenly a widow with four young girls, and he hadn’t quite left her the money she imagined was sitting in a bank somewhere.” I’d picked apart our childhood from every angle over the years, witnessed the varying ways my sisters and I felt the ramifications of her leaving, yet it still made my throat tighten up to try to talk about it out loud.

His hand moved gently over my back. “We don’t have to talk about it.”

I smiled at him. “No, it’s fine. Just thinking about the irony of what I’m going to school for, and I don’t like talking about my own childhood issues.”

“She left you, princess.” His wandering fingers pushed under the hem of my sleep shirt, sweeping in small circles around the bumps on my spine. “It’s shitty, and she’s shitty, and I think what you’re going to school for is fucking incredible, and there’s something amazing that you didn’t let her ruin you.”

My eyes burned. “She didn’t even really say goodbye when she dropped us off at Logan’s. I think Molly knew she was leaving for good, but Lia and I were too young.”

His eyes looked enraged on my behalf, but he didn’t say anything.

“I think it,” I continued quietly, “it makes you feel really forgettable, you know? And small. How small we must have been in her eyes to be able to walk away so easily.”

I sniffed, tilting my chin up because I would not cry on my last night in this wonderful little haven with Bauer.

He shook his head. “You’re just about the least forgettable person I’ve ever met, Claire.”

One tear escaped. Not because what he said made me sad, but because I’d never admitted that to anyone before. And I

was giving it to him in the quiet stillness of that cabin, and his reaction was exactly what my heart needed to hear.

I didn't want Bauer to forget me. And I didn't want to forget him either.

He gently brushed away that tear that slipped down my cheek, and it unlocked the last thing I'd left unsaid. It had stayed hidden so far back in my head that it was almost impossible to form the words.

"I'm glad she left," I whispered.

Bauer went still. His forehead creased slightly, but other than that, he waited to see if I'd say anything else.

"I love my family," I said fiercely. "The one we've built is so amazing, and because I can see that, see that what I went through can help someone else someday, I'm glad she left. We're better off without her."

My words hung between us, and I could see it on Bauer's face. He knew that I'd just told him something secret, something that came from a quiet part of my heart that I'd never given to anyone else.

His smile was small and sweet, and the way he was watching me made me blush in a different way. It wasn't sexual. Bauer looked ... fascinated. Enamored. Like a man who was falling in love. And suddenly, I found it hard to swallow.

For as long as I could remember, I wanted someone—his brother—to look at me in that exact way. To see beyond the fact that I was just one of a set, someone who happened to look like Lia, and really see me. See what made me different and unique and Claire. Someone who thought I was the least forgettable person he'd ever met.

Knowing what I knew now, ever having feelings for Finn felt like a betrayal of his deepest wound even though I could've hardly known that.

And now, knowing what I knew, I didn't want Finn to see me that way. It dawned slowly, warm and pure and wonderful, that I only wanted Bauer to look at me in the way he was.

“If I doubted how incredible you were before,” he said in a gruff voice. His hand pulled from my shirt so he could cup the side of my face, and I leaned into his palm. “You’re going to do such great things, princess. I probably would’ve turned out better if I’d had someone like you to save me.”

Even though I fought it earlier, another tear escaped, and his face pinched in a pained expression when he swept it away with his thumb.

I dipped my head and kissed him slowly, first his top lip, then his bottom, sucking it into my mouth before pulling back.

His expression was slightly dazed, and I couldn’t stop the way my heart was racing.

Maybe we were a strange pairing, one that no one else would put together, but I could see it. And ... and with the way Bauer was looking at me, I think he could see it too.

“Maybe we can save each other,” I whispered. I held his gaze and watched it slowly ignite and then burn so intensely that I fought not to blink, simply because I didn’t want to miss a second of the way he was looking at me.

After that, we didn’t speak a word for a long, long time.

Bauer tugged me down so he could take kiss after searing kiss. His hands swept up my back, and my shirt disappeared. Mine did the same with his.

We managed gasping, broken sounds, as piece by piece, we were tangled against each other, completely bare.

He kept true to his word, using his hands and mouth quite creatively, but I was the one who pushed him over to his back, after he’d already pushed me past the brink once.

His cheekbones blazed red as he stared up at me, his hands gripping my hips so tightly that it hurt.

“Please,” he pleaded as I rolled my hips, close, closer. Fingers tightened on my skin, and through clenched teeth, he swore.

I dropped down, my hair falling around our faces like a curtain. “I’m on the pill, Bauer. I trust you,” I whispered.

Smoothly, he rolled us again until he was over top of me, covering me with so much strength and heat that I wanted to live there forever.

He whispered a curse, his expression intense and searching. He knew what I was asking of him. Knew what my trust meant.

“Claire,” he said brokenly.

“I trust you,” I repeated.

His hands gripped me tightly. “I’ve never not used one. There’s never been anyone ...” His voice trailed off, and inside, I burned so bright with what I saw in his eyes.

“I know you’re here with me,” I told him, my hand landing on his heart. His wild, pounding, hammering heart.

Bauer didn’t rush, never, ever did anything except bring us both to the edge of our sanity, and the glass sharp edge of pleasure and pain, with how he made us wait.

With patience that I couldn’t fathom, and a tenderness that I hadn’t yet felt from him, Bauer made love to me. It was in every sweep of his hands over my body. Every roll of his hips, every second he held my gaze with his own and refused to look away.

The way he moved inside me was slow, slow, slow, and his control made the burst of pleasure that much better when it finally came. Movements became faster and harder after that, his control fraying as I clutched his sweat-damp back. It was my name he shouted when the dam broke for him. A second wave crested slowly for me when it did, and I gasped for breath when it warmed me head to toe.

I had to fight not to tell him I was falling in love with him, and when he slowly came down himself, he spoke something softly into the skin of my shoulder that I couldn’t hear.

It was easy to imagine that he was murmuring secrets into my skin that I was keeping tight inside me as well.

Maybe because we both knew what waited for us when we got back to reality, and that we were hardly at a place to make

declarations of love after only a few days.

But for the rest of the night, I felt the truth of it in the way he touched me, like I was something he treasured, something he wanted, something he'd protect.

By the time we finally lapsed into sleep, me curled tightly in his arms, I knew I felt the same way about Bauer Davis. But it still didn't mean I was ready for the sun to come up and reality to intrude because after that happened ... I couldn't bear to think about what might come next.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

CLAIRE

WE SAT in the Jeep and stared at Scotty's cabin. The snow had started melting, coming off the sharp edge of the A-line roof in a steady stream of water. There was no hiding anymore, no ignoring reality, no more excuses to stay.

Plus, we'd just about cleaned Scotty out of food. So, unless we wanted to start eating Agnes's really expensive cat food, it was time to face the music anyway.

"Well," he said quietly and glanced in my direction. "Shall we?"

The lump in my throat was about the size of Rhode Island when I tried to answer, so I just nodded instead.

He slid a hand across my thigh, fingers wrapping comfortably over the top of my leg so he could squeeze.

I'm right here.

It was so clear in my head that I could almost hear his voice.

"Why is it so hard to leave this place?" I said. I'd hardly even made the decision to speak the thought out loud, but there it was.

Bauer sighed, removed his hand, and put the Jeep in reverse, navigating through the plowed area that the truck had provided him to back up.

"Because it's nice to hide away every once in a while." He paused again before he pulled out of the driveway, and I

caught the way his eyes lingered on the cabin in the rearview mirror. “Forget about all the other bullshit we have to deal with.”

For some reason, his answer saddened me even further. He’d woken me so sweetly with kisses all over my naked back and hands roaming until I’d been panting his name, begging him to take pity on me. He had, hands clutching mine, his body hot and hard behind me as I found release again, my sounds muffled into the mattress.

Breakfast and packing up our stuff had kept the same tone, slow and sweet, lingering kisses and caresses, until we couldn’t prolong the inevitable anymore.

It was time to go back.

My phone had been left unattended that entire last day, and when I plugged it in while packed, I had to close my eyes when the notifications started rolling in.

Between Paige and Lia and Logan, my phone was blowing up with texts about when I’d be home. But still, I turned it over so I didn’t have to see. Not until I buckled myself into the Jeep and one from Logan had me caving.

Logan: I SWEAR, CLAIRE, if you don’t answer one of us soon, I’m calling EVERY POLICE OFFICER I KNOW, and dispatching them.

Me: I’m FINE! Sorry. Sorry. Spotty service, haven’t been checking my phone.

Logan: Not amused, kid, not amused. Paige is ready to castrate this guy for kidnapping you.

Me: Bauer is hardly at fault for the snowstorm. I’m fine, and I’m on my way home, so calm down, please. Isabel knew I was fine. We texted the other night.

Logan: YEAH, and I’m still trying to permanently erase the image of what those texts contained when she wouldn’t tell me and Paige ripped the phone from her hands. My last attempt of pouring bleach in my eyes didn’t do it, so I refuse to talk about this anymore with you.

“Your family’s freaking, huh?” Bauer asked after he finally pulled the car onto the road.

My phone and all their belligerent texts were safely tucked into my backpack where he wouldn’t accidentally see them. The last thing Bauer needed was to know that Paige, Logan, and Lia were ready to sic federal agents on him.

“They’re ... fine.” I tucked my leg up against my chest and stared happily at his profile. “But they’re on to you, bud. They know the roads were cleared yesterday.”

“On to me?” Bauer glanced at me. “Should I tell them who seduced who into staying for one more day? Because only one of us was topless and begging. With straddling involved, I might add.”

I held up my hand. “Okay, okay. I get it. No, they don’t need to know that.”

His grin was wicked and wonderful, and I wanted to eat him alive. Bauer Davis had turned me into a certifiable addict.

“But,” I said, “be prepared. If you thought Paige’s grilling was bad when you picked me up ...” I whistled.

Bauer hooked a wrist over the steering wheel and draped his free hand over my thigh again. Immediately, I wove our fingers together. “They didn’t act like that with the other guys you’ve brought home?”

I laughed. “I haven’t brought anyone home. Not like ... anyone serious.”

“Yeah, right.”

“I haven’t!”

He peered over the edge of his sunglasses. “I call bullshit.”

“Call whatever, it won’t make it less true.” I shrugged. “I went on a few dates in high school, so sure, they’ve met guys who picked me up, but they never turned into anything serious. And in college ... I don’t know ... my classes were always a higher priority than dating, so I never had anyone serious or even semi-casual who’d want to come home for family dinner.”

Bauer's head reared back. "Huh."

"Not all of us are professional snowboarders who probably have women throwing themselves naked on the snow in front of their board."

Did I sound like a jealous harpy? Yup. Sure did.

Did I sound insecure that I'd been a late bloomer and didn't feel the need to date my way through high school and college? Yup. That also.

"Naked on the snow sounds awful." He gave me a sideways glance. "And entirely irrational, if one wanted to look sexy."

Withdrawing my hand from his, I smacked him on the chest. His laughter boomed through the Jeep, and I found myself smiling.

"Ass."

Bauer snatched my hand and kissed the palm. "Listen, I won't lie, there are women who chase snowboarders like we're a prize, but it can't be that different from what any football player has to deal with."

"No, I know. And there are so many guys who don't chase that life." I shook my head. "I shouldn't have implied that you did."

He sighed. "I wasn't an angel. But most of that, it stayed behind me in my early twenties. It's not as fun once you start creeping closer to thirty." His cheeks were slightly pink.

"Are you saying you've had a dry spell lately, Bauer?" I teased.

His shrug was small. "A little. Isn't this ... isn't this weird for you to talk about?"

"Is it weird if I told you about guys I dated?"

"That's not the same."

My head tilted. "Why not?"

He sighed. “Well ... you’re like ... girlfriend material, you know? Every parent in the world would be thrilled if a guy brought you home.”

Ahh. “And you’re not boyfriend material?”

Bauer licked his lips before he answered. “I wouldn’t know.”

“Hmm, well, let’s see.” Regarding him with a thoughtful expression, I waited until I saw his expression soften a bit. “You’re not terrible to look at.” He rolled his eyes, but he was smiling, so I kept going. “You are an excellent dancer.” My fingers trailed along the top of his hand. “You open doors and make pancakes. You shovel pathways in the snow.” I picked up that hand and pressed a kiss into his palm. “You wake me up in the sweetest, sexiest ways. And you make me feel beautiful.”

Bauer looked over at me, and what I saw in his eyes slayed me completely. “You are beautiful,” he said roughly.

“You make me feel amazing just by being you, Bauer.” I kept my voice even, despite the way my stomach fluttered nervously. “If that’s not boyfriend material, I don’t know what is.”

The man next to me stayed quiet, but I saw the strong column of his throat move on a slow swallow.

“Everyone has a past, Bauer. It doesn’t define who we are moving forward.” I gave a small shrug of my own. “So I won’t hold your past against you if you can promise to do the same for me.”

He tangled our fingers together again. “So I won’t imagine some ripped book nerd in your sociology class mooning over you because you guys dated for five years. Because that would probably do the same cute pouty thing to my face as yours just did when you talked about snow bunnies.”

I laughed. “Seriously, you’re such an ass.”

As he grinned, I felt my stomach flip weightlessly again.

Some ripped book nerd. No, I hadn't dated one of those for five years, but in my head ... one had taken up residence for even longer. If Bauer and I stayed together, and oh, my heart wanted that so badly, I'd eventually have to admit my harmless crush on Finn and how that played a role, but I knew this wasn't the time.

The feeling of suspended reality that we'd enjoyed at the cabin still lingered in the Jeep. We drove through a winter wonderland so beautiful it didn't seem real. I was with a man who gave me the kind of butterflies I didn't know existed—like sex-crazed, I want to stay in a bed with you for a week and pluck every deep thought out of your head because your head is just as fascinating as your body kind of butterflies—and I wasn't ready to pop that bubble just yet.

My gut screamed at me over whatever logic my head told me to just ... keep my mouth shut about Finn.

Finn didn't even know, so there wasn't even really a secret to be brought out into the open. It was just, something I used to feel. Something I'd gotten over.

“What's waiting for you when you get back?” he asked.

I smiled, happy for the change in subject. “Family dinner. We eat at Logan and Paige's every week. It's loud and crazy and ... perfect.”

“All right, princess, tell me about them. Any group of people who make you smile like that, I've gotta know.”

Turning slightly in my seat, I took a moment to gauge his facial expression. Because his eyes were covered, I couldn't get a true read on him, not really, but the rest of him looked relaxed and happy. Interested.

This was me and him outside of the cabin. Him getting to know the other parts of my life, and me, hopefully being able to do the same.

“Molly is the oldest,” I started. “She travels a lot because of her job with Amazon. She's the assistant director for their documentary series, *All or Nothing*.”

He nodded. “I remember when that came out. She and her boyfriend, Noah, right? The guy who plays for Washington.”

“Yup. So they miss dinner a lot, but whenever she’s in town, they’re there.”

“Next is”—he snapped his finger—“Isabel, right? The only one who didn’t try to glare me out of your apartment, which makes me prone to like her the best.”

I laughed. “Yes, she’s the middle. And the funny thing about that is that Isabel is usually the hardest to impress. She and Paige are two peas in a pod; they always have been. Isabel manages a gym, a kickboxing studio.”

“Nice.” He nodded appreciatively. “Have I heard of it?”

“Maybe. Wilson’s Gym and Kickboxing Studio.”

He shook his head. “I haven’t. Maybe ... maybe we could check it out someday.”

My face felt warm and flushed and happy at how easily he suggested it. He was *trying*.

I licked my bottom lip, watching his face carefully. “You going to be in Seattle more?”

His grin hooked up on one side. “You know, I think I might be.” He squeezed my hand. “Even if the rest of your family hates me, at least I know Isabel is on my side.”

“Lia knows you,” I pointed out.

“Lia has spent more than ten years as best friends with the younger brother who’s gone his whole life hearing what a horrible influence I’d be on him. Trust me, your sister won’t be a fan of”—he glanced meaningfully at me—“this.”

I frowned. “She’s still my twin, though, and my best friend. When she sees ...” My voice trailed off. It felt like a strange place to say something big and meaningful like when she sees how important you are to me.

When she sees how insanely happy you make me,

When she sees how wonderful you really are.

When she sees that I'm falling in love with you.

Bauer heard something in the pause and pulled his eyes from the road. "When she sees ...?"

"Us," I finished lamely. "I think if she's able to see us," I stammered slightly over my words, "you know, hanging out or whatever. She'll be okay with it."

He didn't exactly look convinced. "If you say so."

"Lia is protective, just as we all are of each other." I didn't want to feel defensive about the way he was immediately writing off her ability to see that I was happy or give him a second chance, but I did. "And yeah, maybe she doesn't know you well, but she'll get to know you. And she'll see that you're more than what Adele's written you off to be."

Sensing my discomfort, he lifted my hand and kissed it. "Okay. You know her better than I do. I've only seen her as Finn's best friend. She's protective of him too."

I sighed. He wasn't wrong. "Lia is ..." I searched for the right words. "She's like ... bottled energy inside a body that can hardly hold it. It's one of the biggest ways we're different. She was always the ringleader when we were young because her brain never stops moving. She's stubborn, and she's strong-willed." Despite my words, I was smiling. "And she's my other half. Because she loves me," I finished quietly. "She'll be okay with you."

Bauer took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "I don't ... I don't know what it's like to have that." His smile was rueful, but I still saw the sadness clinging to the edges. "So I'm sorry if it sounded like I was questioning your sister. You've got a pretty big leg up on this whole family deal."

In answer, I squeezed his hand, and I saw the way his chest and shoulders relaxed.

"You'll be fine." At his skeptical look, I laughed. "You will."

"I'm glad you have so much faith in me, princess." His tone was wry, but I heard what was buried beneath it. "Don't know that I've earned it, but it's appreciated."

My finger traced small circles over the rough knuckles on his big, warm hand. “Will you come with me to family dinner tonight?”

A sweeter, softer kind of butterfly took off inside of my body the moment I asked.

It wasn't about sex.

It wasn't about how he made me feel when he looked at me with want and desire.

This was about having him sitting next to me at a dinner table and knowing I could reach for his hand.

It was letting him know that his presence mattered to me.

That I'd crave the normal, in-between things when he wasn't around me.

Bauer took a moment to answer, but when he did, his voice was a little rough, a little low.

“Yeah, princess. I can give it a shot.”

The rest of our drive was music and easy conversation, and the closer we got to Seattle, I felt a slow tension creeping in-between my shoulder blades.

The scenery was so familiar to me that I couldn't use it as a suitable distraction over what may or may not wait for us at dinner.

I hadn't prepared anyone that I was bringing this guy who'd just consumed the past four days of my life.

Bauer took the exit for my apartment as I tried—really, really hard—not to let my brain freak out over the fact that I felt this way about someone I'd known for less than a week.

My heart thought it was freaking romantic.

My gut was all arrows, pointing straight at Bauer.

But for one moment, I had a horrible thought that I couldn't immediately banish in the back of my overthinking brain. Didn't Brooke leave because she felt something this big and all-encompassing? She didn't care what her family

thought or what the consequences of her actions were. She just took a leap and never looked back.

My fingers tightened around his hand before I realized what I was doing.

“You okay?”

I nodded furiously. “Fine. Just ... still trying to mentally prepare to be back.”

“I miss that cabin too, princess.”

Smiling, I thought about something he’d said right before we left. “You gonna warn Scotty that you’re shipping him a new mattress?”

“I better.” He grimaced. “If I were him, I’d want to sleep on the couch until something shows up that wasn’t defiled the way we defiled that mattress.”

I was still laughing when we pulled up in front of my apartment building, and my whole body froze when I saw Lia standing next to Finn’s car, her arms crossed and a sour expression on her face when she caught sight of Bauer. Finn was next to her, tall and handsome, with something a bit more polite on his face than my sister had managed.

Sitting next to Bauer, I was relieved to realize that Finn didn’t cause any sort of reaction at all.

No wings. No flutters. No second thoughts.

Bauer whistled as he pulled the Jeep into a parking spot. “Remind me what you said about Lia again?”

Sighing, I gave his hand another squeeze. “Let me talk to her for a second, okay?”

He pulled off his glasses, and completely ignoring the way that they were both staring unabashedly, he leaned in to give me a soft kiss on the lips. “You sure you want to face that firing squad alone, princess?”

I nodded slowly, then risked a glance out of the windshield.

Finn was watching us with a curious expression on his face, one that held only the smallest resemblance to Bauer.

When I saw Lia's face, I decided firing squad was a pretty apt description to how she was glaring at the man beside me.

The bubble of the cabin was well and truly popped.

CHAPTER TWENTY

BY THE TIME my booted foot hit the concrete, Lia had grabbed Claire's hand and started dragging her around the front of Finn's car.

"Hey," Claire objected, planting her feet and refusing to be dragged anywhere. "Chill, okay?"

Lia gave me an unfathomable look, which softened when her gaze came back to her twin. "Are you okay? I thought we could talk in private."

Finn shuffled his feet and settled a shoulder against his car. "Bauer."

I nodded. "I see you're feeling better."

Claire watched our stiff greeting over her shoulder and gave me a tiny smile.

Lia said something to Claire quietly enough that I couldn't hear her, and after a second, Claire nodded.

"Give us a second, okay?" she said to me.

I smiled. "I'll be right here."

"Oh, gross," Lia mumbled.

"Lia," Claire snapped.

With interest, I watched Lia take a deep breath, slick her tongue over her teeth, and give me a tiny, tight smile. "Sorry. Force of habit."

I held up my hands. "Forgiven."

The sisters walked in tandem just to the other side of Finn's car where my little brother and I wouldn't be able to hear them.

"Weird week," Finn said conversationally.

My head tilted. "A good week."

He squinted into the sun, and I took a moment to study him. I hadn't been home in months, and my little brother had filled out a bit, clearly spending time with the weights.

"School going okay?" I asked.

Finn nodded. "Eventually, I'll be able to sleep again or have a social life."

It was no surprise that Adele struggled with me. Finn and I couldn't be more different. Like Claire, he'd dedicated all his free time to his studies. Nothing came before it, and it showed in his grades. And lack of a girlfriend.

"Heard Mom and Dad got the money from Richard," he said.

My eyebrows lifted in surprise. "Good for them."

"She was excited."

"Adele should send Claire one hell of a thank-you note when she cashes that check," I pointed out.

Finn looked back at the sisters and grinned crookedly, and it was one of the odd moments that I noticed similarities in us. That smile looked a bit like mine. "Lia would've been able to pull it off too."

"I don't think she would've," I said quietly. My little brother wanted to stand up for his friend, but I held up my hand. "Don't misunderstand me. I know Lia is smart in her own right, but she's not Claire. And the kind of smart Claire is, the way she reads people, that's what Richard responded to. It had nothing to do with her last name, or who her brother is, or how she's connected to Washington. It was her."

"Hmm." Finn regarded me carefully. "Sounds like you got a read on Claire pretty quickly."

My eyes moved to the woman in question, her animated gestures almost had me smiling, but the whole situation was still just a little too strange for anything to be humorous. “I think so.” The whole day still had me feeling off-kilter after leaving our haven in the woods.

It was laughable that I’d worried at one point that Claire might regret one night with me.

Not only did she seem to have zero regrets but she also willingly stayed. Willingly dug inside parts of me that no one had ever seen, no one had ever wanted to before. Those blue eyes of hers came with a superpower, X-ray vision straight through whatever messy tangle I’d kept floating on the surface.

When she looked over at me in the car, kissed my palm, and told me she thought I was boyfriend material—that bringing me home to her family was something she wanted to do—I damn near cried.

One manly, manly tear.

Right on the heels of that was, *holy shit, I don’t know if I can pull this off.*

For her, though, I’d try. Because my little brother was right. I had gotten a read on Claire quickly, and she never would’ve told me the things she did in the car if she didn’t believe them.

Finn turned so he could watch the sisters, his thumb tapping restlessly on the side of his car. “She’s Claire, you know. I guess I never thought much about the ways they might be different.”

I wanted to tell him all the ways Claire was different because what idiot couldn’t see it? Finn might be book smart, but book smart people could still be total dumbasses in the ways of the world.

Something about the way he was watching them, trying to see what I saw, left me feeling edgy. Jealous.

It was a strange sensation.

“She’s nothing like her sister,” I snapped. “I don’t know how you missed it.”

He laughed at my grumpy ass, which didn’t help the green-eyed monster settle. “It’s not like I missed it. I just didn’t ... I don’t know. I didn’t pay much attention.” His smile faded as he took in my glowering face. “Never thought I’d see the day that a woman turned you inside out like this.”

“Join the club,” I muttered.

Finn gave me an assessing nod. “I think she’ll be good for you.”

Couldn’t argue with that. “Thanks for getting sick, by the way.”

“Ohh, it was my pleasure.” His voice was dry humor and tinged in sarcasm, and it lessened a smidge of the tension banding tight around my chest at this entire exchange.

Lia.

Finn.

Whatever her family might say to my unexpected presence.

There was no misunderstanding what a big deal it was, and it was on the tip of my tongue to ask Finn for tips. Tell me what the hell to do at this family dinner. Ask him if Logan Ward was going to punch me in the balls for whatever had gone down between me and Claire in the cabin.

In his mind, I was sure our relationship played out backward.

There was no first official date, where I walked to the door and picked her up with flowers in hand. Where I told her she looked beautiful. Where I had her back home later that night and snuck a kiss in the car. Where I hoped for a second date and then a third. Because if I’d done those things, in whatever way he probably wanted his sisters to start dating a guy, I would’ve wanted a second and third and fourth date from the moment I picked her up.

I would've pulled out her chair, held the doors, done every chivalrous thing I could think of. Not because Claire wasn't capable of holding the door herself or pulling up her own chair, but because I would've wanted her to know how special she was.

No, in Logan's mind, I stole a date that wasn't meant for me. I forced a situation where Richard thought we were dating. I conned her into spending days stuck in a cabin in the remote wilderness with me.

With a dawning sense of horror, while I watched Lia make her own animated gestures back at Claire, I realized that her family had absolutely every reason to be skeptical. The first guy she was bringing home had the reputation of a hothead and a drunk.

“What's that look on your face?” Finn asked.

I blinked over at him. Apparently, Claire wasn't the only one good at reading people. My first instinct was to give him a flippant answer so that he'd leave me alone, reestablish that my little brother didn't know shit about me, because he'd never really tried.

But I hadn't tried either.

It was a tough pill to swallow, but in light of what Claire said about Adele and my mom, who I didn't even really remember except for pictures, I was forced to acknowledge my own part in the rift between me and my family.

What if I had the same effect on Claire and hers? Caused some sort of tension because they couldn't reconcile who she brought home.

“They'll all hate me, won't they?”

He chuckled. “Not all of them.”

“Thanks, that makes me feel better.”

Finn was giving me a curious look. “I'm surprised you care if they do or don't. You've always made it perfectly clear to us that your own family's opinion doesn't matter. Why does hers?”

Apparently, Golden Boy knew me better than I thought. My family's opinion hadn't mattered, not in any of the choices I made, which is why I never cared too much that they hadn't celebrated in my victories either. In that way, Claire and I couldn't have been more different. Behind her was a veritable army, ready to defend her against the slightest hurt, perceived or otherwise.

Then there was me.

The one who normally held his inked hands, middle finger up, to the people who were supposed to care for him the most.

"I don't have to justify myself to you, Finn," I said. His frame tensed, bracing for whatever was going to come out of my mouth next. He'd heard it enough over the years. For her, I had to remind myself I could try. I took a deep breath and tried to answer more calmly. "It matters because she matters. To me," I clarified.

His jaw relaxed, shock clear in the widening of his eyes. "You've known her for like, five days."

Claire turned back in our direction, and I found myself breathing more easily when her eyes met mine, sparkling with warmth and sweetness. Whatever had been talked about with Lia, Claire felt good about it.

And by extension, I felt something ease inside me. Simply because she looked happier.

Fuck, falling in love was terrifying, wasn't it?

This woman could ask for a knife to flay me alive, and I just might have handed it to her with a dopey ass grin on my face. It was the scariest shit I'd ever experienced in my life, which didn't explain why all I wanted to do was hold her hand, see her smile back at me, and know that she was in it with me.

Finn laughed softly at whatever was on my face.

"Shut up," I mumbled.

When Claire walked straight into the arms I hadn't even realized I'd opened for her, Lia grimaced before she could stop

herself. Finn elbowed her, and instead of trying to figure out what it meant, I buried my nose in the top of Claire's head and breathed in deeply.

She felt so good in my arms, and I hated how much the raised hackles inside me were soothed by her open affection in front of her sister and my brother.

Claire slid her arm around my waist and faced the other two but kept herself tucked into my side. "Where are you guys off to?"

Lia let out a slow breath, and I made sure to keep my expression pleasant.

She was stubborn, I already knew that. And she'd had years of building up an opinion of me that wouldn't be erased with one single conversation in a parking lot.

"I need to run to the store before dinner, and my car's acting up," Lia said.

"Again?" Claire shook her head. "That car is such a piece of shit."

Her sister smiled, as did Finn, so I gathered it must have been a running joke between the three of them.

"I could look at it," I told her.

Lia's eyebrows popped up. "You fix cars?"

My hand curled up around Claire's neck, and I gave it a gentle squeeze. "I can manage a couple of things if you want me to check it out later."

Claire smiled up at me, clearly happy with the effort I was making.

For her, I could try.

Lia licked her lips and didn't answer right away. Finn elbowed her again and gave me a lift of his chin. "She'd be thrilled, thank you."

"Yes, thank you," she managed with only the slightest tightness to her voice. Her eyes went to Claire again. "I'm

assuming you're going to ride with us to dinner? Since you usually do."

Again, whether it was intentional or not, it was a pointed reminder that I was the oddball in this strange little trio.

Lia and Finn, the best friends.

And Claire who always tagged along.

It made me feel protective because Claire shouldn't have to tag along anywhere. Not like she was an afterthought.

"I'm riding with Bauer," she said firmly.

Lia's mouth dropped open. "He's coming to dinner?"

Finn gave her a warning look.

I struggled mightily against my first reaction, which was to say something to piss her off.

Claire slid her hand up under my shirt and tightened her grip. It was proprietary, a signal that couldn't be missed, and holy shit, I loved it. At that moment, she soothed the bull ready to charge. "He is, and I can't wait to introduce him to Logan and Paige," she told her sister. "Which is why you're going to uphold your promise to me, Lia."

Her words had the intended effect on Lia because her body deflated slightly and lost the shocked tightness to it.

"You know I will," Lia answered quietly. Then she looked at Finn, who nodded. "I guess we'll meet you guys there."

Claire looked up at me. "I want to freshen up before we go over."

Finn nodded at me before he climbed into the driver's seat. Claire walked out of my grasp for a moment to squeeze her sister. Lia closed her eyes as they embraced, and it was easier that way to see her in the role of loving, protective sister rather than someone who'd vacillated between hating and barely tolerating me over the years because of my family. Because of me.

I wove my fingers through Claire's as they drove away, and as soon as Finn's car left the parking lot, I turned and

cupped her face in my hands, pressed her against the car, and took her mouth in a deep, deep kiss.

The match lit immediately, and she wound her arms around my neck as I tasted the sweetness on her tongue, the softness on her lips.

Yes, for her, I could try. I still felt unbalanced and about a thousand miles outside of my comfort zone, but when I touched her, felt her touch me back, everything fell back into place.

My hand dug into the back of her leggings, and I groaned happily when she rolled her hips. If it was dark, if we were hidden and out of reach of prying eyes, I'd have taken her there up against my Jeep. Quick and hard, with little preamble, simply to soothe whatever addiction to her had taken over every corner of my soul.

Someone hollered an obscenity out of their apartment window, and I broke my mouth away from hers.

I laughed against her mouth. "Sorry."

Her face had a dazed look on it. "What was that for?"

"For whatever you said to her," I admitted. "And for inviting me to dinner. For being crazy enough for wanting me there."

Claire grinned. "Don't thank me yet."

My forehead pressed against hers, and I breathed her in, trying to wrestle my desire for her under control, given we were in public. "I want to take you out on a date, princess. A real one. I pick you up, and you know it's me coming." My voice was rough, and my hands held her tightly. She must have sensed a change in me because she smoothed her hands up my chest and kept them there. "You can dress up, and I'll take you somewhere expensive and think about kissing you all damn night."

"Okay," she answered softly. "I think we can do that."

Wrapping her in my arms, I kissed her temple. What Claire Ward was doing to me, I wasn't entirely sure, but I was on

unsteady footing. She had me balancing on a beam, thin and wobbly, over a wide-open expanse and no net.

While we were alone, I felt the strongest in what was building between us. Even now, just one hit of her to my bloodstream, and I was calmed. I'd have to share her eventually, and maybe Claire was right when she said I'd be able to make it through dinner just fine.

“Good.” I buried my head in her hair again.

“You know what I want to do?” she asked. Her mouth nipped at my jaw.

“What?”

Her blue eyes sparkled with mischief. “Show you my bed before we have to leave.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

WHEN YOU BEGIN your drive to a former football star's home, especially one who is now one of the league's most respected coaches, you start getting a certain image in your mind about what the house might look like.

Long, curving driveway.

Lush landscaping.

Arches and large windows and a pool house.

Somewhere I'd feel like a fucking fraud even more than I already did.

But when I turned my Jeep into a packed, normal size driveway, I had to take a second to look around.

Yeah, it was in a nice neighborhood, but the house was ... normal.

Big, but normal.

"Ready?" Claire asked.

"Yeah." I scratched the side of my face. "It's not what I expected."

She blinked at the brick structure. "The house?"

"I was thinking I'd be driving up to a mansion with a code and shit."

Claire grinned. "No codes, no gates, just ..." She shrugged. "Just home."

From the assortment of vehicles parked in front of us and judging by the noise that came out like a blast when a small boy opened the front door and came flying out at us, it appeared everyone had beaten us there.

“Claire!” He flung himself at her, and she caught him on a laugh. “We thought you *died*.”

“No, you didn’t.” She kissed the top of his head, covered in reddish-brownish hair, and in the curve of his smile, I saw a strong resemblance to her. “I was just snowed in, goofball.”

The boy released Claire and gave me a wide-eyed look. “They’re talking about you a lot in there.”

Claire laughed while I frowned. Great. Just what I wanted before walking inside—verification of what I was worried about. But it wasn’t this kid’s fault.

Instead of crouching, I held out my hand and shook his like he was a man. That made his skinny chest puff out. Kid couldn’t have been more than eight or nine.

“What’s your name, sir?”

“Emmett Ward.” He kept shaking my hand, like he wasn’t sure who was supposed to let go first. “I’m Claire’s nephew, but I don’t call her aunt because she doesn’t look old enough to be someone’s aunt.”

I gave Claire a head-to-toe inspection, and her cheeks blushed furiously. “You might be right about that, Emmett.”

“Ooooh, you shouldn’t look at her like that when you get in the house,” he warned.

Claire slapped a hand over her mouth.

I glanced back toward Emmett in surprise. “I shouldn’t?”

Emmett shook his head. His eyes were the exact shade of blue as Claire’s.

Before I asked, I knew it was probably stupid to do so, but I didn’t deal with kids too much. Plus, I figured he was too young to know what any kind of look I’d given her could

possibly mean. “How’d I look at her? Just so I know not to do it again.”

He sighed heavily. “Like you want to kiss her. My mom said she’d rip your ballsack off if you looked at Claire with sex eyes at the dinner table.”

Claire groaned behind her hand, and I grimaced mightily.

Emmett shrugged. “Kissing leads to sex, and sex leads to babies. So ... I wouldn’t do that in there if I were you.”

With that, he was gone, tearing back up to the house, leaving Claire and me in stunned silence. She let out a hysterical giggle.

“Well,” I said. “That was fun. Can’t *wait* to go inside.”

She dropped her hand and planted a soft kiss on my cheek. “You’ll be fine.”

It was clear she believed it as she said it. There was no fake enthusiasm, no false encouragement.

For the hundredth time since we left the cabin, I repeated my new mantra. For her, I could try.

The only time I ever tried to impress anyone was when my feet were firmly planted on the smooth surface of my snowboard, my head covered with a helmet, and goggles down over my face. That was something I knew without a second thought. I could contort my body, shift, and move with the momentum of the mountain so that I didn’t face-plant into the snow and ice.

It was never about my personality. Never about what came out of my mouth or how I treated someone. It wasn’t about what I looked like or proving my worth as a person.

The scores I received, the time I clocked going down a charted course, the tricks I completed—they were about my ability to physically perform.

This—walking through that door with Claire at my side—was about everything else. The one thing I was good at, at this moment, was completely and utterly useless.

So, while her certainty was great, it didn't feel like I'd be fine as she clutched my hand and walked us inside behind Emmett.

But I didn't want to make her second-guess bringing me, so I kept my stubborn mouth shut.

The two-story entryway was bright with athletic equipment scattered around the hardwood floor. The arched hallway adjacent to it led to a bright, big kitchen, which was filled with amazing smells and loud, feminine laughter.

It was a house that was lived in and loved well. Marks on the painted walls were plentiful, and I saw a gouge in the drywall that looked suspiciously like a bike wheel had implanted itself there. The walls were covered in snapshots of a family that had grown together over the years, and each one we passed made me just a bit more ill at ease.

The love in this place was overflowing. In every inch, dominating every sense.

All of it should have made me feel better, but it only made me feel worse. Because this wasn't the kind of home I knew. I tightened my grip on her fingers, and she squeezed them in return.

We came around the corner into the kitchen, which was one large open space that flowed into a massive, comfortably furnished family room. A large flat screen mounted on the wall was frozen on a football game. No surprise there.

Most of the family had their backs to us with how they were crowded around the large marble island where Paige and Logan were cooking.

Logan saw us first, and I took a deep, steadying breath at the look he leveled in my direction.

He was a tall guy, broad and strong, and his slightly graying temples and lines around his eyes were the only sign he was well into his forties. Instead of interrupting the story that Isabel was telling, still oblivious to our entrance, he settled a hand on his wife's back and excused himself from the kitchen.

He came around the island, and something about his gait, his commanding presence had me standing up straighter. Lia noticed and nudged Isabel. Isabel quieted, and threw a towel at Paige, who finally lifted her head.

Now the look I got from *her* made it difficult to swallow. Yeah, she was imagining every nightmare I could've conjured for this family dinner.

Logan gave his sister a tight hug, ruffling her hair as he pulled back. "You made it home safe?"

He looked her over like we'd actually been stuck outside in the snowstorm, and she rolled her eyes.

"Yeah. Roads were fine by the time we left this morning."

"I'll bet," Paige muttered.

Isabel cleared her throat, and it held a warning behind it. Finn smothered a smile, and I wanted to chuck something at his head for the fact he got to be here to witness this.

He turned to me and held out his hand, which I took. I swear, I tried not to cringe at his grip, I really did.

"Logan," he said.

"Bauer Davis," I told him. "Appreciate you having me, sir."

At that, he finally cracked a reluctant smile. "I'm not that old. Logan is fine."

Isabel had turned on her stool, peppering Claire with questions about where we'd stayed, and Lia whispered behind the counter with Paige.

Emmett tore around the house, oblivious to any undercurrents of my visit.

The rolling chatter of the family never ebbed, just stayed at a constant hum. A buzz that seemed to grow louder and louder in my ears.

"That's romantic as shit," I heard Isabel exclaim. "A tiny cabin in the woods? Can't ask for better."

Claire laughed under her breath, reaching for my hand.

Already, the small gesture felt like an anchor, holding me steady. Could she have known that I needed it?

Of course, she could have. She was perceptive enough to know that big families weren't exactly my expertise, especially when two of the people present were probably waiting for me to bolt.

Maybe because I absolutely wanted to. Bolting sounded great. Take Claire and go back to her bed. Better yet, drive her up to Whistler so we could break in my bed too.

Paige turned a burner down on the stove and wiped her hands on a towel that was slung over her shoulder.

It was impossible not to compare her to the only other matriarch I knew in Adele.

The irony was that while Paige had made her living as a supermodel, years earlier, and Adele made hers helping at-risk youth, I knew which woman I'd want in my corner. And which woman was absolutely terrifying to have pitted against you when she was looking at me in the way she was.

She reminded me of a lioness as she came around the island and headed in our direction. Ready to rip me apart with her bare teeth.

"Bauer," Paige said evenly. "How'd you do on your end of the bargain?"

I blew out a breath. "The bargain where you threatened my life if I hurt her?"

Paige tipped her wine glass at me. "That would be the one."

Logan joined us, sliding an arm around her waist. "You being nice, my sweet wife?"

To stop my nervous laughter, I rolled my lips together.

Paige beamed at him. "The nicest."

"Isabel was singing your praises before you got here," Logan said.

I laughed uncomfortably. “Was she?”

“Heard you’re a hell of a competitor.” Logan gave Paige a loaded look. The inquisition was over, at least for now. “Though, to be honest, I don’t know much about snowboarding as a sport.”

“It’s cold, and you don’t make much doing it,” I told him as honestly as I could. “But I wouldn’t trade it for anything.”

He smiled. What else would he do? The man got a yearly check with a shit ton of zeros behind it. Even if I could find another sponsor, most professional snowboarders rarely cracked fifty g a year. It was why most of my friends waited tables. Why I tended bar in the off-season. Why most of us found odd jobs as we traveled around to our favorite spots to catch fresh powder.

“Being able to find something you love and you’re good at,” he said, “it doesn’t happen to most people. You’re lucky.”

His reaction was one I could add to a list of what was already so different from what I knew.

Again, I knew it should have made me feel more comfortable in their home, surrounded by all these people who loved Claire so much that they were willing (to varying degrees, obviously) to welcome me into their home. But instead, it made the skin itch under the collar of my shirt.

But never, not once, had I had a woman look at me with such expectation in her eyes. And now, she came with a family, who’d want to know what I did, how I made my living, because that affected Claire too, or might someday. My hands started tingling, and my chest felt tight.

“Excuse me,” I said to them and disentangled my hand from Claire’s so I could head to the bathroom I saw off the kitchen.

Once the door was closed, I braced my hands on the sink and stared at my reflection.

The bolts of panic tightening the muscles along my back were foreign, but the only reason I knew I wasn’t having a heart attack or something was the overwhelming urge to flee.

I wanted to be back at that cabin where it had been simple. Where my feelings came easily, and I could take ownership of them. Where it wasn't hard to put words to what she was doing to me. In that crowded, happy kitchen, I had to face the realization that I didn't know how to be in a serious relationship for shit. I didn't know how to share someone I was falling in love with, with this giant group of people who was just waiting for me to screw up.

Cranking the water on, I cupped my hands under the faucet and splashed my face a few times. When I felt like my heart rate slowed and I could breathe normally again, I walked out. Lia was in the laundry room adjacent to the bathroom, finishing a phone call.

“Yeah, thank you, I'm thrilled.” She held up a finger for me, but because she looked happy, I didn't feel like she was baiting me. “I'll call you tomorrow and let you know for sure. Thanks.”

I tucked my hands in my pants pockets and let out a slow breath.

She did the same.

Before she started talking, I could tell she was trying. Maybe she was repeating the same mantra I'd had in my head all day. That for Claire, she would try.

“I promised my sister I'd give you a chance,” Lia said. “Because she's never ...” she shook her head. “This is new, for Claire. Being in a relationship like this.”

Her candor eased an admission from my lips. “For me too.”

Lia smiled. “I know. I've heard.” When I lifted an eyebrow, she held up her hands. “Sorry. I have almost ten years of thinking about you a certain way, and your brother lectured me about that on the way here. That you and Claire have nothing to do with whatever it is between you and your parents.”

The idea that Golden Boy was defending me at all had me rocking back on my heels slightly. “Did he?”

“Yeah. Finn isn’t like his mom, you know. He doesn’t hold any of that against you. The distance between you and them.”

I nodded slowly. “Finn is a more forgiving person than I am. I guess I should be grateful for that right now.”

“Yeah, you owe me and him pretty big, if you think about it.”

“I suppose I do,” I conceded.

“Not like I can take credit for Finn getting sick.” Lia shrugged. “Though, if he’d warned me, Claire would’ve bailed in a hot second.”

I tilted my head. “You think?”

“I mean, you guys talked about why she went, right?”

“We did,” I hedged. Because we had, just ... not a lot.

“They’re too much alike, you know. That’s probably why I never worried about it.” Lia glanced into the kitchen. “She probably doesn’t even realize I knew she liked him.”

Following the line of her gaze was impossible to resist, and even though it should have been a tiny thing, to realize that she’d gone because of Finn, to spend time with Finn, it suddenly felt really, really big.

Standing on the edge of the mountain big.

If I’d felt like a lost cause before what Lia had said, it was nothing in comparison to how I felt now. If she’d dropped the proverbial anvil on my head, it would have had less of an effect.

Of course, Claire went because of Finn. Everyone, including the woman I was trying so hard for, would’ve preferred him.

The nice brother. The smart brother. The one who wouldn’t embarrass her or himself.

“But you wanted to make sure I knew,” I said in a quiet, dangerous tone.

Lia's eyes jerked back to me, wide and shocked in her face. "Umm, given the giant heart-eyed, lady boner you've turned my sister into, I assumed she told you that's why she agreed, considering you guys had nothing but time to talk for days."

I folded my arms over my chest and tried to stop looking at Finn standing next to Claire in the kitchen. He was pouring her a glass of wine, laughing in a friendly way at something she said.

Lia grabbed my arm, and I pried my gaze away from the scene in the kitchen.

"She didn't tell me."

Her eyes widened even further. "Bauer, I'm so sorry. I didn't ..." She shook her head. "This is not a big deal, I swear."

My harsh, low laughter had her tightening her grip on my arm.

"Hey, I'm serious. The reason this is not a big deal is because I knew Claire would meet someone who was a better fit for her than Finn. They're basically the same person, and she needs someone who will push her when she needs to be pushed." Her fingers tightened. "Her crush was harmless, okay? Finn has *never* looked at her like that."

My silence was starting to freak her out, but my teeth were clenched too tightly for me to try to say anything.

I chose a hell of a way to dive into the dating pool, hadn't I?

With a woman, who was already too good for me, but now I had to come to terms with the fact that I'd only gotten my shot because she'd been pining for my little brother for years. My eyes drifted back to them, a golden couple, with dark hair and big brains and kind hearts.

"Bauer," Lia snapped. "Look at me."

I did, and she immediately started shaking her head at what she saw.

“No, don’t you shut down on her because of this. I will tell her this is my fault, and she will forgive me.” Her voice got wobbly. “She’s my twin, and that’s how I knew, because sometimes we know things about each other that we don’t even want to know, but simply because we feel it, okay? But please, please don’t break her heart right now because of whatever weird dynamic you have with Finn. *Please.*”

It was the wobble in her voice that had me pausing.

My inner skeptic was roaring that Lia did this on purpose, but I didn’t think she’d be able to fake the panic stamped over her face or the emotion in her voice.

“You have five minutes to tell her before I pull her aside,” I told Lia. “Because there’s no way I can sit through a dinner, staring at them, and pretend I’m okay with what you just told me.”

“What are you two doing back here?” Claire asked. She was approaching us with a smile, but I could see the cautious curiosity.

Lia shared a panicked, begging look with me. “I’m just running my mouth, and Bauer is ...”

Claire’s face started falling, and as her blue, blue eyes studied me, I saw her shoulders tense up. “Bauer is what?”

“I told her I’d give you five minutes,” I said flatly. “I’ll wait outside. I can’t go in there right now.”

“Bauer, wait,” Claire begged, reaching out to grab my arm. I stopped because yeah, my mind was racing, and there was no way in hell I could fake anything in front of her family, not the first night I was meeting them, but if I ripped my arm out her grasp right now ...

So I paused but closed my eyes.

“You’re freaking me out,” she whispered.

“Just ... talk to your sister for five minutes, okay?”

“No.”

My eyes popped open at her firm tone. Lia said her sister's name.

Claire's gaze never wavered from mine. "I want to talk to *you*. Lia, can you please give us some privacy?"

"Claire, it's my fault, I swear," Lia said in a rush. "Please, let me—"

Claire held up her hand. "I never ask you to leave me alone, but Lia, this is a moment when I need you to go away so I can talk to Bauer."

Lia's eyes widened, and even I was surprised at Claire's reaction. But Lia respected her twin, nodding her head slowly.

It was quiet enough in the kitchen that we'd gathered an audience.

"Shit," I whispered. "I can't do this in here."

Claire let out a long exhale. "What's going on? Talk to me."

My chin dropped to my chest. I was going to fuck this up, I could already tell. I wish I'd never come out of that bathroom. I wish I'd told her I could meet her family another time. And I wished that I knew how to do bullshit like this with a woman who already meant entirely too much to me.

So much that the thought of her wanting my brother made me pound his stupid face in, right after I clawed my heart to try to temper this ... feeling.

Staring at her, trying to figure out what I wanted to say and how and where, all I could imagine was her in that yellow dress with the red lipstick painstakingly applied. The look in her eyes when I turned around, and she saw me for the first time that she hadn't been able to mask.

It hadn't been shock that kept her so quiet on the drive. It was disappointment.

Which was why I turned and walked out the door, and I wasn't entirely sure I wanted her to follow me.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

CLAIRE

THE WIDE EXPANSE of Bauer's back had never looked ominous to me.

Strong.

Capable.

Sexy.

But never ominous.

As I gaped at it, at the sight of him walking away from me, out the door that led to the garage, it was the most terrifying thing I'd ever seen. Mainly because I was so confused, so completely and utterly lost, I didn't know what the hell was going on.

Noise exploded behind me when he exited the house, and I refused to give my family a backward glance because it wasn't like I could explain anything. I jogged out of the house and yelled his name when I saw him pace between the parked cars.

"What is going on?" I begged. "You were gone for three minutes, and all of a sudden, you're walking out on me?"

Bauer stopped pacing, his hands propped on his hips, as he stared up into the cloudless sky.

Maybe it was a strange thing to notice, that the canopy above us was clear and bright, but it made me wish we were back at that cabin.

There we'd had blankets of white and clouds and wind to shelter our little space. Suddenly, I wanted that sense of

security back.

“What did Lia say to you?” I asked quietly. It was taking everything in me not to march up to him and shake the answer out of him.

“I can see it.”

My head tilted at his strange answer. I felt like a fish that had been plopped unceremoniously out of its bowl. It was hard to breathe because I had no concept of how to navigate this. “See what?”

He exhaled slowly, finally turning to face me. “You and Finn.”

My stomach was now the thing giving me all the ominous feels because it turned dangerously. What the *hell* did my sister say to him?

“Me and Finn,” I repeated quietly. “Bauer ... I—”

Denial trapped in my throat. Nothing else came up. Because I couldn't lie. And he saw that on my face.

He nodded. “You'd look great together. And it's probably really fucking stupid on my end that I never even considered that you went that night because of him.”

“I don't want Finn,” I argued. Carefully, I approached him with my hands held up. Don't spook the snowboarder, Claire, because he walked out of that house and had his mind halfway made up already. “I don't know what Lia said to you, or what she thinks she knows, but if she inferred anything that makes you think I don't want to be with you, she's wrong.”

“Don't be mad at her.” Ugh, my skin recoiled at his casual tone. The way he tucked his hands in his pockets as if this was no big deal, just any other conversation we might have had, standing under a cloudless sky. “She's just speaking the truth.”

“How would I know? You haven't told me what she said.”

“Fair enough,” he conceded. Bauer braced a shoulder on the side of his Jeep and studied my face. “You would've canceled in a heartbeat if you'd known who was going to show up. No yellow dress. No red lipstick. No lying necessary.”

Because the only reason you did what you did was because you wanted a shot with the Golden Boy.”

Normally, I prided myself on being a levelheaded person.

Seeing both sides.

Understanding differing opinions.

But now, I saw red.

“And you stormed out of my family’s house because I *might* have made a different decision if I’d *maybe* known he was sick, when I’d never even *met you* before that night?” My tone gradually increased in volume, in pitch, in absolute mind-blown anger. “Is this a joke?”

His face slowly hardened into a mask. “I sure as hell don’t think it’s funny.”

“Neither do I, Bauer.” I stared him down. “I didn’t know you.”

“No, but you sure as hell knew him.” He tipped his head back and let out a dry laugh. “Everything you said in the car ... so understanding about my past. You were covering your ass.”

“I was doing no such thing,” I protested. But hadn’t I been? Just a little. Discomfort ratcheted my anger up another notch.

“I have a pretty good bullshit meter, Claire, so be careful.”

“I wasn’t protecting myself, Bauer. I was trying to get to know you, talk to you about normal relationship things. You asked if I’d ever brought a boyfriend home, and I haven’t. Just you.”

“Yeah,” he said slowly. “Because the guy you wanted was here for every damn dinner.”

“And you’re punishing me because I had a stupid, silly crush on him, one that I managed to ignore for a long time. I cannot change what I felt before I knew you.”

No surprise, but the mask didn’t move, and not one word came out of the hard line of his mouth.

I rubbed at my temples. “Bauer, come on, you are smart enough to know that it’s grossly unfair to hold that against me. I didn’t know you.”

His jaw clenched, and his brows lowered a fraction. He didn’t want me to be right, but I saw it in his eyes—the complete and utter inability to argue with me.

“Are you going to just stand there?” I snapped.

That finally cracked the mask. “What do you want me to say, Claire?” He spread his arms out. “That right now, it’s impossible for me to look at you right now, without seeing you with him. That it’s impossible to think about you wanting him—even if it was before me—without wanting to go wreck his pretty-boy face? Would that make you feel better?” he yelled.

I swallowed, tucking my arms around my waist. “No.”

“I have one member of my family who doesn’t treat me like a complete asshole, and that’s him, and now I want to break his fucking nose.”

My eyes pinched shut.

“Maybe it’s not fair. But if I walk in there and say to him, do to him what this makes me want to do, I will sever any and all relationship with my family. Not to mention what *your* family will think of me.”

“Is that a joke?” I pointed back at the house. “Have you met Paige? She’d claw anyone’s eyes out if she thought they were making a play for Logan. I’ve seen her cuss out football groupies so badly that my ears almost bled.”

Bauer slicked his tongue over his teeth. “Groupies are not the same as my brother.”

“Your brother was a harmless crush and nothing more,” I said fiercely. “He never looked twice at me. And now? I’m glad he didn’t. Because I got *you*.”

He clenched his teeth again, watched me warily as I approached. But his eyes took on a warning glint when I moved to touch him.

That was why I stopped. It was like stepping up to a bear about to charge.

We were standing closely enough that I could've lifted one hand and it would land on his chest. I'd be able to know if his heart was pounding and thrashing the way mine was.

A thought came into my head quickly, that maybe this was all Bauer and I were destined to be. Something bright and hot and fast. Nothing that could sustain because of the way we started.

It was too intense, and we burned out whatever heat had lit between us, simply by the nature of how our relationship had begun.

Locked in a pressure cooker.

It was a quick way to get started, but as soon as that lid was opened, everything dissipated into smoke.

"You'll never allow yourself to overlook this, will you?" I said quietly. As soon as I said it, my mad drained immediately to sad.

Bauer dropped his chin and breathed deeply. "Could you?"

"I don't hold your past against you. Because it's irrational and unfair, and you know it."

"That's not what I mean." He lifted his head, held my gaze, and the resolve I saw there chilled me to my core. "Could you overlook it if I told you that I showed up that night to take a shot with Lia?"

Words were gone. My mouth was sand-dry at what that did to me.

He kept talking, quiet, dangerous words that did horrible things to my heart. "If I told you that I thought about being with her, touching her, kissing her, and for even one moment, I was disappointed that I got you instead."

I sucked in a startled breath.

"Yeah," he said slowly, softly. "You couldn't overlook it either. Because that look in your pretty blue eyes, princess. It

feels like I just punched you in the gut, doesn't it?"

My eyes filled with tears, and I hated them. I hated that he was right. And for just a moment, one fleeting, fast one, I hated my sister for whatever she'd said, I hated Finn for being inside the house, and I hated myself for not saying something when I'd had the chance.

Because Bauer was right. The thought that he might have had feelings for Lia, oh, it hurt. Even the idea of it made my bones freeze over, crack dangerously when I tried to breathe too deeply, like I might shatter from the inside out.

Point proven with stunning accuracy, Bauer exhaled slowly. "It's good, though, you know?"

"What is?" I whispered. My throat hurt from holding in tears.

"That she said something." He looked behind me at the house. "I don't fit here any more than I fit in my own home. This isn't my scene, and I don't know why I thought it would be."

The pain I felt was staggering, and it threatened to buckle my knees, if I'd let it.

"Don't do this," I whispered. "I see exactly what you're trying to do, and I don't believe you."

"It's the truth whether you want to believe it or not." Bauer could hardly look me in the eye now. "We had a great weekend, princess, and it's probably best that that's where we leave it."

My eyes dried, and my heart curled in on itself while a roaring, angry beast took over my head. "You are the biggest coward I've ever met."

Oh, he didn't like that. But if Bauer got to fling little darts at me, let them find purchase in my skin over and over, but I would not be the only one bleeding by the time we were done with this awful, insane conversation.

"Feel better calling me names?"

“I’ve met children with more emotional maturity than you, Bauer Davis,” I told him.

He started nodding, pulling his keys out of his front pocket. “Good, get pissed at me, princess. It’ll make it easier for me to leave.”

“Don’t call me that,” I snapped. “I’m not a princess. I’m not some untouchable, pristine thing up in a tower, and I will get *pissed* because I see an intelligent man who means a lot to me throwing away the possibility for something amazing because he’s too chicken shit to work past his problems.” I marched the final steps between us and grabbed his face with my hands. His jaw was granite hard beneath my fingers, that was how tightly he was clenching his teeth. “I’m not trying to make it easy for you to leave, Bauer, because I know that’s not what you really want to do. You felt exactly what I did this weekend, and you are running scared at the first available chance.”

His eyes were zeroed in on mine, and for a moment, I thought he’d relent. He curled his hands around my wrists and carefully tugged until I had no choice but to release his face.

My hands fell when he let go, and quite strangely, I felt nothing the moment they did.

No anger.

No fear.

No pain.

Inside me was a strange quiet, a sudden stillness that could only be self-protective clarity.

“I was a fool to trust you with any piece of me,” I told him. “Wasn’t I?”

He conceded that with a slow nod, and my hand itched to slap that placid mask off his face.

“Finn’s the trustworthy brother, princess.” He smiled, and it looked cruel and cold, and I hated it. “I’m the one you come to for a good time, and I think you got that in spades.”

The ice in my bones hardened to steel, and I lifted my chin as I took a step back from him. “You should be gone by the time I walk inside that house because the second I do, I can’t be held accountable for what happens to you.”

He laughed under his breath, twirling his keys around one finger. “Not a problem, Miss Ward. Your wish is my command.”

This time, it was me showing him my back, and I hoped to hell that he didn’t see the tear that slid down my face when I did. The slam of his car door sounded like a gunshot, and I kept my pace even as I walked into the dark garage. My heart uncurled painfully as I opened the door, and I found myself wrapped into my big brother’s waiting arms.

I never heard the Jeep leave because I couldn’t hear a thing over the breaking of my heart.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

CLAIRE

“YOU CAN’T IGNORE ME FOREVER.”

My nose stayed glued in my textbook, and I ran a highlighter under a sentence I wanted to remember.

Lia plopped on my bed even though I hadn’t invited her into my bedroom. Forty-eight hours after we’d driven home from Logan and Paige’s—me in stony silence, Lia begging me to talk to her, Finn glancing uncomfortably at me in the rearview mirror—I was proving to my sister that I could, in fact, ignore her forever.

I’d never gone this long without a word to her.

But I was pissed.

At her.

At Bauer.

At myself.

And unfortunately for Lia, as my roommate, she became the most convenient scapegoat for that anger.

“Claire, come on,” she begged. “I don’t know how else to apologize, okay? I’m sorry. You know I run my mouth sometimes, and I shouldn’t have said anything to him, but I swear, I thought he knew. I thought ... I thought you knew that I knew.”

My highlighter froze on the page, and I had to clench my teeth tightly to keep from screaming at her that there was no

conceivable way I could have known that when we'd never freaking talked about it.

Lia, like a rabid dog, saw the pause in my motion and pounced on it. "He said you talked about it, okay? About why you went. And I just ... I was trying to make conversation because seriously, I was trying to be nice to him."

By telling him I had a crush on his brother! I wanted to scream. My eyes pinched shut.

This was killing me.

Because no matter how pissed I was, I could feel it seeping through my skin, how miserable Lia was.

She was sad.

She was frustrated.

She was scared.

Between the two of us, I was always the one who caved first. Who tried to keep the peace. Who let things slide.

And I didn't want to let this slide because I was miserable too.

I missed Bauer.

I wanted to punch Bauer in the balls for acting like he had.

Yet I understood. He was a man with zero relationship experience, and not just that, but he wasn't raised in a way where he saw a healthy one modeled for him. Lia and I were young enough when we moved in with Logan, and by extension, Paige, that we knew how it was supposed to look.

We were raised in a home where we saw—day in and day out—love and respect, communication, and structure in the way that kids needed it. Logan was the foundation, the strong timbers that kept the house standing in place. And Paige, she was the walls, the roof, the windows. The thing that completed our family and made it safe.

"I messed up, C," Lia whispered. I'd heard her say it a thousand times in the last day. "And I'm sorry. I love you."

My nose burned, and my hand started shaking. But I pushed the highlighter forward until I felt her stand.

The stubbornness I was feeling was so deep-rooted, I wasn't even sure where it came from. To be honest, I wasn't even entirely sure what I wanted from Lia.

For her to rewind time, maybe?

From the corner of my eye, I saw her pause before she left my room.

"I-I didn't know how important he was to you. It took me by surprise. And," Lia sniffed noisily, "this is killing me, C. You can't shut me out completely. Yell at me, throw something at me, slap me, something! I deserve it."

All of a sudden, she was on her knees in front of me, and I had no choice but to look at her. Her face was wet. So was mine.

"I know how much this is killing you too," she whispered in a thick voice. "You're my best friend, and I can feel how awful it all is for you, and don't you think that's punishment enough for me? I know how much your heart is breaking because I can feel it."

"I ..." I paused. "I'm still so hurt, Lia. Because it feels like you said something on purpose to mess it up for me."

Her face collapsed. "I swear I didn't."

"I know you keep saying that," I cried. I shoved my book aside. "But this is the first time I've had something that was just mine, and yes, I should've told him, and I would've eventually, but it was mine to tell him. Not yours."

"I know." She sniffed. "I'm so sorry."

I stood from the bed and paced my room. "And it's embarrassing, okay? I can't believe you knew I had a crush on Finn that whole time and you never said anything. Why didn't you tell me you knew?"

She shrugged her shoulders. "Because ... I don't know! I know the two of you so well, C. You're ... you're the same

person. I love Finn, I do, and I love you more than anything in the entire world ...”

“But?” I crossed my arms tightly over my chest and waited her out. She didn’t want to say whatever she’d been about to say.

Lia shifted from the floor onto my bed. She licked her lips, and I noticed for the first time that she had matching dark circles under her eyes. Looked like neither of us had slept the night before.

“But you would’ve been the most boring couple ever.”

My mouth fell open. “That’s so freaking rude,” I whispered.

“No, I mean ...” She rubbed her forehead. “Okay, I just mean there wouldn’t have been any spark. No fire. You probably would have been perfectly happy, and sweet and blah blah blah, but Finn is the boy version of you.” Her eyes pleaded with me. “Why do you think I get along with him so well? He’s just like you.”

Slowly, I sank into the chair in front of my desk and processed what she was saying. And Lia wasn’t wrong. Finn and I had so much in common. It was weird, though, now, to try to think about him in a romantic sense.

Not just because of what Lia said, but because of what I’d experienced with Bauer—oh hell, would my heart ever not hurt thinking his name?—which was in an entirely different universe.

He was my opposite. Finn’s too.

And as pissed as I still was that he’d stormed out the way he did, I couldn’t help but look at my sister and try to put myself in Bauer’s shoes. Like he said, the thought of him wanting anything with Lia that night, hoping he might cross some invisible boundary, it hurt. Oh, how it hurt.

“I shouldn’t have ignored you,” I whispered. “I’m sorry too.”

She sagged in relief. “No, it’s okay that you were upset. You had every right to be.”

“Maybe I was channeling my inner Lia.” I smiled. “I don’t know where that stubborn streak came from.”

My sister swiped at her face and laughed. “I know, right?”

I let out a sigh that came from so far down in my soul that Lia laughed again.

“I don’t know what I’m supposed to do with all these,” I motioned to my chest, “feelings.”

Lia braced her arms on her thighs and leaned toward me. “Okay, talk to me. Tell me everything. I mean, maybe not like, sex details. But ... what happened while you were gone?”

Then she patted the bed.

My entire being settled back into place as Lia and I braced our backs against the wall. She curled her hand around mine with our legs stretched out straight onto my bed, and I unloaded for the next hour.

After a bit, she leaned her head on my shoulder, and I set my head on hers, and we fell quiet before I got to the scene in the driveway. I didn’t even attempt to wipe the tears coming down my face during that part.

“I’m so mad at him for leaving,” I said, voice hoarse from talking. “But I get it. I don’t want to, but I do.”

“I don’t.”

I nudged her. “I don’t need you to vilify him. Paige did enough of that.”

Lia laughed under her breath. After the driveway showdown, family dinner was a shitshow. I cried in my old bedroom while Isabel and Paige and Lia yelled over each other about what happened. Logan kept knocking on the door, trying to talk to me, and Emmett happily sat the table with a strangely quiet Finn.

“I’m not trying to vilify, per se.” She nudged back. “I mean, sure, it couldn’t be easy to hear that about Finn, but

literally, nothing ever happened between you two. Not even a single loaded glance. I think if he'd given his hothead temper five seconds to calm down, he would've thought that through and seen that you were still the badass that rocked his freaking world off its axis up in that cabin, and he'd eventually get over it."

"Here too," I heard myself say.

"What here too?"

I glanced down at my bed with a sheepish grin.

"Oh my gosh," Lia groaned. "Seriously? Don't tell me stuff like that. It's Bauer. I'm still coming around to this whole thing."

That made my heart do the weird achy thing again. I missed him. It had been two days, and I missed him.

"Nothing to come around to." I sighed. "He made it clear I wasn't worth the trouble of dealing with that kind of emotional baggage to him."

"Claire, be serious, you know that man was crazy about you, right? Like ... stupid, head over heels in love with you."

"If he was," I said carefully, "he has a strange way of showing it."

"Bauer has the emotional IQ of a six-year-old, C. You know that."

"No, most six-year-olds could communicate better than he did in that driveway. He has the emotional IQ of a stunted twenty-six-year-old who has no freaking clue how to be in a relationship. Combine that with his stupid face and stupid muscles and stupid job, and that makes him the most dangerous creature alive." I banged my head against the wall. "And stupid me, I thought ..."

"What?"

Bang.

"I thought he'd be willing to figure it out for me. Because of what we had together." I laughed. "And look where that got

me. Brokenhearted, being irrationally stubborn to my twin sister who really didn't do anything wrong, and missing him like he sawed off a part of my body and took it with him."

"Graphic but okay, I'm tracking." She glanced at me. "Why are you being so hard on yourself about this?"

Bang.

"I'm the one who's supposed to be studying human behavior, right? Cause and effect. Knowing how childhood trauma can play out into adulthood. It's like I saw Bauer and every single *I can fix him* impulse was screaming at me. Except the multiple orgasms just made me dumber."

Bang.

"Number one," Lia said. "Stop banging your head against the wall. Concussions help no one. And number two, Adele did a number on him. So freaking what? Brooke did a number on us, and you know why we're not emotionally stunted?"

I turned my head to look at her. "Why?"

"Someone who never gave up on us. A group of someones. We had each other, and we had Logan. Then we had Paige." She groaned. "And I can't believe I'm going to say this, but Bauer has never had anyone refuse to give up on him."

A faded picture on a wall of a cabin came into my head. "He's had one person. But I get what you're saying."

Lia's fingers tightened around mine. "If this man is as important to you as I think he is, then show him what it feels like. Refuse to give up on him if he feels what I think he does. He never would've gotten so upset if you hadn't dug your cute little claws into his emotionally stunted heart."

I sighed. "So just ... ignore the bullshit he spouted and tell him I'm not going anywhere? That sounds healthy."

"Noooo way. If he knows what's good for him, there will be copious groveling. But you don't have to decide anything right now, okay?"

Curling into my sister, I let her hug me. It felt like I could sleep for a week after that one conversation. "Okay."

“I know what will cheer you up,” she said.

“Alcohol and a week at the beach?”

“No.” She laughed. “I think you should go somewhere with me this weekend.”

I sat up with a sigh. “Where?”

Lia was quiet for a second. “Adele and Tom are doing a big celebration party at the center on Saturday night, and I think ... I think you should come and see.”

The face that came to mind now was the one I’d lied to, and I found myself grimacing. “Richard Harper will have quite the surprise seeing the two of us.”

“And you will explain it to him, and he’ll be fine. Finn told me he’s been amazing with how involved he wants to be at the center.”

I nodded. “I’d feel better if I could apologize to him.”

“Not that you really have anything to apologize for,” Lia pointed out.

Unwilling to hash that out, I let her think whatever she wanted. “What would I have to wear? Because if it requires another fancy dress, I’m out.”

“Cute casual will be fine. It’s a community center, not a ballroom.”

“Will Bauer be there?” I asked carefully. “It’s not that I’d ... I don’t know, avoid going if he was, but I don’t know if that’s the place I want to see him for the first time.”

Lia gave me a squeeze, and my heart gave a weird hiccup thinking about Bauer doing the same thing. “I’ll check with Finn, but I’ve never, ever known him to show up at an event there. Ever.”

“Okay.” I yawned. “What would I do without you, Lee?”

She was quiet, and I looked at her face.

“What?” I asked.

“Nothing. What?” she said too quickly.

“Lia,” I warned. “You paused. Why did you pause?”

She scrunched up her face. “Did I?”

I sat forward. “Oh my gosh, what is it? Are you moving out? Are you leaving? Are you *sick*?”

“Slow your roll, crazy,” she said on a laugh. “I’m not sick, good grief.”

My heart settled back into a normal rhythm. “Well, it’s something.”

“I didn’t want to say anything with all the feelings.” She gestured to me. “But I might be going to London.”

“What?” I shrieked excitedly. We’d done a bit of traveling over the years, but we’d never been to England, and for someone like Lia, it was her dream to visit. “When? With who? For how long?”

Lia laughed. “Margaret Atwood sort of ... invited me to study there ...” She paused, gauging my face. “For a semester.”

My face fell. A semester away from Lia. We’d never been apart for that long. “Lia,” I whispered. “That’s incredible.”

Her eyes filled, and so did mine. “It’s a long time, I know.”

The other half of me across the ocean for months. It sounded like an eternity. But oh, the elation I could feel coming from her made me so happy.

She let out a watery laugh. “I haven’t said yes yet. I wanted to make sure you’d ... be okay.”

I grabbed her hands. “If you don’t say yes, I will really never forgive you.”

Lia wrapped me up in a tight hug. “Nothing we need to worry about right now. Let’s get some of that alcohol that will make you feel better, okay?”

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

“WELL, THAT WAS STUPID.”

I rolled my eyes at Scotty’s tone, wincing as I poured hydrogen peroxide down the road burn on my calf. It hissed and bubbled, and Scotty leaned in to look at the damage.

“It wasn’t stupid,” I told him. “I’ve biked that trail a thousand times.”

His gray eyebrows, bushy and out of control, rose incrementally on his wrinkled forehead. “A few days after a monster snowstorm just melted down, and they’re covered in mud?”

I straightened my leg, satisfied when the muscles stretched without further pain.

“You’re lucky you didn’t break a bone, you moron.”

“Who invited you here again?” I muttered.

Scotty walked out of my tiny kitchen, waving his hand at me like I was a lost cause, only stopping when he saw the empty bottle of Jack Daniel’s sitting on the floor next to the trash can. He shook his head but didn’t say anything.

Which was good, because for four days, I’d been one hair shy of snapping at anyone who came too close.

I felt like Agnes.

“Thanks for checking on my cat while I was gone,” he said as he sank into the leather chair next to the loveseat. He

always took my chair. I really needed to stop inviting him over.

“Oh, it was my pleasure.” My tone was caustic, and I couldn’t stop it. For four days, long and endless and horrible, I’d done my very best to ignore everything that had preceded it.

Eventually, I’d be able to get the thought of her out of my head.

Eventually, I’d be able to drink enough that I wouldn’t dream of her.

Eventually, I’d work myself hard enough that all the blood in my veins would be focused on keeping my heart working instead of screaming at me that I was the biggest fucking idiot in the entire world for how I’d acted.

But it wasn’t happening yet.

When I ignored Finn’s calls all week, I hadn’t felt the slightest shred of guilt.

When Scotty’s went unanswered too, he showed up at my doorstep, and now guilt was all I felt.

“You’re a peach today,” Scotty said. From the end table next to him, he picked up a dirty plate and grimaced at what was left on the surface. “What happened while I was gone?”

I slammed the kitchen cupboard closed once the peroxide was back on the shelf. “Nope. Not talking about it.”

He hooted. “Oh man, whoever she was, she did a number on you, didn’t she?”

Coming around the corner, I pointed a finger at him. “Old man, did I just say I didn’t want to talk about it?”

“Tough shit, kid.” He held up his hands. “I don’t see anyone else lining up to help you with your problems.”

“I don’t have any problems, except that I left half my leg on the road.”

Whistling under his breath, Scotty folded his arms and gave me that stare that I hated so much. It was a stare he

reserved for moments when he thought I was being unnecessarily stubborn, when I wouldn't work on a trick that he thought I was ready for. When I wouldn't push myself as hard as he knew I could be pushed. Normally, it took a while, but I'd begrudgingly admit he was right. Do the trick for the thousandth time until my body knew every tuck and hold, and my muscles burned from the exhaustion. Do a course one more time even though my knees and back burned in protest.

But this time, I met his stare with my own. I knew this man as well as I knew anyone, and when I saw the disappointment in his eyes, I was the first to look away.

The screen on my phone lit up on the battered coffee table that held all my back issues of *Sports Illustrated*, and Scotty leaned forward to squint at the screen.

"Golden Boy," he read. His eyes lifted to mine. "Says four missed calls."

I leaned my head back against the couch and closed my eyes. "Yeah, he's been a real pain in my ass this week. Not the only one, I might add."

"Oh geez, people are worried about you. How rough you have it."

Opening my eyes, I pointed at the phone. "He's not worried about me. He is trying to cover his ass because if it weren't for him, I'd actually be ..." I stopped myself before I blurted it out. If it weren't for him, I'd actually be happy right now.

I'd be with *her*.

I could've spent the past four days with Claire, getting to know her, talking to her on the phone, seeing what she looked like in my bed. Pinching the bridge of my nose, I willed my mind to stop cycling around those thoughts because it didn't matter. It was one weekend of my life, and that was it.

I'd get over it.

I'd get over her.

My phone lit up again, and I sighed. “I don’t know what he could possibly want to say to me.”

The recliner squeaked as Scotty leaned forward. “I’m curious too. Hello?”

“What are you doing?” I yelled. “Give me that phone.”

When I tried to swipe for it, he flipped me off. “Finn? Yeah, this is Scotty. I train the grumpy asshole.”

Even though my leg screamed in protest, I stood from the couch and towered over Scott, holding out my hand and giving him my most forbidding glare.

He ignored me. “Hmm. Sure, yeah. Makes sense.”

“Give me the phone, Scott.”

“Great idea, Finn. Yeah. I like it.”

When he handed me the phone, I exhaled heavily. Then I saw the call was already disconnected.

I blinked. “He hung up?”

“Guess so.”

My eyebrows lifted slowly. “What did he say?”

Scotty leaned back in the recliner and let his hands rest on his stomach. “Gosh, I can hardly remember since I’m so old.”

Muttering curses under my breath, I hobbled back into the kitchen and yanked open the fridge. It was the off-season, so if I wanted to have a beer with my lunch, even Scotty wouldn’t stop me.

“Tell me about her.”

I pinched my eyes shut as the first swallow of beer went down like a brick.

The way she laughed slid like fog through my unwilling brain.

The way she smiled.

How she felt under my hands and lips.

What she did to my heart, that horrible waste of an organ that refused to stop thinking about her just yet.

“I can’t,” I managed.

Scotty got out of the chair with a groan, and I braced myself for the interrogation to continue.

But it didn’t. He walked past the kitchen to the apartment door.

“Are you leaving?” I asked.

“Nope.”

Shaking my head, I took another swig of beer. “You and that crazy-ass cat deserve each other.”

He opened the door, and I almost spit out my beer when Golden Boy walked in.

“What the hell are you doing here?” I roared.

The two assholes in my apartment completely ignored me, shaking hands and introducing themselves like they weren’t completely intruding on my privacy. Finn had never come here. Not once.

“Nice place,” he said, looking around the small condo I’d lived in for two years. It wasn’t big, but I had a bed and a kitchen, and view of the mountains out my window. The village of Whistler was like any mountain resort town, big condo and apartment buildings that housed people like me, who chased the snow, and would give up square footage for proximity to what I loved most.

Neither of them flinched when I slammed the beer bottle down on the counter. “You need to go.”

“Not until I talk to you.” My brother lifted his chin, and I felt a begrudging pang of admiration that he was willing to drive up here and face me.

And I hated, hated that I heard Claire’s voice in my head, urging me to give him a chance. Hear what he had to say. Finn had no choice in who our parents were either. And if I ignored the fact that I still wanted to plant my fist in his face for

having years with Claire right in front of him for years, I had to admit that Finn had never treated me with the reserve that his mother did.

I spread my arms out. “Then say it. Let’s get this over with.”

Finn sighed. “Can we sit?”

“Yes,” Scotty agreed. “Let’s sit.”

“You think you get to be a part of this conversation?” I asked him incredulously.

“Hell yeah, I do.” He patted Finn on the back and led him toward the family room. “You owe me, kid. If it weren’t for Agnes, you never would’ve gotten stuck with her in the first place.”

The string of expletives that I hurled at him made his booming laughter fill every corner of the room.

“What’d you do to your leg?” Finn asked when I yanked a stool from the kitchen counter and sat on it.

“Mountain biking,” I told him. “What do you want?”

He exhaled a laugh. “Geez. You’re in as bad a mood as Claire is this week.”

The sound of her name on his lips lit my skin with suppressed rage, feelings that I’d tried to smother all damn week about her. “If you want to escape this impromptu visit without a black eye, how about you not tell me things like that.”

Finn cocked his head. “I only know what Lia told me,” he explained. “I haven’t seen her.”

My shoulders relaxed, and I glared at Scotty when he badly smothered a pleased smile at my reaction.

Knowing my brother hadn’t seen her soothed that immediate caveman reaction that I’d never experienced before her. And wasn’t that insane? I was the one who walked away from her. I was the one who said things that I still hadn’t

forgiven myself for. And one single mention of how she was doing had every proprietary instinct roaring to life inside me.

They were both eyeing me.

“I just want her out of my head, okay?”

Finn raised an eyebrow. Scotty covered his mouth with his hand.

“What? I do. If dicks like you would stop constantly reminding me about ... Claire,” my voice stumbled over her name, “then I’d be able to forget her.”

So why did my whole body seize up with panic at the very idea of that?

Finn took a deep breath. “Bauer, I’ve been a crappy brother in a lot of ways, okay? And you haven’t been much better,” he pointed out carefully. “But I wanted you to hear from me, that even if Claire had some ... crush on me for a while, I didn’t notice and I’ve never, ever looked at her that way.”

Breath was sawing violently in and out of my chest, but I kept all my boiling thoughts inside.

Apparently, he deemed it safe to keep talking because he nodded slowly. “She’s Lia’s twin. And Lia is ... my best friend. It’s like, trying to imagine me and Lia together and it just ...” His voice trailed off. “It doesn’t make sense in my head.”

“You get why it makes me crazy, though, right?” I asked.

“For about a day, sure.” He shrugged. “But I think what you’re doing now? This has nothing to do with me, or whatever she felt before she met you.”

I hooted with laughter. “Nothing to do with you? Pray tell, enlighten me, Future Dr. Davis.”

“I’m no shrink, but Claire is the first woman to make you want something more. And you’d have to put every part of you on the line in order to make something real with her. It’s scary, and you’ve never done it, and you grabbed the most

convenient excuse to make life easier on yourself. That excuse is bullshit, but you'll hold on to it like it's a life raft."

Well.

I glared mightily at him because clearly someone had used their time driving up here to prepare exactly how to knee me in the proverbial balls.

Scotty murmured like he was hearing a good sermon.

He got a glare too.

Finn leaned forward. "What if she had been the one to show at your door?"

The second he said it, my heart reacted without a single thought on my end. Racing, pounding, thumping erratically at the mere mention of her on the other side of that door.

I wanted it so badly.

Wanted her.

"What if you had the chance, right now, to redo that day you guys came back?" Finn continued.

"You can't erase the past," I interrupted. I stood from the stool and paced the room. "No matter how I'd feel if she showed up, or if I could back up time, I can't take back what happened. What she said. What I said. It's done."

"But it doesn't have to be over," he said. "You're such a stubborn jackass, Bauer. She's crazy about you, and look at you! You're a mess because you reacted badly and had a shitty argument. So what? People argue, and they say stupid things, and sometimes we have to be able to forgive them for those things because we know it's more important to move forward."

My hands speared helplessly into my hair, and I shook my head. The feelings taking over my body were almost more than I could handle because they were loud and overwhelming and terrifying.

Not once, as my board balanced on the icy edge before a race, had I felt like this. No matter what I was going to attempt

or how big the stakes were. No competition or award had ever come close to what I felt like was at stake when I thought about the possibility of fixing things with Claire.

“I don’t know ... I don’t know how to make this better,” I admitted quietly. Finally, I looked him full in the face. “What I said to her—”

“Oh, I heard, trust me,” he answered with a wry smile.

“You heard?”

He held up his hands. “I was not the one to crack the window, but yes, I heard.”

“Shit,” I groaned. Just what I wanted to hear.

“You’ll have work to do.”

“That family will toss me out on my ass with two broken legs if I tried to show up again.”

“No, they wouldn’t.” He sounded so sure.

With a lift of my eyebrow, I tried to wait the truth out of him.

He held up his hands. “They won’t. Because if you mean to Claire what I think you do, they’ll get over it. It won’t take them long, and all you have to do is just ... prove that you mean what you say.”

“That’s all?” I asked dryly.

“Yeah. Once you do that, they’ll be in your corner as much as they’re in hers.”

It was almost too much to bear, the kindling of hope that sprang up. I wanted to squash it with two hands and grind it out with my boot because I’d tried so hard to ignore how horrible I’d felt all week, how much I missed her, and the sad truth that I was so relationship-slow at the age of twenty-six that I’d screwed up my first real shot at happiness. The kind of happiness that made a hopeless wretch like me think about forever.

But maybe, just maybe, I hadn’t screwed it up beyond repair.

Finn watched me carefully, as did Scotty.

I shrugged. “So I, what? Show up and apologize and hope she doesn’t slam the door in my face?”

Finn exhaled slowly. “I have a better idea, if you’re willing to come somewhere with me.”

“Where?”

“You won’t want to go at first.”

I eyed him because I could only think of a few places I’d refuse to go with my little brother who was weirdly, inexplicably, trying to help me with this.

“But she’ll be there?” I asked.

Finn nodded. “She will.”

I held Finn’s gaze. “You’ve got yourself a deal.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

CLAIRE

“I KNEW IT,” I whispered to Lia. “I told you I’d be the only one wearing a dress.”

People milled around the center, and all those jerks wearing jeans and leggings and cute T-shirts were like one giant taunt when I thought about the fact that I’d shaved my legs for this.

Lia rolled her eyes. “It’s a sundress, calm down.”

Tugging at the hem, I gave her a mild look. “Says the girl wearing jeans.”

She ignored me, and I conceded the fact that she’d gotten me here, and the fact that I was showered and shaved and wearing something that made me feel pretty was still a freaking miracle.

Yes, the week got better when I started speaking to Lia again, but there was no lying to my heart that things were fixed.

All week, I’d turned my head around and around and around what to do about Bauer.

Bauer, who was haunting my dreams now.

Who hadn’t texted or called.

And who was still the first person I thought about when I woke up. The last person I thought about before I went to sleep.

Lia caught me watching snowboarding competition replays on YouTube the night before, and instead of chastising me, she plopped onto the couch, slung an around my shoulders, and watched quietly alongside me.

And if there were bags under my eyes to match the blue of my dress, it was because the videos I'd watched triggered some serious sex dreams where Bauer was flipping me around in the snow like we were recreating a Cirque du Soleil on ice or something.

I took a deep breath to get those memories out of my head because hello, it was never appropriate to reminisce about one's sex dreams at a party at a community center that helped little kids.

When Lia saw Finn and touched my elbow to let me know she was going off to talk to him, I took a second to study the space.

It was wonderful. Big and bright and airy with colorful murals decorating the walls and spaces for kids to sit and play and create and learn. The framed photos hung on the walls were easier to focus on than the faces of the strangers milling around the room, so I took my time walking along the perimeter, grinning at some of the gap-toothed smiles captured on film.

Whatever Finn's parents' faults were, and they had them, they'd done good work here. And maybe they were one of those couples who were so focused on helping other people's kids that they couldn't even recognize where they'd gone wrong within the four walls of their own home.

I stopped to study a picture when I felt someone approach. My heart sped up before I heard the voice, which didn't belong to Bauer.

"It seems we need to reintroduce ourselves to each other," Richard Harper said softly.

I turned, giving him a sheepish smile. "Did Adele tell you?"

Hands in his pockets, he smiled back. “She did. Just before I handed the check over.”

“Richard,” I said, “I can’t tell you how much it killed me to lie about who I was.”

He glanced at the photo behind me. “Lie is a harsh word, Claire. And I’m not upset at you because it sounds like you were put into a strange position, based on the decisions of a lot of other people. Your sister, Adele, and Bauer,” he said, watching my face carefully.

There was no controlling my expression when he said Bauer’s name, so I looked down. “That’s true. But I was a guest in your home, and I wasn’t raised to deceive people, so I hope you can forgive me.”

“Already forgiven.” He rocked on his heels. “Adele and Tom might’ve been a little ... overzealous in their approach, thinking I needed someone to impress me in order to listen to what they had to say, but even if they went about it in the wrong way, they’re doing a lot of good here. And you, young lady, will do a lot of good someday too. I hope you realize that.”

“I hope so.” I smiled.

“I told Adele she should hire you, actually.”

“You did?”

He nodded. “Your passion for kids, your background, you’d be a perfect ally for children who could desperately use one.”

As I looked around the space, it was easy to see myself there. Except for the tie to Bauer. Because the truth was, I still didn’t know exactly how to approach that. And working for his parents might be a strange connection if he refused to ever see me again.

Because no matter what Lia said, I could show up on his doorstep, and he still might’ve decided that we were completely done.

One weekend of fun because he genuinely believed that was all he was capable of. And I didn't know if my heart could handle hearing that from him again.

"Is Bauer here?" Richard asked.

Somehow, I kept my smile in place. "I'm not sure."

His eyes searched my face until he nodded. "Ahh."

"Another deception, I'm afraid."

Richard hummed. "Oh, I'm not sure I believe that. Bauer Davis strikes me as the type of man who wouldn't be able to pretend anything."

I sighed. "Maybe he wasn't. But ... either way, it wasn't real yet. When we were there."

"But it became real?" he asked gently.

I nodded. "It did. And now"—I shrugged—"it's hard to think about him." I laughed under my breath. "I'm sorry, I'm sure you don't want to hear about my relationship drama."

He waved it off. "I liked you two. And if you remember, we started this whole thing because you told me what was on your mind."

"True," I conceded.

"I think Bauer has had a hard time of things," Richard said. "He reminds me a lot of myself when I was younger. Maybe that's why I like him so much."

"Stubborn as all hell?" I asked.

He nodded. "Yup. Anyone who's reached success has to be stubborn. Tenacious. Refuse to back down. And I like that fire in him. But it makes it hard to let anyone in when you look at every part of your life that way."

The truth of it made me sigh heavily. "I have my work cut out for me, don't I?"

Richard gave me a kind smile. "I know I said it the first time I met you, Claire Ward, but I'll say it again. I wish I'd had someone like you on my side when I was younger." He

patted my arm. “I laid down all my chips in order to grow my fortune. And I’ve been successful in that, but that money doesn’t keep you warm at night, and there are many days when I’m forced to admit that for a long time, I believed the lie that I was better off by myself.”

“But how can someone else force you to confront that truth?” I asked. “It’s easy for you to say that, but I can’t make Bauer open himself to me.”

Now, his smile was rueful. “Not from here, you can’t.”

I slid my hands into my hair and shook my head. “Everyone makes it sound so simple.”

“Love is always a risk, Claire. Always. Every day, even when you’re together, because the day you stop choosing your partner is the day you risk losing them. That’s the truth in love and relationships and business and life. It translates across every line. We make choices in what matters to us, but not everyone is brave enough to take that step without knowing we have someone ready to take it with us.”

“Richard,” I said slowly, “I think you are the most relationship smart single man I’ve ever met.” He laughed, but I saw the blush cover his cheeks. Impulsively, I went up on tiptoe to give him a soft kiss on the cheek. “Thank you. I needed to hear that.”

“You’re welcome, Claire.” He tucked his hands back into his pockets. “Now what?”

I exhaled slowly. “Well, now I think I need to steal my sister’s car and drive up to Whistler.”

Richard looked over my shoulder and grinned. “Or maybe you should hold off on grand theft auto for now.”

When I turned around slowly, it didn’t take me long to see him.

Bauer hadn’t seen me yet, and my heart clenched painfully when I saw him reach up and tug nervously on the tie he was wearing. He hated dressing up and coming to this place would be hard for him, but I knew, seeing him framed in the entrance, that he was here for me.

My smile was endless, and my heart soared even further than that to a place I wasn't even sure had a name. That was how far it was beyond any definition I could think of.

The only thing that could've tugged my attention away from Bauer was my sister hustling to my side with a devious grin on her face.

"You little sneak," I murmured.

"Guess who's happy about wearing a dress now?"

"You did this?"

Lia shrugged. "I kinda owed you. Finn helped."

I gave her a quick squeeze. "Thank you."

"Go get him, C." Her eyes were bright with tears, and I felt her happiness for me like a sweet wave.

No one paid me much attention as I crossed the room toward Bauer, who still hadn't quite walked inside. Because he wanted to know I was there, waiting.

His gaze scanned the room, then came to rest on me.

Bauer's chest expanded on a deep breath, and his eyes warmed in his handsome face. His dark hair was slicked back neatly, and he'd shaved. The white shirt covering his chest was starched and neat, the tie a color of blue that matched my eyes.

I loved him.

And I knew without a single word exchanged that he loved me too. He never would've shown up if he didn't.

Bauer strode into the room, and I finally noticed that clutched in his other hand was a basket with a long handle.

"Hi," I said quietly when he stopped in front of me.

But for a moment, he was quiet, just drinking me in. His hand came up slowly, and he slid his thumb along my cheekbone.

"I'm the biggest idiot in the entire world."

My laughter was loud, and Bauer smiled as I nuzzled my face into his palm. "No, you're not," I argued. "You were

surprised and out of your element, and you should have heard it from me.”

“Don’t let me off the hook, princess.” He dropped his hand, but his eyes were still fixed on my lips. “I’m so sorry for what I said to you, and I plan on apologizing to Logan and Paige for walking out of their house. I have no excuse.”

“Okay.”

He smiled. “Just okay?”

My hands found their way up his chest, a slow trek, and I relished the heat of his skin coming through the material of his shirt. I only stopped when my palm was over his thudding heart. “Yeah. I don’t think either one of us needs fancy words or big speeches about what happened. I just ... I just need you to know that I’m in this with you, even if you screw up, which you will. Just like I will too.”

Bauer plucked my hand off his chest and pressed a fervent kiss into my palm. I wrapped my other arm around his waist, he slid his arm around my back and tugged me into his waiting embrace.

Everything settled into place, blissful warmth filling all those cold places that I’d not known existed until him. Whatever happened to bring this, him, into my life, I was so thankful, I could hardly think of a way to process it.

“I’m so in love with you, Claire,” he whispered into my ear.

I squeezed him even more tightly, my forehead resting against the side of his neck as I breathed him in. “I love you too.”

Bauer pulled back, his face split in a massive smile. “You really think we can do this?”

“I’d like to see who could stop us.”

His chest rumbled with pleased laughter, and I wished we weren’t surrounded by dozens of people. Half of whom were staring curiously at the little scene unfolding in the middle of the room.

Oblivious to anything but me, Bauer lowered his head and brushed his mouth once, twice over mine. The sound he emitted—from those two small kisses—gave me goosebumps. It was a hum of contentment, a growl of satisfaction, and I wanted to record it so that I could listen to it on a loop for the rest of my life.

Exerting pressure on the back of his head, I deepened the kiss, letting my tongue brush against his just once. I sighed into his mouth happily, which made him smile into the kiss.

“Do you want to get outta here?” I murmured against his lips.

Bauer pulled back and shook his head. “Look at you, ready to bail on the big party.”

“Not bail,” I explained, “maybe just ... leave early.”

Bauer smiled. “Before you open your present?”

In his free hand, he was still clutching the small basket. I smiled. “What is it?”

“The reason I was late,” he told me. “I thought it would be easier to find.”

Brow furrowed, I release his waist to take the basket. It was small, with a small eye hook keeping the lid closed. Something moved inside, and I gave him a quick look.

He was grinning widely.

That was when I heard the teeniest, tiniest meow I’d ever heard in my life.

“You didn’t,” I breathed.

I couldn’t open the basket fast enough. In my haste to get the latch undone, I almost dropped it. He took pity on me with a laugh and braced the bottom with one hand. Carefully, I lifted the lid, and the small patchwork face that popped out had me gasping in delight.

It had bright green eyes and brown ears, long white whiskers, and orange patches on its face.

The kitten mewed pitifully as I lifted it out of the basket and cradled it to my chest. “Oh, my goodness,” I whispered. “Aren’t you the most beautiful baby I’ve ever seen.”

“You said you wanted one that looked just like Agnes,” Bauer said. He smoothed a big hand over the top of its head. “But I had to make sure this one didn’t hate me first.”

“You got me a kitten,” I said.

He shrugged, looking shy for the first time since he set eyes on me. “I’d give you anything you want, princess. Anything to make you smile like you are right now.”

The cat pushed his head against my chin, and I laughed, so full of love, it didn’t even seem fair.

“Just you,” I told him.

“So, I can keep the cat with me in Whistler?”

I kissed its little head. “No.”

He laughed loudly. “You’re gonna have to name her.”

“Ahh ...” I glanced down at the little green-eyed face and grinned. “A girl, are you?”

Bauer scratched under her chin, and she meowed again.

“Belle,” I said.

His answering smile was massive. “How’d you know?”

“Know what?” Belle licked my chin with her sandpaper tongue, and I laughed.

“My number one favorite Disney princess.” His eyes twinkled mischievously. “Why do you think I started calling you that?”

He took my mouth in a slow sweet kiss, and when we pulled back, I felt the eyes on us.

“Should we go say hi?” he said.

I glanced over my shoulder. Lia was grinning like a dope, as was Finn. Next to them was Richard, who didn’t look any less ecstatic.

“Richard didn’t seem very surprised to see you,” I mused out loud.

Bauer wrapped an arm around my shoulders as we started in their direction. “That’s because he called me this morning.”

“He did?”

He nodded. “Apparently, he thought we’d have more time to talk up at his place, which is why we never covered his reason for inviting me in the first place.”

I stopped walking. “Why’s that?”

Bauer lifted a chin in greeting at the man in question. “I guess he’s the primary investor in an up-and-coming snowboarding manufacturer as of about two weeks ago.”

“Really?” I smiled. “And?”

“And he wants a hotheaded, stubborn asshole to be the new face of their company.”

“Bauer!” I exclaimed, giving him as much of a hug as I could with a wriggling kitten clutched to my chest. “That’s incredible.”

“It is,” he admitted. His cheeks were endearingly pink from my praise. “But it’s still not the best part.”

“There’s more?”

He shook his head, eyes tracing every feature on my face. “There’s you. That’ll always be the best part of my day.”

“Total boyfriend material,” I whispered through my face-splitting grin.

When we faced the room together, I grabbed his hand, curled my fingers through his, and squeezed.

EPILOGUE

BAUER

TWO MONTHS LATER

“BAUER, this is getting completely out of hand.”

I loved when Claire did that thing. When she set her hands on her hips and looked at me all *I am serious right now*. It was like getting reprimanded by the hot teacher you always had a crush on.

“She needs it.”

“She absolutely does not need it.”

Because she was standing there like she was, looking like she was, I tugged her to me for a hard kiss. “I like spoiling my girls rotten,” I said against her lips, sweet and smooth. “I didn’t hear you complaining last night when I bought that thing from that shop.”

Claire snorted.

When the spoiled girl in question wandered out of Claire’s bedroom, she scampered over to the bag waiting on the floor next to my feet. Her tail twitched while she sniffed along the top edge.

Before I sat on the floor to open it, I smacked Claire’s butt.

Bag cast aside as soon as I had my back braced against the couch, I pulled the box out and started opening the sides. Belle curled around my leg and butted her head against my thigh when I didn’t immediately scratch her head. “Hey pretty girl,”

I cooed. “I bought you something new for when Mommy is ignoring you to do her homework. She’s so mean, isn’t she?”

Claire sighed heavily, which made me grin.

“It’s a master’s program, Bauer, and I’m not ignoring her. Unlike you, I think the cat will be just fine if she’s not doted on every single second of the day.”

When I pulled the wooden contraption out of the box and set it on the floor for Belle to inspect it, Claire dissolved into helpless laughter.

“Where the hell did you find that?” she said as she wiped tears from the corners of her eyes.

“The greatest website ever. Where else would I find a cat whack-a-mole toy?”

Belle studied the setup, cautiously sticking her nose into the first of the holes. Weaving her small body around to the front, she stared at the wooden levers before pushing on one with her paw.

When a small blue mole popped up out of the corresponding hole, she scrambled back. I grinned up at Claire, who was shaking her head.

“See? She loves it.”

“You’re gonna go broke buying her all these toys.”

I stood with a groan.

“Your knee?” she asked. “Should I tell Scotty to take it easy on your poor, poor body? He’s training you too hard.”

Pointing at the offending spot, I leaned in for another quick kiss. “My hip. Which is your fault, not Scotty’s.”

Claire smiled. Given we still lived about two and a half hours apart, we made up the time we missed during the week on the weekends. And we made it up in spades.

But that would change, soon.

“You still okay checking out that apartment with me?” I asked her.

“Yup. I’m done with my paper, so I’m good to go whenever you are.”

Claire finished her bachelor’s and slid straight into an online Child and Adolescent Behavioral Health Master’s program with the University of South Florida, and her work ethic blew my mind. The times she did have to finish an assignment when I was over, sometimes I’d just sit back and stare in complete awe of her while she worked on a paper or did research.

Hot teacher fantasy, I’m telling you. I begged her to wear black-framed glasses and stick her hair up in a bun one night, and she did, after only a little persuasion. I broke her desk that night, but how was I to know that it wasn’t meant to bear the weight of two adults?

Given Belle was fully entranced with her new toy, one of about a dozen I’d bought her in the past couple of months, we ducked out of the apartment before she could dart out of the opened door with us.

“She won’t even notice we’re gone,” Claire said. She liked to tease me about being a cat dad, but really, the timing of my gift couldn’t have been better. Lia had left for London a couple of weeks earlier, which meant Claire was living alone for the first time in her entire life.

If either of us had felt ready for the next step, I probably would’ve moved in with her, but hell ... she was only twenty-one, and we’d only been dating for a couple of months. And I needed to wrap up things in Whistler before I could relocate closer to Seattle.

Snoqualmie was a perfect compromise. I had a mountain to keep me busy, and I’d be less than thirty miles away from Claire.

Closer was definitely better.

I couldn’t believe how much I missed her during the week when we were apart. I wanted to be able to grab lunch with her on a Tuesday. Or stop by to take a nap with her on a Thursday. See a movie on a Monday because we both had the day open.

Date things.

Boyfriend and girlfriend things.

Because as it turned out, Claire was right about one thing. I was fucking boyfriend material. I loved doing all that sappy shit for her that I never could have imagined doing before.

Make her breakfast in bed.

Wash her hair for her when we shared the shower at her apartment.

Buy her flowers from the market simply because the color reminded me of her eyes.

And I loved the girlfriend stuff she did for me.

Call me just to see how my day was.

Rub my back and shoulders when I was sore.

Make sure I was eating right since I was training so hard leading up to the upcoming season. Every point I earned at the different competitions got me one step closer to my first Olympic team spot, and she knew it.

Because she cared enough to know.

I was starting to realize, as I began to think about our relationship in terms of the months we'd been together instead of weeks, that the reason I was boyfriend material was because of who my girlfriend was.

Anything good in me that started growing through the cracks, it was because of her.

“What are we seeing today?” she asked as I steered the Jeep onto the highway.

“The two-bedroom by the park.” Handing her my phone, I watched her type in the passcode. “It’s bookmarked.”

“Oh yeah, I liked that this one was on a cul-de-sac.”

I nodded. “Closer to the highway too.”

Sliding my hand over her thigh as we drove, I did what I always did when Claire and I were on our way to check out a place for me. It was our fourth possibility, and before I even

walked in the door, I thought about how we might use that space.

Because even if she wasn't living with me, I wanted her to feel at home where I laid my head. I already knew the second bedroom would be used as an office/study space for her, though I was willing to concede a fold-out couch in case Scotty crashed at my place.

Or Finn.

Very, very slowly, he and I had been trying to repair years of what our status quo had been. I wasn't ready to pretend Adele and my dad were my new BFFs, but she'd been surprisingly happy for me and Claire. She even hired Claire on as an intern to help build curriculum for certain community programs.

This was what it felt like, I thought, with her hand entwined in my own as we drove to a place I'd imagine for both of us to start building a life with someone.

My fingers tightened over hers, and I caught the edges of her smile as her face captured the sun coming in the open windows.

"I love you," I told her. Simply because I couldn't not tell her. The words just ... refused to stay inside me, now that I knew what they meant.

Claire glanced over at me with a soft smile on her lips. "I love you too."

Most days, I didn't know whether fate or destiny or God or just a bunch of random shit were what brought me to Claire. What brought Claire to me.

No matter what it was, she had me. And she always would.

LIA

London

THE RAIN CAME out of nowhere, and like a rookie, I'd left my little umbrella back at my flat.

My *flat*, not my apartment, because I was in London, and we called it a flat, thank you very much.

Even though I pulled the hood of my jacket up, it didn't do much to protect me from the sudden downpour, so when I looked up and caught sight of a dark wood sign for a pub on the corner, I quickly jogged around a group of tourists on a sightseeing walk and ducked through the heavy wooden door.

It was quiet inside, still hours before the post-work rush would have a place like this packed to the brim with men wearing perfectly tailored suits in want of a pint.

God bless London, because really, British men knew how to wear suits. Sure, I'd only been here for two weeks, just long enough to fully recover from my jet lag, learn how to ride the Tube, but it did not take long to recognize how far superior they were to American men in that regard.

An old man wiping down the gleaming wood bar nodded to me as I slid up to a stool. "What can I get for ya?"

I glanced behind him at what was on tap. "I'll have a Stella, please."

He nodded, deftly pulling a glass under the correct tap. "Be wanting anything to eat, dear?"

I smiled. Would the accents and the casual endearments ever get old? "No thanks. Just the beer for now."

He set it in front of me. "Cheers."

After my first sip, I glanced around the pub. It was quiet with only a couple of tables occupied by other patrons. I was by myself at the bar.

Alone.

My first two weeks here had been a whirlwind, yes, but I'd still spent a lot of my time alone. Which was ... weird for me. The busy-ness and exhaustion of getting used to the time zone change had kept that loneliness from swamping me.

But sitting alone at the bar, I felt a visceral pain in my heart, missing Claire. The rest of my family. I started pulling my phone out when I heard his voice behind me.

“Can you put the match on for me, Carl?”

The bartender nodded, giving a quick smile to whoever belonged to that deep, glorious, accented voice.

As Carl flipped on the mounted TV facing the bar, I kept my eyes on my beer, careful not to turn and gawk. Because he sounded hot. Really, really, grade A level ten hot, and I didn’t want to pout if he turned out not to be grade A level hot.

Leaving a seat open between us, he slid his tall, broad frame onto a stool and folded his large hands together in front of him on the bar. Ink crawled up his forearms, as did ropey muscles and strong veins.

Have you ever tried to check out a man without him noticing? It takes skill, people.

His attention never once wavered from the soccer game that appeared on the screen, on the emerald green grass and brightly colored jerseys of the players passing the ball back and forth before the start of the game.

Match.

Whatever.

I snorted into my beer.

“Not a fan of football?” he asked.

Instead of turning fully to see if his face was as hot as his voice and hands and forearms, I kept my eyes forward, just like he seemed to be doing.

“Football, yes,” I said. “The *real* one.”

He whistled at the jab. I tried to hide my grin by taking another sip of my beer.

When he replied, his voice was dry, mild amusement hanging off every deliciously spoken syllable. “Hate to break it to you, love, but that sport you Americans call football is *not* the real one.”

Now I did turn, because Mr. Hot Voice and Muscley Forearms didn't want to go down that road. And when I did, I froze.

The face matched everything else. It matched, surpassed, blew the voice and muscles out of the water.

And when I smiled at him, he did some turning of his own.

His gaze studied my face carefully for something. Whatever he saw caused him to relax. "What?" he asked.

I pointed at the TV. "I don't think this is an argument you want to get in with me."

He licked his bottom lip, and reflexively, I felt my thighs clench together. His eyes, an indecipherable color in the dim light of the bar, never strayed from mine. "Carl, put another drink for the lady on my tab, if you please."

I raised an eyebrow. "Who said I wanted another one?"

His thumb tapped the surface of the bar. His lips curved into a devious smile that made my toes curl inside my shoes. "Because I'm about to give you an education, love."

Floored, Lia's book, and the third standalone in the Ward Family series,

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Let me start with a note to my readers who were expecting Finn to be the hero. I tried. I REALLY, REALLY TRIED. I tried for a couple of months, actually. After writing a really solid chunk of words, I hit a wall. No matter how many pep talks I gave myself (or got from writer friends), I could not move forward with this book, and it's the first time that's happened in the 8 years since I started writing. Something was wrong, and no matter what I tried, the story wasn't working.

The reason I dedicated this book to Fiona Cole is because it was in one particularly violent, emotional voice message rant about why my brain was broken and why I couldn't write this book, I said something like "I just freaking wish that freaking Finn had a freaking brother or something and I could've written him."

I stopped. I let my brain catch up with what had just come out of my mouth. And INSTANTLY, I knew that's what I needed to do. Everything clicked into place, as Bauer was starting to form in my head. I threw away every word I'd written. I started from scratch, and felt amazing about the story that I had plotted.

Then the world exploded. LOL. Writing a book during quarantine, when I was trying to home-school my kids and manage a really anxious time to live in this world was not easy. Actually, it was really, really hard at first. I had to keep my blinders on, and let Fiona yell at me that unless writing made me feel WORSE, I had to just freaking do it.

So that's what I did. And I could not have done that without her.

That's the thing about this job. Yes, it's solitary. No one could write this book for me, but on the flip side of the coin, I could NOT have written it and written it on schedule, if it wasn't for the friends I've made through this book world. Fiona was one, and the others, who encouraged and listened and commiserated and cracked the whip (Kathryn Andrews, Kandi Steiner, Amy Daws, Brittainy Cherry, M.E. Carter, and Staci Hart), THANK YOU is entirely insufficient.

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To my reader group, The Sorensen Sorority, for being AWESOME.

And as always, to my Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

Philippians 4:6-7

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Karla Sorensen has been an avid reader her entire life, preferring stories with a happily-ever-after over just about any other kind. And considering she has an entire line item in her budget for books, she realized it might just be cheaper to write her own stories. She still keeps her toes in the world of health care marketing, where she made her living pre-babies. Now she stays home, writing and mommy-ing full time (this translates to almost every day being a 'pajama day' at the Sorensen household...don't judge). She lives in West Michigan with her husband, two exceptionally adorable sons, and big, shaggy rescue dog.



Photo credit: Perrywinkle Photography

