

NO COOLDOWN FOR

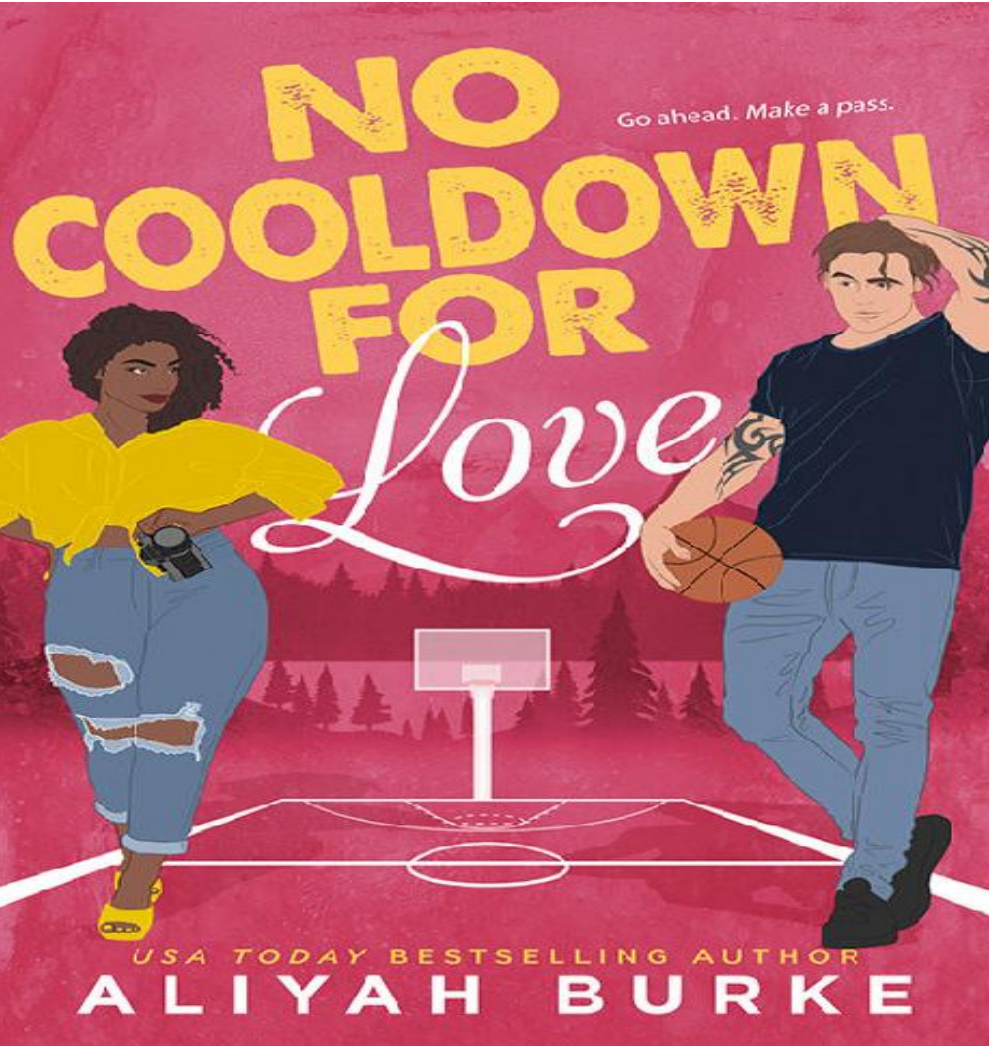
Go ahead. Make a pass.

Love



USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

ALIYAH BURKE



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FOR
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To Opal,

I miss you more every single day. Tally Ho! Run free, my sweet girl.

Chapter One

Mitchell Anderson walked around his kitchen as his two best friends in the world moved through their usual reactions to his latest announcement of his ex-wife's antics. Tully Faulkner, ex-professional hockey player, and Linc Conner, ex-professional baseball player. The best two friends he could ever have and part of the reason he no longer lost his shit when dealing with The Viper.

That and meditation.

"Let me get this straight," Tully said as he pulled out a massive amount of food from the refrigerator to begin assembling a sandwich. "According to The Viper, *you're* a fucking bastard because you divorced her—due to her infidelity—but also because you won't give her any more money? That about right?"

Mitchell leaned on the marble countertop with a nod. "You got it. My fault because I don't understand what it was like for her." A self-deprecating laugh escaped. "Years I was married to her, loved her, and it was hard for *her*."

"Fuck her," Linc snapped. "She should be happy she wasn't dragged through the mud for all the whoring around she did."

Mitchell joined his friends in making a sandwich. "No, no, Linc. That was her *supporting* my career."

Like she stood in the room with him, he could see her plain as day and hear the voice he'd once believed he loved. Only now, it was akin to rusted nails being ripped over his skin. Like she was using an ancient, unkempt Shuko on him.

The room quieted as if he'd stepped into a vacuum. Hell, even the air around him got colder. Perfectly coifed hair. A skintight dress which didn't leave *anything* to the imagination. And the six-carat oval diamond set he'd given her. But it had been her eyes that cut deep.

They'd been hungry. Not for him, he'd learned, but for the money he could give her. Back when he'd been foolish and in

love, he'd believed that unquenchable desire had been for him.

Fingers snapped before his face, yanking him off the road his memory had reluctantly dragged him down.

He blinked. "What?"

Linc scowled. "Lost you for a moment."

Mitchell groaned and leaned over the counter, pressing his cheek into the cold marble. "She's in my head. *All* the damn time, and if it's not her, it's my mother."

Tully slid a plate toward him piled high with a sandwich, followed by a bag of chips. The man scratched his chin, muscles flexing in his arm.

"Look, we all know she turned sleeping with teammates and other players into a profession. But you've gotten away from her. Yes, it sucks that she did that to you. Made you look like an ass."

He bolted up. "Wait a minute. An ass? I was a fool, sure, but how the fuck does her cheating on me for years make *me* look like an ass?"

The men looked at each other before glaring at him. "Because you ignored us. Ergo, you're an ass." Linc shrugged as he picked up his sandwich and took a bite.

"There are days I hate you fuckers."

Tully gestured to his body. "Liar, you love all this."

Mitchell snorted. "Not that much."

Both stopped and watched Linc put away his sandwich like it had been nothing more than a tiny appetizer.

"Jesus, man. Don't you eat anymore?"

Linc wiped his hands off after demolishing his sandwich, then raked his fingers through his hair. "Unlike some of us in this room, I worked up an appetite last night." A smirk. "And again this morning. And about sixty minutes before I came here."

"Don't make him jealous, Linc," Tully said, taking a large

bite. “He’s not getting any.”

That was the truth. He wasn’t, and after *The Viper*, it was the last thing he was looking for. He looked at a woman and pictured his ex-wife.

Shawnee Deveraux.

He breathed out slowly and realized the high-pitched squalling that had made him cringe was only in his head. Even though it sounded as if the woman stood in the room with him.

Slow breathing.

Stay calm.

She wasn’t here. They weren’t even in the same state and he would do well to remember that.

His friends watched him but didn’t say a damn word while he regained control. “I have no use for a woman right now. I’m still trying to get rid of the last one. Who, according to the screeching voicemail she left, and my mother’s subsequent calls, claims her life was hard as my wife and I will never know what it was like for her.”

What a crock of shit.

He sure as hell knew what it had been like for her. Unlimited money at her fingertips for whatever she wanted. Which was why she was determined to keep her claws in him. She hadn’t realized what her infidelity would net her. Loss of *her* god—which was money. The other men she’d fucked had seen her as nothing more than a quick lay. They hadn’t wanted to marry her and give her access like he had.

Bastards had been far smarter than him.

With a deep breath, he faced the window and focused on the fat snowflakes falling faster to the ground. His sandwich sat by his hand, forgotten.

Right now, he needed a meditation session. A long one. Dealing with that woman drained him and not in a good way.

“I’m curious,” Tully said, leaning over the wide island and dragging Mitchell’s plate closer to him. “What more is she

thinking to get? She's already taken half of what you got for playing ball. No offense, but she's lucky you gave her that, all things considered. That's enough. The two of you are *divorced*."

Thank God.

"I know we are, and trust me, had I listened to you two and not married her in the first place, I would have even more money. And *no* battle scars."

Because damn, those scars were deep.

"She still thinks she gets Inicio, or rather proceeds from it?" Linc popped open a soda and drained nearly half before reaching for Mitchell's chips. "Because that's not in your name."

"She feels that I withheld it from her and because it's computer things and 'big money' she should get part. She's going to the papers, which means people are after me about interviews and I'm not doing them. I'll only do one when I finally take the company back from you two and am ready to make my announcement."

Linc muttered something entirely unflattering about her before he demolished the bag of chips. Mitchell didn't argue. He agreed with his friends. That woman, well, she wasn't worth a damn in his mind.

"And since I've paid her a shit ton, she can afford a lot of expensive lawyers."

Tully wiped some mustard from the corner of his mouth and belched. "Sounds to me like they're expecting a big payout when she wins." He smirked. "Which she won't."

"She's not wrong, Inicio is making a lot of money." Linc again.

And dammit. It was *his* money. Two more months. That was it. Then the company would officially be returned to him and he wouldn't have to worry that his ex-wife could get her hooks in his profits. His legal team had suggested waiting a certain amount of time before putting it in his name and he wasn't going to ignore that advice.

“Not my money.” He looked around the kitchen, one of the few rooms in the house that was finished.

Thankfully, he’d had the foresight to put everything in his best friends’ names. Also, he was blessed to have Tully and Linc who he could trust with such a favor.

“No, it’s not.” Linc went to the fridge and opened it.

“Christ, do you have a fucking tapeworm?”

“Told you. Hungry.” Linc rooted around before pulling out some leftover pasta.

“She’s complaining that I want her to suffer because of, how did she put it? Oh yeah, *that one little indiscretion*. It’s purely that I’m spiteful.”

“She start crying?” Tully’s words were drenched in disgust.

Mitchell put his back to the sprawling view of his backyard, currently covered in snowflakes. “Of course she did. And when that failed to stir a response, she went to anger.” He looked at his left hand, the tan line where he had worn his ring no longer visible. “Then she began chucking things.”

“Hope she knows you’re not replacing anything she broke. None of us are.”

“That woman, Tully, I don’t know anymore.”

He swallowed his snort.

One.

Little.

Indiscretion.

Like hell.

“Meaning?”

He stared at the ex-hockey player who, with Linc, was polishing off the leftover pasta.

“The fact that she is trying to lump all of the men she cheated on me with into one is fucking hilarious. If that’s what she called fucking some—and that is estimating lightly—of my teammates, not to mention the multiple men from rival

teams.”

Slow, deep breathing.

“I told her we have attorneys for a reason. Use mine. Don’t call me again. Then I hung up on her.”

Linc watched him, black eyes unflinching as he held a fork in his mouth. “And your temper?”

“I didn’t lose it.” A shrug. “Not completely.” He returned to the large island and braced his hands on it. “I wanted to rage and call her more names than books in the Bible.”

They nodded.

He smacked a hand on the counter. “I want a medal. I deserve sainthood. Actually, I’d be good with a fucking cookie.”

Like a large one, right out of the oven so the chocolate chips were still gooey and warm. Not that it had to be chocolate chip. He would be happy with any type of cookie.

Great. Now he wanted a cookie. And he didn’t have any in the house.

“Dammit!”

Linc smirked. “He doesn’t have any cookies in the house.”

“Fuck off,” he snarled. “I don’t have a woman who loves me, baking me sweets like you two do.” He held up a hand to hold off their next words. “I don’t want one, either. Bad enough The Viper is going to drive me to change my number.”

Both their phones rang and he knew their women were calling them. They glanced at him and waited, eyebrows up. He waved them on, not wanting to interrupt any more of their time with family. Especially with it being the lull between Christmas and New Year’s.

He had no use for relationships now, but he was thrilled for his friends. It hadn’t escaped his notice that the women they had fallen for were nothing like The Viper he’d married. The woman his mom had pushed him toward. Had approved of.

Shawnee had been the perfect WAG. Wore the perfect

clothing, never a hair out of place. A size double zero. She'd loved the power that came with being married to one of the hottest players in the NBA. He snorted. The only reason she'd stayed with him when they'd first gotten together was because she could see his potential. And he was fairly certain she would have dumped him with remarkable swiftness if he'd not rocketed up the fame ladder.

It wasn't a world he wanted part of anymore. She'd sucked the joy out of it for him.

All he wanted to do was run his company, Inicio, and develop video games. Play the occasional pickup game and help out at his buddy Linc's community center. Somewhere down the road, perhaps he'd take the risk and put his heart on the line again. Maybe.

"Go," he instructed. "Go home to your families." He took their dishes and put them in the dishwasher. "I need a change of scenery."

He really did. Snow fell from the sky, fast and heavy. It didn't matter, he needed to get away.

"I'm heading out. You two keep an eye on the place for me."

They stood in front of him, expressions serious.

"You going to be okay, man?"

Forcing a smile he didn't feel, Mitchell nodded. "I will be. First, I'm going to get myself a goddamn cookie. Then I'm going to get out of town for a while. Avoid my mother and, well, take a breather. I'm going to be gone for a few weeks. At least."

They nodded in understanding. After hugging both, he walked them out to the front porch.

"You call us if you need anything." Tully walked backward until he hit the bumper of his fiancée Dawson's Acadia. "Don't be a prat like that one and go it alone purely because you think you need to."

Linc flipped Tully off but didn't disagree. Mitchell waited on the porch until they both drove off, Tully in the SUV and

Linc in his jacked-up truck.

Back inside, he packed for a few weeks away. After tossing two bags in the back of his SUV, Mitchell jogged back inside. He started the engine from the kitchen as he made sure the house was good to leave, even though for a year or so now it had been in a state of reconstruction.

His mother, Vera, called as he got in his vehicle. He declined her call and drove away from Rock Falls. He knew the reason she was calling. *She* had reached out with tears and a fake simper which had gotten his mother on her side. Not that it truly mattered. His mother had always thought Shawnee was perfect. *He* was the fuckup, not his cheating, money-hungry ex.

• • •

Two weeks, four days and numerous ignored calls from both his mother and his ex-wife later, he was on his way home from a vacation in Canada. He'd gone to visit a friend, an ex-NBA player who was now one of the stars of the Canadian Elite Basketball League—the CEBL. It had been great to play the game with friends and enjoy himself, his phone shut off and ignored other than when he'd checked in with Linc and Tully.

The mountains were damn near impassable. The narrow two-lane roads were covered by heavy, wet snow and smart people weren't out. Explained why *he* was on the road. He snorted and shook his head. The driving was slow so he was taking his time. The trip had been worth it, even given the current conditions.

All those years in California and he still considered himself a New Englander and there were some things that were a given. Driving in shitty snow was one. Part of the reason he had climbed into *this* vehicle when he left Rock Falls instead of his sports car.

Slowing around another curve, he tapped the brakes as he saw a car upside down, headlights pointing into the woods, angled unsteadily as it hovered off the road, ready to slide out of sight.

He touched his call button and dialed emergency services. When they answered, he didn't waste time. "I'm on Route 5 heading toward Darnell, about twenty-five miles from Wiltshire, and there's an overturned car. Off the road, but you're going to want to send a tow when you can."

Mitchell parked the SUV, leaving it running as he put in his earbuds. No way the person, or people, in that car would survive the night. The back end of the vehicle was smashed in, as was the front. The snow had increased and he realized even *he* wasn't going to make it home—so-called expert New England driver or not.

"I'm checking to see about the passengers." Hazards on, he climbed out, shivering from the biting wind and wet snow.

"Sir, you need to stay in—"

Yeah, that wasn't going to happen. He hung up and slid to where the car hovered.

"Anyone hear me?"

"Help." A woman's low drawling voice reached him.

He slogged through the deep snow. "Are you the only one in here?"

"Yes. My leg's pinned." A slight wobble in her voice but she'd not succumbed to hysterics.

Moving with caution, he got to the driver's side. He crouched to peer in the window. Mitchell opened the door and swore it was colder in the car than out.

"Name's Mitchell. Which leg is pinned?"

"Right one. People call me Hope." A sharp breath. "Hope Roman."

No disguising the fear in her voice.

"Hope. Beautiful name." He inched closer, not liking the easy way the snow shifted beneath him. Whatever he was going to do, it had to be fast. "Can you undo your belt, Hope?" This car wasn't going to stay here for long, its position was too damn precarious. Add the wet and heavy snow and the time

was even shorter.

“Tried.” A slight sob before she cleared her throat. “I’ve been *trying*. It’s not budging. And to tell you the truth, I’m a bit worried by how the car keeps moving.” Her voice wavered only the once before it firmed up.

He dug in his pocket for the Leatherman tool he always carried. “I’m going to slice through the seatbelt. Brace yourself so you don’t put more strain on your captured leg.”

“Okay.”

His touch slid over curves that he would describe as lush, and he made himself focus before he got to the seatbelt. Following it up, he sliced up high then went down to her lap belt.

“What brought you up to this area?” He didn’t only ask to keep her distracted but because he needed to focus as well.

“What gave it away that I’m not a local? The fact I’m hanging upside down in my overturned car?”

He appreciated that she had retained her sense of humor and wasn’t crying. Even so, he recognized that she’d dodged his question.

“Well,” he teased, his fingers brushing against her smooth but far-too-cold skin as he worked the blade through the strap as fast as he could without hitting anything vital on her. “I wasn’t going to point it out, but you *do* have an accent.”

He got a laugh that time. Damn if it didn’t crack the iron wall around his heart. It was frightening how easily that happened.

“I’m going to the other side to get your leg free.”

“Okay.” Her voice wasn’t as strong this time and he didn’t like that.

He wiped the wetness from his face as he rushed to the other side to wrench the door open. It took some muscling to do that, which in his mind meant there had been some bouncing before she ended up where she was now. The vehicle slid a few more inches. He swore. Feeling his way, he paused when

she whimpered.

“This is going to hurt.”

A few moments of silence. “Pain means I’m not dead. I can take it.”

A fighter. He approved. Strong. Unique. Special. Like the snowflakes that fell outside. Flykra. Snowflake. That’s how he would forever think of Hope Roman.

“I’ll lift on three. You get out and away from the car as fast as you can.”

He tried not to worry her that she needed to be out in case—correction, when—the car started to slide down.

“Understood.”

He got the best position he could find, making sure he wasn’t going to slip and lose his grip and possibly pin her again. Or himself. “One.”

Hope covered his hand with hers and squeezed. “Thank you. For stopping. I didn’t want to forget to say that. I’m not sure if I’m hallucinating or not, because you have one hell of a sexy voice. The kind a woman would love to have whispering in her ear.”

The quaver in her words was a gut punch. This lost woman had been nicer to him than he could remember a stranger being in a long time. And her words...wowza.

Would that change if she knew how much he was worth?

“Two.”

He felt her gather herself. Mitchell did the same.

“Three.” He heaved up and Hope moved. The sound of ripping fabric reached him but he ignored it and held out as long as he could.

“I’m out.”

He retreated quickly and met her at the trunk. Mitchell reached for her hand, clasping it in his larger one, and together they trudged up the incline and made their way to his car,

slipping and sliding the entire way. It didn't escape his notice how much she favored her left leg and that he was pulling on her a lot more than he would like, but they had to get out of the cold. He held the car door open for her and partially lifted her up to the passenger seat before shutting out the blowing snow and rushing back to the driver's side. As he stepped up to slide in the warm interior, he watched as her car's lights vanished, skidding down the side of the mountain.

Christ, I almost didn't get to her in time.

Mitchell buckled himself in and stared at her in the dim red lights from the dash, the red not all that attractive of a light to shine on someone but it was easier on his eyes at night.

This woman's skin was a rich brown with some hints of sienna. Or at least that's what he saw. Perhaps in natural light it would look different. Not as touchable? Doubtful. Her hair had been yanked back into a tight bun and he couldn't tell if it was perfectly straight or had waves. Some had fallen free and plastered against her face from the snow.

Not that I should be thinking about that.

"Are you okay?" He reached for her only to hesitate before actually touching her. Helping her up a hill was different than placing his hands on her in a car. He *was* a stranger.

She bit her lower lip and grimaced as she secured her belt without turning her head toward him. "I will be."

I shouldn't be thinking about how plump her lips are.

After a mental ass-kicking, he put the SUV in gear and drove off, going even slower now than he had been. Cutting his gaze to her, he noticed that she kept her face averted from him. He called 911 again to let them know she was with him. She didn't speak, didn't offer up her name to the dispatcher on the line, so he provided it. She huddled in the seat, pressed to the door.

He cut the call off and glanced over to her once more.

"Turn on the seat warmer. Low not high. That'll help. How long were you stuck there? Where were you headed?" He had blankets in the back but didn't want to stop. He could feel the

wheels of his SUV spinning before they caught and it was getting hard for even him to drive on the winding mountain road.

To wherever that was going to be.

She didn't move. "A few hours, I think. South. I was headed south."

He frowned. That was too fucking long for someone to be out in weather like this, especially not properly dressed for it, and he turned the seat warmer on low for her. And south was an extremely vague response. A lot of places were south of Vermont.

"Why were you out here on a night like this?" He focused on the road. "Hope?"

She jerked slightly, almost as if she'd been about to fall asleep. Or maybe she had been dozing in the warmth already. "Why are you?"

Her tone was exhausted but that didn't hide the bite of sass he heard. His involuntary smile surprised him.

"I wanted to rescue a southern lady." He readjusted his grip on the wheel. "Took me a while to find one who likes my voice." He wanted to make her relax. More than that, he wanted to get her somewhere he could check her over.

"Sorry for ruining your night." Nothing but honesty in her tone.

Lights shone through the near white-out conditions, and they had to stop. They had no choice.

"You didn't ruin anything." Mitchell ensured his voice held no room for disagreement. The last thing he needed was her feeling worse because her car had gone off the road in a blizzard. "I'm going to see if this place has room."

Not that we have any other choice but to stop here.

He parked in the parking lot. "You wait here. I don't want you walking on that leg until we can assess the damage." Even though he knew she would have to eventually, because no way could he do that in the car. The weather was getting

progressively worse.

The Thrush & the Clover was an extremely popular bed and breakfast. They typically slowed down between Christmas and Valentine's Day. However, judging from the number of vehicles in the lot, that wasn't the case this year.

Mitchell hopped out, leaving the vehicle running, gritted his teeth against the cold, and jogged to the steps leading up to the front door. Heat rushed to meet him as he stepped inside. Then he froze.

WELCOME SINGLES said a banner in the entryway. Holy fuck. What was this?

"Welcome to The Thrush & the Clover." An older woman walked up. "Are you here for the mixer? This weather had a few cancellations." A smile. "But brought others."

"No. I'm not here for any mixer. I need to rent two rooms."

She frowned. "I only have one room left. Can you share?"

Could they?

Sure.

Did he want to?

No!

"I'll take it. I also need a first-aid kit or a doctor, if you have one. She was in a car accident."

"Bring her in." The woman rushed off. Mitchell returned to the SUV. The glow from the overhead lamp let him see Hope had fallen asleep. He didn't want to wake her. But he had to.

And he didn't until he got his bags, shut off the engine, and opened her door. Full features. Lips the color of dark cherries. Dangerous curves, ones you needed to take your time on. Damn it, his fingertips burned.

Something he definitely didn't need to be focused on.

"Hope." Her head angled to him and he saw the blood moving down her temple and onto her cheek. "Damn it, Hope."

His bags could fucking sit out here if he needed to carry her. He had to get her inside.

She opened her eyes, a bit out of focus.

“I thought I imagined you.” Although wobbly, a brief upturn of her lips was there.

He leaned closer, grateful she was looking at him. “I’m real. Let’s go, we have a room.”

A small smile which didn’t fully hide her exhaustion tilted her lips. “Sure you want to do that? I may take advantage of you. Have my wicked way with you.”

Yes please.

He snapped his mind back to the here and now. It wasn’t the time to get lost in fanciful thoughts.

“A chance I’ll take.” He helped her out. “Lean on me.”

“Ohh, a song *and* a movie. Do you sing?”

He chuckled as he got them moving toward the building after throwing his bags on his other shoulder.

“Only in the shower.”

“Now there’s a beautiful image.” Her words were slurred now.

Mitchell squinted his eyes against the stinging snow. When she slipped the third time, he swept her up in his arms. She struggled for a moment but he tightened his grip and was fairly certain he growled at her. Keeping Hope protected as best he could, he couldn’t help but notice how perfect it felt to have her curves against him.

The going was slow but they got inside where she insisted on being placed on her own feet. Then they trekked up the stairs to the only room left. Mitchell returned to the first floor to get them signed in as two other women went up, looked at Hope, and got her patched up. Back in the room, he dug out some warmer clothing for her to put on.

As he hooked up his computer, Mitchell realized the shower was running.

“That you, Mitchell?” Her voice was lethal. Low, seductive. The kind of voice used in minds when they fantasized.

“It’s me.”

Who else did she think was in here with her? Grinding his teeth, he finished setting up. At least he could get some work done, uninterrupted.

The bathroom door opened and he glanced up.

Maybe.

Maybe he’d be able to get some work done. When that thought had passed through his mind, he’d not been thinking a damn thing about this breathtaking woman.

She walked through the steam and his heartbeat skittered out of control as his body flared to life. One of his shirts covered her to mid-thigh and beneath that she wore a pair of his workout pants.

She shrugged like she was embarrassed. “Thank you. For, you know, everything. Especially the clothes and the whole not-leaving-me-to-die-upside-down-in-a-rental-car thing. In Vermont. In winter.”

Curls. Her hair had curls.

Mitchell had the strangest urge to comfort her. Tuck some of those riotous curls behind her ears. He dug his nails into his palms, using the bite of pain to keep him in control. *Not now, body.*

Because the one thing he was *not* going to do was notice her as a woman. Just like he hadn’t noticed the array of earrings racing up the curve of her ears, the color and sparkle peeking through her hair. Or how he’d not noticed the color of her lips. Her figure. Or that in this light, her skin glowed and called to him.

Well fuck!

...

Hope Roman wanted to curl up in a ball and cry. Then sleep.

This past week had been a blur of pain and loss and adding to that, she'd nearly died. She had almost hit her limit. Or she was a few leagues beyond it but hadn't acknowledged that yet.

The only reason she was even up here in Vermont was to attend the funeral of her mentor. She should have stayed in the small town of Morgan Depot where he'd lived and been buried. Not tried to brave the winter weather and drive. But she'd needed time to process everything.

Her mentor, Karl Jones, had meant the world to her. He'd been the one man in college who'd seen her not as a statistic to fill a quota but as a brilliant and inquisitive mind he could, and did, mold into his image. He'd shared his love with her and she'd jumped at the chance to be a science journalist.

And a damn good one. Not to his level, yet, but she was just getting started. As a girl who'd been shuttled from foster family to foster family before ending up at a state home, having the complete attention of someone whose intention was to see her succeed had been eye-opening.

She'd acquired his worldview and had learned to open up and accept that love was out there for her, if she'd give it a chance. Before meeting him, she'd figured she would die alone, but he'd given her the opportunity to see how wrong that view was. Now, she met new people, experienced new cultures, and traveled the world, because she'd taken a chance on the professor who had become the father she'd never had. But losing him had rocked the foundation of her world, and add in the accident and Mitchell, well.

Uncharted territory.

This man. This all-American hottie had rescued her and was willing to share a room with her, even if he didn't appear pleased by the prospect. And when she thought hottie, she meant *hottie*. *Jaysus*, the man was fine. Built. Strong. And someone she shouldn't be thinking of like she was. Imagining him naked wouldn't do either of them any good.

"I'll get out of your hair."

Intense brown eyes from behind the blond hair that tumbled

over his forehead followed her hesitant step-slide-limp to the door.

The air remained thick between them but all he did was watch her. She gave another small grin as she stepped out.

She had a vague recollection of calling him sexy earlier but hoped it had been in her imagination. Her leg hurt but she continued to the stairs. One hand on the smooth dark banister, Hope carefully, and slowly, made her way downstairs.

“How are you feeling, honey?”

Her smile came easier. “Sore but warm and so much better. The shower did wonders.” She licked her lips. “Naomi, right?”

“That’s me.”

Hope let the innkeeper guide her into the dining room. The food smelled divine and her stomach rumbled. The staff here wanted her to stay awake for a while and that meant she had to be away from a bed.

“Sit, honey. I’ll bring you a plate.”

Taking a seat, she smiled at the others there. “I’m Hope.”

Hope may have grown up in the system, but her work and general attitude about life made her an extrovert. She loved talking to and meeting people. Hearing their stories and learning new cultures. Even if once upon a time that had bitten her in the ass.

A thought she shoved back. Now wasn’t the time for that memory.

“Erick.” The man had dark hair and eyes that went great with his bronzed skin.

“Sonya.” A pretty svelte redhead.

“Alistair.” A blond with blue eyes, similar to her rescuer, but thinner with no visible tattoos. And his eyes were definitely a different color.

“I’m Wendy.” She had purple hair and colored contacts to match. Cool.

“Are you here for the singles mixer?” Sonya asked while Naomi set a plate before her.

“We’re taking one up to the room for Mitchell.” The whisper eased a concern in her.

“No, I was just passing by. The weather is too much. Hard to believe it’s barely seven.” She looked at her wrist where her men’s watch sat with its cracked face. At least it had survived.

At least I survived.

“Maybe you can participate anyway. Pass the time.” Erick made the suggestion as he cut into his steak.

“Sounds like fun.” And she would have some distance from Hot and Broody.

“Great,” Wendy chirped. “By the way, I love your earrings. A fantastic mishmash.”

“Thank you. Your hair and contacts? Great choice,” Hope replied. She speared the steamed broccoli and took a bite, willing her hand to stop shaking. Her adrenaline had begun to wear off. “So tell me more about this singles mixer.”

After dinner, she sat in the main room with a large cup of tea, a plate of cookies, and some new friends.

The festivities weren’t supposed to start until the morning and, sure, every inch of her hurt something fierce. But she had the impression her forced-proximity roommate wanted space. As he’d saved her life, she would give it to him best she could. There were a lot of people here for the mixer and a few couples who’d not been able to push on to their final destination. Someone had mentioned there was one child here but she’d not seen him, so her guess was they were staying in a room, out of the way.

Some of the guys played cards. Some read. Everyone was settling in. Aside from her savior.

Shifting with a wince she wasn’t quite able to contain, Hope finished her tea and rose.

“Are you okay?” Erick questioned as he materialized by her side.

“Fine, thanks. A bit more tired than I thought.” She lifted her cup. “Going for a refill.”

His smile was warm. “I really hope you’ll consider participating in the mixer.”

“I will. Seems like fun.”

He ran his gaze over her. “Great.”

Hope moved to the dining room and paused due to the pain in her knee.

“You should be in bed. Not on your knee.” That voice. It wasn’t fair to everyone else to have to compete with that heaven-sent yet devilish temptation of a voice.

“I’m fine.” She refused to glance in his direction.

She, unlike him, was but a mere mortal.

Hope tightened her hold on the mug handle and finished her slow trek to the kitchen. Naomi was finishing up in there, tutting when she laid eyes on Hope. Her gaze flickered behind her before returning to her face.

“Honey, you need to be off that leg.”

“I’ll be in a chair soon enough.”

“You’ll be in bed.” Low and authoritative, his words rolled over her.

Naomi plucked the cup from her hand and made herself scarce with a knowing look. Mitchell took her place. Damn he was big. Not fat big, just strong big.

She licked her lips, conscious she wore his clothes. “I’m sleeping down here.”

Mitchell crossed muscular arms over his broad chest. This wasn’t a man with a lean runner’s body. Not at all. He was big but moved with a grace she couldn’t manage even on her best day, which this wasn’t.

“There a bed down here I don’t know about?”

“No. I’ll be by the fire.”

“You’re right.”

She blinked. “I am?”

“The no was correct. We have a room. You’ll be up *there*. In bed.”

“Look.” She reached out to touch his chest and swore. “Christ. Is anything soft on you?” It took her a moment to realize she’d been stroking his chest. Heat flushed as she thought about her words and what she was doing to him.

His expression never wavered but his brown eyes deepened. “No.”

So many ways to take that. She gulped.

“I mean,” she stopped touching him, “you paid for the room. I know you don’t want to share with me.”

His jaw clenched ever so briefly. “Would you like help up the stairs or am I carrying you?”

Hope stared at him. There was no maliciousness in him that she could sense. She liked to think of herself as a fairly good judge of character.

“No need for that. I’m trying to do the right thing.”

He moved closer, allowing his scent to weave around her, bringing a small amount of comfort and a whole lot of desire. Was it right for a man to smell so delicious? Was that a way to describe it? Because seriously, for a journalist, she couldn’t find another word. Well, other than masculine. Outdoorsy. Unique. Unfair to women. Look at that—she could find a few words.

“Then get to bed.”

Realizing that lying on a bed instead of hunkering down in a chair would be divine, she turned and headed to the stairs. Mitchell was with her every step of the way but he kept his hands to himself.

Pity.

She smothered her snort. A man like him dated size zeros. Not a twenty.

He reached around her and opened the door before waiting

for her to enter first. The click of the door reverberated through her.

“Bed and expose your knee.” He brushed by her. Hope perched gingerly on the edge of the king bed. Okay, so he was right, she should not have been on the knee so much. Mitchell was back and he sank to his knees before reaching for her leg. She’d not even tugged up her pants for him to see.

When his gaze slashed to her, she realized she’d not kept her whisper of pain contained. He lifted the pant leg, firm but gentle.

Hope stared at the top of his head. His hair was so much more than *blond*. A word that was so pedestrian.

Gah. What the heck was wrong with her? Had she taken pain meds that were making her loopy? Could she take some to explain away this behavior and line of thought?

She wanted to thread her fingers through the strands. They’d be like silk—smooth and cool.

Nope. Smooth, yes, and soft, but not cool. Fingers clasped her wrist and her stomach kicked. Holy shit. That hadn’t simply been a thought. She was actually stroking his head.

“Sorry,” she blurted.

He moved her hand to the bunched-up pant leg. No words but she got the gist. *Hold*. He rewrapped her knee with swift efficiency, his touch impersonal but tender.

“You’re good at that. Sure you’re not a doctor?”

“Positive.” He didn’t even look up at her.

“Injure yourself a lot?”

Damn it, what is wrong with me? This isn’t like me! Is it? Maybe this *was* her and all these years she’d been packing away her true self. After the humiliation by a man who’d been her fiancé, she had retreated and not allowed herself to get swept away again. Her relationships after Riley Fronson had almost been contractual. He’d been wealthy and, in the spotlight and when he’d broken her heart, she’d decided to focus on her career and not let love get in the way.

Or, to rationalize this situation, she more than likely felt freedom to enjoy someone who—once they left this place—she'd never see again.

“Nope.”

Great monosyllabic responses.

“Not doing Annie Wilkes things, are you?”

He paused, one large hand curling along her calf. The touch felt oddly possessive. Mitchell lifted his gaze to her. His eyes didn't blink, didn't waver, and her gut clenched.

“There's nothing to worry about. You're going to be just fine. I'll take good care of you.”

“Holy fuck,” she gushed, the pain in her leg temporarily forgotten. “You are kneeling here and just quoted *Misery* to me.”

For the briefest of moments his mask fell and, holy elephant balls, the man went from hot and sexy to something out of her stratosphere. The crinkle at the corners of his eyes. The slight upward tug on his lush mouth. And the way his eyes sparkled.

Then it was gone. He pushed up and gazed down at her. Before she could figure out what was going on, he retreated to the bathroom, only to return with stuff for her head.

She inched back to the headboard, his unflinching gaze remaining on her. Always aware of being a larger woman, she wanted to cover up. Normally confident in herself, comfortable with her size, this man's gaze did something to her that set her out of her comfort zone. Like she'd been when she'd come face-to-face with sea turtle poachers in Nicaragua. Yet not in the same mind-numbing fear way, more like the what-do-I-do-about-this-situation way.

Mitchell checked her head injury again and propped up her knee.

“Try not to move it tonight.” He drew the blankets up to her waist.

“You are sleeping beside me.” Hope didn't make it a question. “Because if I can't sleep in a chair, neither can you.”

“You were in an accident.” His words were low and fierce.

She crossed her arms, glaring back as the snow and wind buffeted the window. “And you deserve a good night’s sleep. Don’t worry. I’m aware I’m not your type. This is about sleeping.”

He narrowed his gaze. “And if I refuse?”

Years of being belittled by supposed boyfriends and hearing the whispers of people who wanted to remind her she didn’t fit society’s ideal of beautiful had hardened her shell to the hurtful comments. But she wasn’t coated in Teflon. Making sure her face betrayed zero pain, she flipped back the blankets he had covered her with.

“I’ll go downstairs.”

He frowned. “Don’t move.”

She wasn’t going to budge on this. “Look, you rescued me. You are taking care of me and I appreciate it but I won’t take a bed from you.”

He covered her back up. “Are you always so hardheaded?”

“Are you?” She watched his face, expecting pure frustration, but what she saw was amusement.

“Does it work?”

She shrugged. He ducked in the bathroom and walked out in another pair of workout pants. Mouth as dry as the Atacama Desert, she struggled to find moisture.

“Well, does it?” He ran his fingers through his hair as he approached the bed.

She’d not thought this through. Hard bodied. Tattooed. God, she longed to explore him. This time, she made sure to keep her fingers clenched on the bedspread. Last time she got lost in her thoughts, she’d touched him like she had a right.

“Not sure. Never threatened a man to share a bed with me before.”

His arm flexed as he drew back one of the blankets. When he sat on the mattress, she held her breath.

I shouldn't have pushed this.

What if she snored or farted in her sleep?

“I’m your first.”

Yeah, he was her first in a lot of ways. “Something like that.” She pulled the blankets up to her chin. “Good night.”

“Night, Flykra.”

What the hell did he call her? And why was she thinking that it sounded so nice rolling from his lips?

The bed dipped as he got in and got comfortable. Not much later his low, deep breathing let her know he’d fallen asleep.

She dozed and as soon as five a.m. hit, her eyes flew open and she bolted. With a degree in psychology, she could figure out her own reasons, but she didn’t want to analyze herself. Not now.

Definitely not in regards to the man whose bed she had run from.

Chapter Two

Warmth surrounded him and Mitchell burrowed closer. It was winter and he was *not* relishing the idea of getting out of the heat. He'd spent his professional career playing in California where it was sunny and warm. Where he didn't have to deal with weather like this except at away games and the few times he'd come home to Rock Falls. Which hadn't been often. Usually, he'd met his friends elsewhere.

Or he'd purchased a ticket for his sister to come to him.

Cold winters were fine but damn it, it was hard to get out of bed in the mornings. At least for him.

He opened his eyes, immediately realizing he wasn't at home. Turning his head to look across the bed, he didn't see anyone.

Memories of yesterday streamed in and he scowled. Where was Hope and how hadn't he heard a damn thing when she got up?

He thought about the name he'd called her and his lips twitched as he recalled her expression. She hadn't been sure if she should be offended or not. Snowflake. She shouldn't be offended and he would forever think of her as one—unique, special.

After climbing out of bed, he took a quick shower. With still no sign of his temporary roommate, he opened the door to venture out. Halfway down the stairs he heard laughter and paused.

He still hadn't moved when Naomi walked by the stairs, pausing when she spied him.

“Good morning, Mr. Anderson. I hope you slept well.”

He descended the remaining stairs. “I did, thank you. Have you seen Hope?”

She nodded. “She's in the main room with the other singles, playing some games. Would you like to join them?”

His insides turned to ice. “No, thanks. I should get ready to go.”

“I’m sorry, Mr. Anderson. It still hasn’t stopped snowing. Roads are shut down. We’re all here for a while. Are you sure you don’t want to join the mixer?”

He’d rather have red hot poker shoved in his eyes. From the way she smoothed her hands down her apron, he realized his expression relayed that very thought.

“Very good, sir. I will bring some food to your room.” She walked off, leaving him alone.

How he wanted to be.

Right?

Despite everything inside him telling him to go back up to the sanctuary of the room, he drifted to the entryway of the main space. Mitchell took a deep breath and scanned the room.

Gaze on Hope, he clenched a hand on the corner of the wall he stood beside. She wore her own clothing, curly hair gathered atop her head. The bun it had been in last night when he found her must have been painful to eliminate all signs of those curls.

Personally, he liked her in *his* clothing.

Mitchell shook his head. *What is wrong with me? Why does it matter whose clothing she wears?*

Something stirred when she and the other people near her burst into merry laughter. She fit. Even though she didn’t look like anyone there. No, his Flykra, his snowflake, was definitely one of a kind. He watched as she played cards with another man, all the while carrying on the conversation with more than the man she gamed against.

He narrowed his eyes as the guy she played with slapped the pile between them, making her jump and give a small squeal. Then she dissolved into a fit of laughter.

Unlike his ex, who used to titter in a manner to make herself appear flirty and attractive, Hope laughed because she was amused and entertained. Her entire body moved as her husky

voice rolled over him like a wave. It hit him, knocked him over, then the undertow pulled on him, trying—and succeeding—to drag him into depths he wasn't ready for. Closer to her.

And he couldn't.

Shouldn't.

Wouldn't.

Mitchell stalked back up to his room. After staring out the window at the blinding wall of white, he turned on his computer.

Once his food was delivered, he set his phone beside him. Crunching a piece of toast, he sent a text. He swallowed the toast and reached for his coffee when the phone rang.

He swiped accept.

“Hey.” He took a drink.

“Where are you?” Tully's voice reached him.

“You okay? How did the vacation go?” Linc posed the next question.

“I've been better.” He didn't lie to these guys. They had no secrets. “Right now, I'm stuck at The Thrush & the Clover...” He swallowed more of the coffee, wincing at the burn. “Which happens to be hosting a singles mixer.”

“Why are you talking to us? Go mingle. You're single again.” Linc was so matter of fact.

He snorted. “The last thing I need is another woman.”

Damn it to hell, Hope's soft features were as vivid as if she were in the room with him. Those big dark eyes watching him with trust. Admiration.

He squeezed his eyes shut as soon as that gaze in his imagination turned heated with desire. He was officially losing it. He barely knew the woman.

“Singles can mean males too.”

“I'm not gay, Tully. But scarred is a thing. I need to get *me*

right.” And after having met Hope, he didn’t feel that would be such a struggle.

“We’d love you either way.”

He knew that.

“So what are you doing then? Tell us you’re not hiding out in your room. This storm is huge and it’s stalled over us.” Linc sounded worried. “Roads aren’t going to be open for a while and chances are power will also be going out. I’ve set up the center to take any unhoused people who will need shelter. What about you?”

He loved that about Linc. The man had a heart of gold. “I’m working in my room. Putting in some hours on the new game.”

“That’s good, right, Linc?” Tully sounded concerned.

“Sure,” his friend said. They both had the same amount of anxiety in their voices.

Mitchell sighed and leaned forward. Time to come clean. It’s like his friends knew he was holding something back. “I’m not here alone.”

Dead silence.

He waited, sure they wouldn’t disappoint. “The fuck? Who’s with you?” Tully.

“Do we know her? Next time lead with this, asshole.” Linc’s words were full of friendly exasperation.

“I found her.” He hid his smile, even though there was no point in doing that—he wasn’t on a video call with them.

“Like a toy? Linc, tell our boy that’s not a thing.”

“Tully’s right, Mitchell. You can’t just go around grabbing people and telling them you found them. That’s, well, it’s mighty white of you.”

Mitchell rolled his eyes.

“Would you two shut the fuck up?” They listened. “She was in a car accident. I helped her and now we’re here.” He ran his tongue over his lips and rubbed his hands on his thighs. One

more bit of truth to share. Damn it, he wanted to keep it to himself. Hell, he wanted to keep *her* to himself. “We’re sharing a room.”

This time the silence was not appreciated. “Single bed?”

“Yes, Linc. The room has one bed.”

“And you shared.” Tully’s voice sounded odd. Like he was choking.

Good. Bastard.

“Yes.” His skin went hot at the reminder. “Nothing happened other than sleep.”

“You shared a bed and nothing happened?” Linc’s tone showcased his disbelief.

“I tried to give her the bed.”

“But,” Tully prompted.

Mitchell picked up his fork and stabbed the orange slice on his plate. The one not harming anyone.

“She basically bullied me!”

They snorted. He wished they were close enough to punch. “Have you shrunk since we last saw you? How did a woman bully you?” Tully’s tone was drenched in disbelief.

Okay, so he couldn’t really blame his friends for that. He wasn’t a small guy.

“She was injured and said if I didn’t share it with her, she would go downstairs.” He flushed even though they couldn’t see him. After a moment, he shrugged. “I didn’t want her on her leg more than necessary.”

“You like her.” Tully made the pronouncement and Linc agreed without hesitation.

“Listen, that’s not the point. Don’t go there. Just because you two are in love doesn’t mean I am. Plus, I don’t even know her. And let’s not forget I just got out of a toxic-as-hell relationship. I’m not looking to get into another. We went over this. I need to get *me* right. She’s not exactly anyone my

mother would approve of, that's for sure."

Harsh it may be, but that was the cold truth when it came to his mother. Vera Anderson thought a woman should never be above a size two, a four on a special day. His own sister, Mallory, had been shipped off to "fat farms" more than once, until she was the proper size, according to the gospel of Mrs. Anderson. And it had killed him he hadn't been able to protect his baby sister while he'd been away playing ball.

"Mitchell."

He slouched. Damn it, Linc sounded like his own father when he took that tone. So much. Having grown up with Delano Conner—a man he respected like hell—that voice had him shutting up and listening. Even if it wasn't the older man but his son, who, he had to admit, had taken over the role of being a father figure to his fiancée's little girl very well. "Yes, Linc?"

"Say what you will, but you stayed and we all know you go where you want. Had that been The Viper, no threats would have gotten you in that bed with her."

Damn it. He hated when they were right.

"What Linc is trying to say is that you should get to know her. Let yourself like someone for *you*. Stop worrying about your mother's opinions and find someone *you* like for being herself."

"Maybe this is all a ploy to get something?" He hated that he even thought that about Hope but, hello, mistrust.

"A woman who wanted that would've stripped in front of you. I'm guessing that didn't happen," Tully said.

Mitchell smirked as he thought of her saying something about taking advantage. No, she hadn't stripped in front of him. In fact, she'd gone out of her way to remain as covered as she could in his presence. And she was avoiding him.

The more he thought about it, he wasn't onboard with that—at all.

His guys razed him a bit longer before he hung up and once

again he was alone.

Determined not to think about Hope, he started tinkering on his game. And it worked for about thirty minutes. Swearing, he paced the room as the wind continued to buffet snow against the window.

Standing on her side of the bed, he skimmed his fingers along his folded clothes. The ones she had slept in next to him—without expecting anything in return. Seriously? One night and he considered this *her* side of the bed. Like they were actually a couple.

How long had it been since someone—other than those in his inner circle—had shown concern for him?

Still, he was suspicious. Typically the most easygoing of guys, he had been burned. Badly.

He wanted to know more about Hope. A fact that made him uncomfortable. Muttering to himself, he returned to his computer and got back to it.

Aside from taking a break for some lunch, Mitchell stayed in the room.

By himself.

Alone.

Outside, the storm continued to rage and grew stronger as the hours passed. Getting up to stretch, he ambled to the window and stared out into the vast nothingness of Vermont's wilderness.

A soft knock came on the door, and he gave a final look outside before allowing the heavy curtain to settle back over the glass.

“Yes?”

Any further words dried up on his tongue as he stared down at Hope. She gave a small smile, uncertain almost.

“Did you forget your key?” He cocked an eyebrow.

Her face was flushed and he stepped back to allow her entrance.

Hope hesitated before moving by him with barely a brush of skin and a tempting whiff of a light floral scent.

“No. I didn’t want to disturb you. Trying to stay out of your way.” She gestured to the small pile of clothes that he’d brushed his fingers across not that long ago. “I was a bit cold, so I came to add a layer.”

He strode to his bag and dug for one of his sweatshirts. Mitchell balled it in his fist and turned back to her. She wasn’t even looking at him but staring down. He was used to women vying for his attention, even *after* he’d gotten married. They would look at him and see dollar signs.

After a slow drawn-out moment between them, Hope lifted her gaze to his. He witnessed the refusal in her eyes before she opened her mouth.

“Hope,” he said with a firm headshake. “Your clothes are in a car off a mountain road. Hell, we both know it actually slid down by the time we pulled away. Take the sweatshirt.”

And yes, a primitive craving to see her in his clothes again rushed through him.

“I’ve been enough of a burden. I don’t need to take more of your clothes.”

He shook his head even as he moved closer to her. “Been a long time since I’ve had to beg a woman to wear my clothes.”

“Does that make me your first, then?”

His lips twitched as she tossed his words back at him.

Her eyes sparkled and for whatever reason his cold heart beat a little faster. Mitchell held the item out.

“Hope.”

Her lips twitched before she shrugged and reached for the sweatshirt. “I warned you, so don’t try to complain later. Taking advantage. All part of my grand plan.”

“Put it on.”

She listened and he realized something. He enjoyed seeing her draped in his clothes. When she vanished behind the cotton

he stared at her full hips and strong thighs. Lust stirred. Then her head popped free and her loose curls tumbled from the haphazard bun they'd been in.

God, she looked deliciously rumpled. He watched her eyes flutter down. Those eyelashes of hers were long, thick, and curved as they brushed her smooth cheeks. On the heels of the motion a low groan slid free.

“Warmth, oh this is nice.” She lifted her arms, her fingers not even close to peeking out the sleeves, and removed her hair from under the collar. Her grin was soft and a bit shy, even as it tempted. “Thank you.”

Without thinking, he guided her to sit on the bed, returned to his bag and grabbed some socks. He crouched before her and put a pair of wool ones on over hers.

“You aren't a burden. You can wear my clothing. You already said you liked how I smelled.” A pause as he cocked an eyebrow. “Was that a lie?”

“No. It may have been blurted out during a moment of my insanity but, no, it was most definitely not a lie.” Instead of backing away, she leaned closer. “Will you come downstairs?”

It was his turn to refuse. No matter how much he wanted to accept. Or ask her to stay with him. Only.

“No.”

Hope reached up to his face, paused, then he experienced an all-too-brief tantalizing brush of her fingers.

“Thank you for saving me, again.”

Her touch fell away. Mitchell helped her to her feet and she gave him a slow appraising look. If she had been anyone else, or if he hadn't been so drawn to her, he would be thinking they were plotting something to get him in a compromising position. With Hope, it was nothing more than appreciation of his looks and gratitude.

Or so he wished.

“I'll leave you to it then.” She bent to retrieve her hair band.

Mitchell watched as his sweatshirt rode up as she drew up her locks. How had he not known that it was so arousing to watch a woman do something with her hair?

Even when he'd first been married, that move from Shawnee had not once affected him like this innocent action.

The click of the door was a loud reminder of how alone he was once more.

This time, he wasn't quite as happy about it as he sat down to his computer.

• • •

“Woo-hoo!”

The cheers rose as Hope continued to shovel the miniature marshmallows in her mouth as fast as she could. Damn these chopsticks. Definitely not easy.

Fun, yes, but seriously, who knew when she'd jumped into the challenge that it would be so hard? Not her. She'd needed something to distract her from thoughts of Tall, Blond, and Broody up in their shared room.

Not to mention to stop overanalyzing her reactions to him. Were she interested in studying humans, this was the place to do it: a singles mixer and forced proximity.

“Thirty seconds!” Wendy, the timekeeper of this game, kept them apprised of the clock.

Hope kept shoveling the marshmallows in. Honestly, she didn't get very many with each attempt with the chopsticks.

“Fifteen seconds!”

She glanced across the table at her competitor, Alistair. He waggled his eyebrows as he lifted his tan chopsticks, loaded with a good number of marshmallows, then shoved them into his mouth.

How the fuck was he making it look so simple? Hell no, she wasn't going down so easy.

I managed to put myself through school, get doctorates and

other degrees. I can fucking shove the most marshmallows in my mouth with chopsticks.

“Ten seconds!”

“Come on, Hope!” Wendy bounced beside her, purple hair unconfined.

Even the proprietor watched with the other people stuck here for the duration of the blizzard.

Leaning as close as the rules allowed, she shoveled quicker, eyes spilling tears faster than she could stuff in the sweet confections. God, she wanted to use her hands.

“Time.”

Erick brought his hand down on the table, making the remaining marshmallows bounce and roll. And she nearly choked from the shock of his hand slap.

“Let’s count.” Sonya clapped her hands. “Swallow all those, Hope.”

It wasn’t easy. A large glob of over-the-top sweetness. But she didn’t spit it out. She refused. She swallowed and pumped her hands in the air. The oversize sweatshirt she wore slid back, exposing her arms.

She tucked her hands back in the sleeves. She had to admit, there was something incredibly lovely about wearing Mitchell’s clothes. His scent surrounded her, making her feel cherished. Even if he hadn’t wanted to come down and participate.

He was probably some recluse who preferred wild birds to actual human companionship. She didn’t begrudge him that. What right did she have? She usually preferred animals to humans herself. More than that, however, he’d saved her life instead of driving by, which she’d been fairly certain others had done. But then, not only had he taken her with him, he was sharing a room—a bed—with her.

Focusing on his scent or the fact she wore his clothing was a foolish thought. Who was this man to make her feel this way?

Wendy grasped her wrist and took Alistair’s in her other

hand. “The winner is...”

Alistair waggled his eyebrows at her. “Quick side bet?”

She leaned closer, lips tilting up. “Like?”

“Winner gets a kiss?”

Hope snorted. If she had to have an accident, be stuck at a bed and breakfast with a strange hottie who saved her life, and be passing time at a singles mixer—this was a great group to be with.

“From whom?”

He grinned. “You, of course. I’m winning this.”

She waggled a finger at him. “You don’t know that.”

Alistair shrugged. There was a loud *pop* and the lights went out. The glow from the fire was the only illumination.

“Sorry.” Naomi hurried closer. “We’ll be without power for a while. I’m so sorry. We’ll be okay. We’re used to things like this happening.”

Wendy released her wrist and Hope cleared her throat.

“We can play closer to the fire.” She didn’t want the woman to feel worse.

The others agreed and some moved the game table while she and Alistair held gazes.

“Who won, Wendy? I want to know before she tries to eat more marshmallows to win the kiss.” The man sent her a cheeky wink.

Hope clucked her tongue. “You would be the one doing that, not me.” Even if she didn’t feel confident about having won.

Alistair laughed. “Either way, a kiss by the fire is my prize.”

Hope grabbed a marshmallow and lobbed it at him. His laughter grew and the three of them headed to the fireplace, where they joined the others.

Claiming a seat in an oversize chair, Hope positioned her leg to ease the ache. “Who did win?”

“I’m still tallying up the numbers. But, in my totally unbiased opinion, the winner was Hope.” Wendy held out her hand to fist bump.

After touching fists, she grinned at her opponent. Alistair lowered his arms with a pout. He leaned over the arm of the sofa. “Do I get a kiss?” A pause. “You know, Wendy, once you finish counting it’ll be revealed that I did win, even if you’re trying to make Hope out to be the winner.”

Wendy laughed. Licking her lips, Hope leaned forward to respond when movement to her left pulled her focus. Her savior stood in the shadows, but she felt his gaze on her.

At the last minute, she restrained herself from reaching out to him. Instead, she smiled and angled her head to look directly at Mitchell. “Coming to join us?”

Around her, the others fell silent. Hope wanted him to join her. Erm, them. Yes, them. Definitely them.

He stepped from the darkness.

“Hey, aren’t you—”

“Mitchell,” he interrupted Alistair. “The name is Mitchell.”

There was something odd in his tone, perhaps a bit edgy, but no one mentioned it. Alistair merely nodded.

“Of course,” Alistair replied. “Mitchell. I’m Alistair.”

Hope didn’t speak as introductions were made. She watched Mitchell. Tried—she’d failed but she had tried—to keep from thinking about him.

He made his way to her seat and sat beside her like he had every right. The fit was tight and intimate.

“How’s your leg?” He made like he would touch it but didn’t. Her disappointment was unappreciated.

“Better, thank you.”

He grunted, leaning back and resting his arm along the back. “What’s the game?”

It hit her. With the power outage, he didn’t want to drain his

computer. He wasn't here because his thoughts mirrored hers.

Even though she knew she shouldn't be bothered by that, there was no stopping it from happening. No longer a logical woman, she seemed to be ruled by her ovaries and other, lower, parts of her body ruled by desire.

"We were about to find out the results of our marshmallow-eating competition." She flicked her fingers between herself and Alistair. "We were the final two. Pretty sure a kiss is up for grabs."

The man beside her tensed and she heard the slow drag of his fingers along the fabric behind her. Yeah, she wasn't going to focus on that.

"As I was saying..." Wendy held her hands out before her, hovering over the table between those gathered. "The winner by an impressive two miniature green marshmallows is... drum roll, please..."

Hope, Alistair, and Sonya provided it. Mitchell was a statue beside her, and Erick was on his way back to the group with a new drink.

"Hope!"

The women cheered and she grinned.

"I didn't even have my speech prepared. But I believe I get a kiss for winning."

Alistair grinned and pushed up from his chair, even though he wasn't that far from her. He swaggered to her side. He stopped and bent down.

"While the fire was part of it, the others being so close definitely wasn't what I had planned for our first kiss."

Everyone laughed at his overexaggerated pout. Except Mitchell.

Hope turned her cheek and tapped it. "Right here."

Alistair brushed a kiss along the skin then whispered, "Your guardian is not a fan."

Heat blossomed and she clucked her tongue. This was

something she didn't need to focus on.

Mitchell cleared his throat and Alistair stepped back, a grin firmly in place. "Can't claim a date yet, Mitchell. The games are just getting started."

The faintest brush of Mitchell's fingers glanced along her nape. Hope couldn't deny her attraction but she wasn't here for pleasure. Or maybe she was.

Gah, she was confused.

"What's next?" Erick questioned as Alistair reclaimed his seat.

Yes, a distraction. That's precisely what I need.

"Wendy," Sonya said. "Do you still have the list?"

"I do."

Alistair waggled his eyebrows as he continued to stare at her. "Two words we need to save for later."

Hope laughed. "Full of eternal optimism. I like it." With a shake of her head, she leaned back. Another whisper of a touch along the nape of her neck. Not even a full touch, just the ephemeral possibility that there *could* be something more.

Didn't matter. To her it was a cacophonous boom which pounded through her like her own fireworks display. Inside the sleeves of Mitchell's sweatshirt—which she was contemplating stealing when they left this place—she allowed her fingers to curl into fists. It left her with a pit in her stomach that overflowed with longing. Her mind raced down a road it had zero business being on. She swallowed and glanced at Wendy.

"Yes. What's next?"

A few more people joined the group and after introductions were made, they played another getting-to-know-you game. The man beside her barely moved, just shut people down when they asked him to join in.

The room, without the additional heat, had gotten cooler. However, the blazing fireplace made it bearable.

Sonya brought over a bunch of drinks and passed them around. Hope sipped on her water as she listened to the others talk about their jobs and the lives they led. Her eyes wouldn't stay open and she fought off a yawn.

Once.

Twice.

The third time, she wasn't so lucky. When she stirred again, she was up against Mitchell with his arm still stretched along the back of the seat they shared. She was not merely using him to slump against but like he was her very own body pillow. Her arms were around his middle, one pressed to the back of the seat and the other along the very hard planes of his abdomen.

Opening her eyes, she found there was very little chatter going on around her. A few others had fallen asleep in their chairs and were covered by blankets. Others had left. The fire still burned strong, and she moved to sit up, her body protesting at the slight movement.

Mitchell stiffened when she pushed away from him and angled his head to see her better.

"We should get you to bed."

Gah, if only he meant those words like she wished. Too tired to risk opening her mouth and letting anything come out, all she could do was nod. He stared a bit longer, that blond eyebrow creeping up even as he continued to stare.

"No comment?"

Damn it. He was making her talk.

Come on, Hope. Don't sound like a salivating hussy. Open your mouth and let smart, logical words come out.

Yep, pep talk over, she was ready. She opened her mouth and responded.

"I'm going to fall on my face once you get up. Figured I could sleep down here."

Sparks of something flickered in his gaze and she wasn't

entirely sure it wasn't a trick of the fire. Mitchell leaned closer, allowing his rich scent to push over her and embed itself into her skin.

A place she rather liked having it.

Damn it, that wasn't supposed to happen.

"I *will* carry you."

Could something sound like a threat and horribly sexy at the same time? She was going to go with a yes.

"Ever the savior, aren't you?"

"Only for a certain lost, injured southern woman. Let's go, Flykra." He rose and held out his hand.

She placed hers in his and allowed him to pull her to her feet. Seriously? How was it possible to feel worse today than she had right after the accident? Hope bit down on her lip to keep the complaint internal. Although she wasn't positive that had been a win for her.

"Okay?"

"Nope." She tried to pull her hand from his but he held tighter. "I'll stay here." Yes, definitely the best course of action. That way, she got some space from him and didn't have to worry about pushing her whimpering, sore body.

"Are you testing me to see if I'll actually carry you?" His breath feathered along the shell of her ear and the side of her neck. "Because, Hope, I will sweep you off your feet and carry you up those fucking stairs—without a shred of hesitation."

"Every woman's fantasy."

"Perhaps it's mine as well."

His words reverberated through her and she stiffened. *No, no, no. It doesn't do me any favors to think about this man more than I'm doing already.*

He began moving her to the stairs and she realized what he was doing at the bottom one. The air was decidedly colder but she didn't feel it, not with the heat emanating from him. They began climbing and her body protested every move she made.

Chapter Three

Something was against him. Warm. Lush. Enticing. Mitchell cracked open his eyes and saw there was still a fire burning in the room, allowing him to see without turning on a light. Not that it was possible with the loss of power, but at least he wasn't blind.

Tipping his head slightly, he clamped his teeth down on the moan which slipped from his throat. Hope was in his arms. Where their pillow barrier had gone, he couldn't say. What he could admit—only to himself—was that he couldn't be happier it had vanished.

Goddamn, this woman was perfect against him. She shifted with a tiny whimper and snuggled closer to his chest. It was then he realized her hands were up under his shirt, pressing against his back.

The part of him that had yet to recover from his ex-wife demanded he put as much distance between himself and Hope as he could. A feeling and instinct he had a reasonable desire to follow. Right? He wasn't positive, because the rest of him wanted to burrow closer to Hope, wrap his arms tighter, and keep her safe.

She wanted nothing from him. At least not yet. He wasn't sure how long he could keep the other residents of the place from blurting out who he was. Then again, she might already know he was an ex-NBA player and was trying to be coy.

But that didn't feel right. This wasn't a woman who played coy or acted underhanded. His gut didn't believe her to be capable of that. However, as his gut was the one that had gotten him his first wife, maybe it wasn't the best judge of character.

Darkness still reigned outside and he could hear the wind slamming into the storm windows. Even though they had no power, he was perfectly warm—being pressed up against Hope along with the fire in the room and the blankets did wonders for his body temperature.

For a few seconds, he debated powering up his laptop and getting some work done. He did have good battery life on it, but he didn't want to drag himself out of bed and away from the curvaceous woman he currently held in his arms. While he loved designing video games, he wasn't a fool and the chance to cuddle with a woman, something he'd not done in years, spoke to him on a level he didn't even know he had. Hell, he hadn't realized something this simple was something he missed. He had the perfect opportunity to indulge himself. Without any expectations. He wasn't going to do anything he would regret later, but right now, he was going back to sleep.

Resting his face against her curls, he took a deep breath and allowed his eyes to close. The next time he woke, he was alone in the bed, missing her body but surrounded by her soft scent. The pillow wall had been re-erected and he smirked, knowing full well she'd done that before she skipped out of bed.

She migrated in her sleep. Not that he had an issue with it—he'd enjoyed having her in his arms. Stretching, he yawned and burrowed back into the bed, pulling the blankets up to his neck. No rush in getting up, as they weren't going anywhere. He snuggled up against the wall she'd made and inhaled, drawing in her scent with each slow breath he took.

The door cracked open and he held his breath as Hope poked her head in. Watching her through slitted eyes as she snuck into the room, he had this insane urge to smile like a fool. Even now, she was trying not to disturb him.

“Morning.”

She squealed and jumped, hand slamming against her full chest.

He slowly sat against the headboard and stared at her, eyebrows up. “You sure are jumpy this morning.”

Hand flexing against her chest, she shook her head. “You scared me.”

“I scared you?” Mitchell didn't take his eyes off her for a second, just stared, wishing the fire burned a bit higher so he

could see more of her facial expression.

She propped her hands on her full hips, eyes narrowing ever so slightly. “That’s what I said. I don’t scare myself. I was minding my own business when you...” She waved a hand around.

He smirked. “Said ‘morning’?”

Hope gave him a sage nod. “Exactly.”

“I can see how that would’ve been scary,” he said drolly. “Opening my mouth to say one word to you.”

Hope narrowed her eyes at him. “I was trying not to interrupt you.” She cleared her throat. “Wake you.” A deep breath. “Whatever.”

He scratched his stomach through his shirt, not ignoring the way her gaze darted toward the movement. “Interrupt me? That’s intriguing. What exactly were you envisioning me *doing* in this bed, Hope?” He leaned forward, lips curling up in a full-fledged smile. “And if you were concerned, why not knock on the door? Did you *want* or *hope* to catch me doing something in this bed?”

“Sleeping.” Her voice was higher and he wasn’t positive but he felt like she was blushing.

“Oh,” he replied as he tossed the blankets back, sucking in a breath at the difference in temperature *outside* the bedding. “Sleeping, huh? You wanted to catch me doing what I was doing when you snuck out?” Disbelief smacked hard. And damn it, he enjoyed making her engage with him.

Her gaze drifted to his arms and he flexed one, loving how she nibbled on her lower lip without looking away from him. He’d heard Emma mention to Linc about how his arms were porn-worthy. Did Hope feel that way about his? Something definitely worth finding out, but he thought she did, considering how her eyes continued to drift to his forearms.

“Or whatever.” Heat filled her eyes and he loved that she didn’t drop her gaze.

“Hope,” he said, rising from the bed.

He watched and waited for her to stop staring at his arm.

“Yes?”

“You didn’t have to put the wall back up. I already know you travel when you sleep.” In basketball, traveling was a foul, but in bed, he was all for her doing it again. Tonight.

Her plump lower lip trembled before she firmed her mouth in a line. “Why are we having this discussion when nothing happened?”

This time he clucked his tongue as he moved across the small floor to where she remained rooted by the door. One hand braced on the wall, he dipped his head, allowing some of his hair to brush along her forehead.

“Or we could say not *enough* happened.” Mitchell dragged his knuckles along her soft cheek before he stepped into the bathroom. He had no logical explanation for why he was behaving the way he was. Hell, he’d just gotten out of a crazy relationship and should be heading for the hills after what that woman had put him through. Yet here he was, flirting with a woman he barely knew because seeing that smile of hers, well fuck, it was worth anything. After making sure the water pipes weren’t frozen, he took care of morning issues and stepped back out into the room.

Hope had disappeared.

He tugged on clothing, banked the fire, and walked out of the room, needing to find her. Nodding to a few others as he headed down, he didn’t care right now if they recognized him. This wasn’t a time for that. He had to do what he could to pitch in and also keep Hope close. There were a few of the guys here who looked at her in a way that set his hackles up. Especially that Alistair guy. Mitchell definitely needed him to keep his distance from Hope.

Locating her in the kitchen, he paused in the doorway as she spoke with the proprietor. Sharp citrus filled the air and he saw sliced oranges on a tray between the women.

“You shouldn’t have to do so much. It’s not like you intended for the power to go out. I can help.” Hope braced

herself on the counter, her non-injured leg bearing most of her weight.

“I’m the owner,” said Naomi. “We’ll have power shortly. They spent last night working on the generators so those should be up and running soon.” Her expression hardened. “It’s what I get for assuming people were doing their job.”

“I can’t speak for the rest of the people staying here, Naomi, but I’m not missing anything. Last night was a lot of fun in front of the fire and today there will be some light. We can play more games. Let’s face it, this matchmaking thing isn’t about us being on our phones or computers. We’re supposed to be getting to know one another.”

An uncomfortable ball settled in the pit of his stomach at the thought of her “getting to know” some of the other men. Nope to all. Definitely not *any* of them. And the computer comment...did she know he was there and made the statement as a dig to him? No, he didn’t think so, she was merely making her point that a mixer was for getting to know people. No electronics necessary.

“You’re a dear.” Naomi squeezed her hand.

“And stubborn. How can I help with breakfast? Even if it’s chopping fruit, which I can do seated. Let me help. Please.”

“Whoever gets to marry you is going to be a lucky man.” Naomi’s eyes kicked over Hope and landed directly upon him. “Extremely lucky.”

Yeah, he thought so as well. Not that Hope getting married was anything he needed to think about. With determination, he placed that thought way in the back of his mind. He wasn’t here to find the next Mrs. Anderson. This was about enjoying the time he was stranded in this place.

Still, it didn’t change how much his heart skipped and his breath caught when Hope lifted her gaze to where he stood lurking in the doorway. He held her stare and lifted an eyebrow.

Dammit, she looked sexy when she was blushing.

“Put me to work, too,” he said, moving deeper into the

stainless-steel kitchen. There was a draw to Hope he wasn't willing to ignore.

Naomi glanced up at him then flicked her gaze between the two of them. "You should be out there talking. Relaxing. Or upstairs sleeping."

His lips quirked. "*We* just came from upstairs."

Hope's gaze widened at his words and he waited for her to say something about it. She tightened her jaw and he bit back his chuckle. Fully aware of the image he had given—if she wasn't going to correct him, who was he to say anything?

"Finish slicing the fruit, please. I'll wrap up the quiche, then do the bacon." Naomi moved back over to the stove where she gave them both one more glance.

He wasted no time in making his way to Hope's side. Determinedly brushing against her arm when he settled in, he reached for a knife, pretending he didn't hear her intake of breath.

"And here I thought you'd be hiding away in the room today, Mr. Anderson. Avoiding people."

He placed his gaze on her, almost memorizing her features. She wasn't looking at him and he wasn't a fan of that but didn't mention it.

"I thought I would be less of a recluse today."

"Good for you." She still didn't look at him, steadfastly keeping her gaze on the cutting board.

"Thought I'd join in more of the games."

She continued to slice up the fruit before her. Mitchell skimmed his gaze down her form, glad she was keeping the weight off her injured leg. However, he wasn't pleased she seemed to be avoiding looking at him. When he focused on the scar on her head, he noticed new butterfly bandages were in place. A slap of unreasonable jealousy hit him. Who'd done that for her?

"That's nice."

Her tone was strange, and he had an uncomfortable pit in his stomach. When people found out who he was, they changed. He pursed his lips and faced her a bit more, propping his hip against the counter. “You’ve figured out who I am. Or someone told you.”

Hope nodded.

“Look at me.”

God, he wanted to insist but she was acting like a frightened puppy. Ever so slow, she lifted those big brown eyes of hers to his gaze.

“I’m still me.”

A bark of laughter. “What does that even mean?”

“I’m still the guy who will nag you until you take care of yourself. I’m still the guy who you’re sharing a room and a *bed* with. Right here, right now, I’m just Mitchell.”

“I don’t think there is anything ‘just’ about you, Mitchell Anderson.”

He grinned and dipped his head closer. “I like the fact you are thinking about me.”

Their gazes locked and he inched nearer to her plump lips.

“If you two are finished over there, we have hungry people this morning.” Naomi’s authoritative tone snapped the moment like a frozen branch. Loud. Sudden. And no going back.

Hope sprang away from him like he’d burned her. Mitchell longed to snake his arm around her midsection and return her to where she’d been. Close enough to kiss.

And he *wanted* to kiss her.

“Finished.” Hope placed the knife on the board and arranged the slices she’d cut on the platter with the others.

“I’ll carry them,” he murmured as he followed suit with the fruit he’d sliced.

Lifting a tray in each hand, he didn’t miss the way her gaze snapped to his arms—again. Nor did he miss the light

whimper that slipped from her mouth and hit him with the force of a wrecking ball.

Yeah, arm porn. His arms *were* worthy.

She gave a small nod and slipped off the stool. Mitchell followed Naomi out and knew without turning that Hope was behind him. Naomi had been cooking up a storm. There was a huge buffet line of food on two tables and he could hear the patrons talking and laughing nearby. He heard a few of the guests complaining about how hungry they were.

With a smile to Naomi, he placed the platters down per her directions and watched as Hope set down the much lighter containers of jam by the other syrups.

“Thank you both for helping.” Naomi adjusted her apron. “Did you want to grab something first?”

“I can wait,” Hope said.

“Me too. Besides, I hear some people are about ready to perish if they don’t get some of this amazing food.” He winked at Hope and wrapped his arm around her. “We’ll wait our turn.”

He guided her to the door, and she paused before they dipped back into the kitchen to walk the long way around to where the others were.

“You okay?” he murmured in her ear. Her confirmation took longer than he wanted. In the kitchen, he halted her by one of the battery-operated lanterns and tipped her face toward him. “Who changed your bandages?”

His fingertips brushed over the edges of each as he watched her face for any sign of pain.

“I did.” A smirk. “Were you wondering why they’re lopsided?”

“Not at all. Wanted to know who I should thank for taking care of you after you ran away this morning.”

Her gasp gave him what he wanted. To engage with him.

“I did *not* run away.”

He stepped back, no matter how hard it was for him to do so, and crossed his arms. “Sure you did.”

She narrowed her gaze at him and snorted. “I left the room. That is *not* running away.”

Moving his fingers like they were legs between them, he said, “Scampered away.”

“I’ll have you know, Mr. Anderson, I have never scampered a day in my life. *Ever.*”

God, this woman made it so easy to grin. And he wanted to. Every second he spent with her, he could feel the corners of his mouth tugging up.

“Scampered.”

Hope opened her mouth to say something else but shook her head and clamped her lips together. Yeah, that wouldn’t do. He wasn’t anywhere close to being done with bantering back and forth with Hope.

“Nothing to say?”

“We need to eat.”

“And play some games.”

“I thought you were hiding in your room to work on your computer.”

He lifted one shoulder in a shrug. “I’ve found something far more entertaining.” A slow blink. “Besides, work will still be there later.”

She walked ahead of him toward the door. “I get the feeling that isn’t a phrase you say very often.”

“Never said it before.” He watched the hem of his shirt as it hung down mid-thigh, liking that it marked her. *His.*

The silence between them as they made their way to the room where people were lined up for the buffet wasn’t strained. It was comfortable. He didn’t feel the urge to fill it with words and it seemed as if Hope was perfectly content to keep to herself.

Normally, that was something he was okay with, but he craved hearing the soft, southern drawl of her voice.

When they entered the room, everyone looked at them. Did a double-take and looked again. Everyone knew.

A child broke the silence.

“Oh my God, you’re Mitchell Anderson! Daddy, do you see? It’s Mitchell Anderson.” Without waiting for his parent, the boy flew across the room and skidded to a stop before him. “Did you know you’re Mitchell Anderson?”

He smiled like he always did when in the spotlight. In his periphery, he noticed the amused tilt of Hope’s mouth. He canted his head to meet her gaze, one brow up.

She mouthed, “Did you know?”

Sure, now she’s cheeky.

Attention back on the child, he nodded. “And who are you?”

“David Larsen. I’m gonna be the bestest player in the NBA. Even better than you were.”

He crouched beside the towheaded child. “That’s a lot of work. You sure you’re up to it?”

The boy nodded eagerly. “I am. And I’m going to get a bootiful wife like you had. But I’m going to keeps her.”

“David, enough.” His father stepped in and picked up his son. “I’m sorry, Mr. Anderson. He doesn’t know what he’s saying.”

He really needed to meditate. “It’s fine. You listen to your father, David, and practice hard. Eat all those vegetables and you may get your wish.”

“Would you come to my first game?”

How like a kid not to focus on the dagger he’d shoved into Mitchell’s chest with his off-the-cuff, cavalier comment about not keeping his wife.

Not that he had wanted to keep her, but still.

Ex-wife. Making sure his smile didn’t slip, he nodded. “You

get there and I'll be there, cheering next to your father."

"Can I have a signed jersey?" The boy sniffed. "I'll give you one of mine when I have *my* number."

"I don't have any with me, but I'll get your address from your father and send you one."

David wriggled until his father put him back on the floor. Grasping one of Mitchell's hands, he held it tight. "I don't care if my daddy thinks you suck and he's glad you no longer play. You are still my favorite. Until I get in the league." He waved and dashed off.

Mr. Larsen flushed a deep red and took off after his son. Those around them watched him for his reaction. It was the snort from behind him that made him turn to find Hope with her hand slapped over her mouth.

The rest of the room fell away as he walked to stand before her. "Something amusing, Hope?"

She shook her head but her eyes betrayed her continued amusement. "I think it's our turn to get some food."

Raking his gaze over her, head to foot, he shrugged. "By all means, lead the way, Flykra."

Chapter Four

Sides aching from laughing so hard, Hope stepped away from the game and made her way to the drinks and snacks table. The generators were up and running. However, based on what she'd heard, the storm was picking up again so they weren't going anywhere soon.

Not that she minded. If she had to be stranded in the northeast in a blizzard, she'd picked a great place for that to happen. Were things a bit more awkward now that she had confirmation that she was sharing not only a room but also a bed with ex-NBA star Mitchell Anderson? Yes, so much yes.

But the man didn't seem bothered by anything going on around him. He checked on her, brought her food and drinks. Asked her how she was feeling.

Not at all what she was expecting.

Then again, I've never met an NBA player before. At least, not that she knew of.

She limped to the loveseat near the fire and carefully lowered herself to the cushion. Her body hurt. A lot. Why, she wasn't sure, but it did and her head wasn't feeling the best either. Sipping the tea, she closed her eyes and listened to the sound of laughter around her. The mixer was still going on, even with the others who had stopped by to ride out the storm. All were adults except for David.

As it was a singles mixer, they had purposefully not allowed people with children here, however, with the onslaught of the blizzard—whatever the winter storm name for it was—it had been necessary. Hope approved of Naomi allowing them to stay here.

Her thoughts drifted to work and how similar these men were to animals in the wild. Sometimes it was easy to forget that humans were, at their core, animals as well. They were circling one another, polite, yes, but there was that hint of bravado and preening too.

Being here was so different from her last assignment. She'd been traipsing through the Mindo Cloud Forest in Ecuador in search of a rare bird for a conservation story. The two others with her hadn't behaved like the guys here. They were all about staying safe. There was a lot less conversation as well, and what they'd had, was quieter. She understood animals much better than human males and it had been much warmer than winter in Vermont.

"You okay?"

Opening her eyes at the question, Hope saw Alistair claim the chair on the other side of the fireplace from her.

"Tired."

He grinned. "I'm sure. Can't imagine you're getting a lot of sleep."

She frowned. "Why not?"

The man shrugged and looked a bit sheepish. "I thought there was something between you and the ball player."

Only in my dreams. Dreams which were beginning to happen even when she was wide awake. "Nope." And what was with the way he'd said "ball player"? Did he know something she should?

The man grinned at her and shifted to the end of his seat. "You sure about that? I see the way he watches you."

She waved away his statement and closed her eyes, if only to keep from looking in the direction she *knew* Mitchell was in. "I didn't think they were serving alcohol this early in the day."

His laugh made her smile but she refused to open her eyes. The light, muted though it was, burned her retinas and made her head throb. She really needed to lie down for a while.

"You sure you feel okay, Hope? You look like you're in pain."

She cracked open her eyes and shrugged as nonchalantly as she could. "Getting a headache."

He rose and plucked her drink from her hand. “I’ll take care of this for you. Why don’t you head up and lie down for a bit? We have games again this afternoon.”

Hope rubbed the nape of her neck and nodded. “I think I will. Thank you.”

“Of course,” he replied, holding out a hand to assist her up from the chair. He dipped his head by her ear. “I’ll walk you to the stairs. Let him think there’s something going on.”

“There’s nothing between us. I’m sure he doesn’t care what I do.” But she couldn’t deny the small thrill that shot through her at the mere thought.

This wasn’t good. She and that man were merely roommates for the moment. Hell, technically, she could get some blankets and sleep down here. In fact, that would probably be the smart thing to do.

Alistair did as promised and walked her to the stairs, leaving her with a smile and assuring her he’d see her later. She slowly made her way up to the room. Mitchell wasn’t there and she noticed how chilly the air was, but she didn’t care. Her body felt too warm anyway.

At the edge of the bed, she toed off her shoes and pulled the blankets down before crawling in and tugging them up to her ear as she curled on her uninjured side. It didn’t matter how warm she was, the heavy weight of the bedding around her made it all better.

...

Hope stirred and opened her eyes when the smell of mint and lemon brushed her senses. The room was darker than it had been when she’d stumbled to bed. Her ears picked up on some fast clicking sounds.

Like someone was on a keyboard.

Hope pushed up, blankets sliding down to pool around her waist as she stared through the hair that had fallen over her eyes at Mitchell seated at the small table in the room, working

on his computer.

“Tea is beside you. Mint and lemon.” He never looked away from the screen. His fingers flew over the keys and it was impressive how fast the man typed.

“Was I snoring and you need me out of the room because I’m disturbing you?”

“Drink your tea.” Even then, he didn’t lift his head or glance away from whatever it was he worked on.

Inching up until she sat pressed against the headboard, a pillow between her spine and the wood, she reached over to pluck up the ceramic mug. It was warm. Cupping both hands around it, she took a deep breath, allowing the rich scents to permeate. It soothed her nerves. She didn’t realize she was so tense.

“Thank you for this.” She took a small drink.

He sat facing her, so all he had to do was lift his gaze over the top of his laptop. Which he did and she nearly spit out the tea she’d sipped. Those brown eyes of his were killer. His blond hair hung forward, giving off this almost innocent vibe, but she knew better. So much so. Nothing innocent about this man.

And damn if that wasn’t a huge aphrodisiac.

No. No. No! The last thing she needed was to see him in any way other than a roommate. A *temporary* one at that.

“Drink.”

His eyes returned to the screen before him.

She listened and they sat in silence as she began to finish the tea. Really, how had her life come to this? Sharing a room with Mitchell Anderson. Not only that, but wearing his clothing and sleeping beside him at night.

Determined *not* to think about any of that, she focused on the tea and how it warmed her insides and calmed her nerves. Right? It was calming them.

Yep, it was. She was *almost* five percent sure.

When she finished, she placed the mug on the table beside her then flipped back the blankets.

He lifted his head and closed the computer lid with a *click*. Her insides tightened when he rose and walked toward her.

Predator.

Like a big cat, he moved with sinuous grace and danger. His gaze fixated on her and she gulped. Having been in the sights of an actual predator many times, she wasn't sure she was safer now.

Before she could swing her legs over, he was there, filling the space and making her thoughts tumble to where she'd been *trying* to keep them from going.

“Why didn't you tell me you weren't feeling well?”

Hope cleared her throat. “Tired is all.” She made sure to keep her face angled from him. She'd just woken up and didn't need to kill him with nap breath, if that was even a thing.

“And the headache?”

He shifted so he was looking in her eyes again. Once more, she averted her head. “Better now.”

“Woman, you're driving me crazy. Why aren't you looking at me?” Low and growly, all his voice did was warm her.

She rolled her lower lip in her teeth and lifted her gaze to his. He scowled. Hope lifted the top quilt over her mouth to keep her breath from him. “Better?”

His lips quirked. Instead of backing away, like she figured he'd do, he leaned closer. “Are you worried about your breath, Flykra?”

As sure as she knew there were feet of snow on the ground outside, she knew her face was heating up. Hopefully, he couldn't tell.

“I spent years in locker rooms with guys. We're not exactly the cleanest creatures. Your breath, even with you having just woken up and drinking some tea, isn't going to offend me.”

She licked her lips, still behind the blanket, but she swore he tracked the movement with those incredible brown eyes. Hope wasn't sure how to handle this man, not that she was used to *handling* any man, but Mitchell Anderson was a different breed all the way around.

That sleepy, hooded, sexy look of his did things to her insides and made her want to ask him to do things to her, insides included. It wasn't fair. Honestly, he probably looked at all women that way, even ones like her that didn't fit the mold of societal beauty.

"Talk to me, Flykra." He settled the back of his hand on her head, near but not touching the healing injury there. "Or I get to make up the conversation between us."

"Will you do voices?" The question slipped out before she could contain the words.

There was the smile. The one that turned her insides to mush. She hadn't seen much of it, but man, it was a powerful weapon when he wielded it.

"I can do *all* kinds of voices, if that's what you want." He sobered. "Are you okay, really? I don't want you overdoing it."

He grasped the edge of the blanket and drew it away, exposing her knee. She gasped, dropping the quilt from her mouth. "I could have been naked under here." It didn't matter she'd covered up after he'd seen she was fully clothed as he walked over to the bed.

Heat exploded in his gaze as he ran it over her body. "We are sharing a bed. You don't sleep naked at night. Although, if you wanted to, I would *not* complain."

She ignored that and stared at the top of his head while he pushed up the pants leg of his sweats, exposing her knee. Again, the touch was impersonal, but he was gentle and thorough. Which she appreciated.

"I should sleep by the fire."

He froze for a moment before continuing to poke and prod her leg, focusing on her knee. "Something happen that is

making you give up a perfectly decent bed?” The man didn’t even look in her direction, keeping his eyes on what he was doing.

Her gut clenched and his touch changed subtly, echoing through her like a bass drum. “I don’t think you want people to know that we shared a room. I’m sure I’m not the right image for you to have next to you, much less in your bed.” She shrugged. “I don’t mind.”

His hand tightened on her thigh before he looked up at her. “I mind.” His gaze was more intense than she’d ever seen it, a feral fire tingeing the edges even as it burned through her. Marked her.

“That doesn’t even make sense.”

He slipped his left hand under her thigh and lifted. As he manipulated her knee by moving her calf with the right, she whimpered as more pain shot through her. Mitchell grunted and stopped moving his hand.

“Why doesn’t it make sense?”

She didn’t respond immediately, again lost in staring at his hair which she knew to be soft and silken. He continued to touch her leg, even though he wasn’t moving it now, in fact, he’d gone predator-still and she took a deep breath, only to find his direct gaze on her.

Her thoughts tumbled away. His stare locked on her and she, quite honestly, could hardly remember her name.

He tightened his grip on the underside of her thigh. A part of her body she tried to hide from men—dimples and all. Mitchell didn’t seem perturbed by them at all. The opposite really. His fingers continued to move like he was caressing her.

There.

“Flykra. Answer me.” This time, the grip on the underside of her leg flexed, grabbing onto her.

She gulped.

...

Mitchell wanted to know what the fuck she was talking about. Also, he wanted to know how the hell her skin was so damn soft. The fact her knee was still bothering her was an issue, but he wasn't a doctor and she would probably be sore for a few days. That didn't mean he had to like it.

Regardless of the sore knee, her skin, holy Christ. He was having dreams about it.

Right now, he needed answers. Mitchell didn't know what the hell was going on here. He wasn't in his typical world. Granted, being snowed in at a singles retreat would never have been his typical world. Yet Hope Roman was an unknown. One he wanted to learn about.

He kept his hands on her. One resting on her calf and the strong muscles there, and the other on the underside of her thigh.

“What difference does it make to you if I sleep here or down there?”

There was pain in her question. He shifted his fingers against her skin and tipped his head to the side, ignoring the hair that fell over one eye.

“Do you want to get away from me? Because I will sleep down there and give you the bed.”

“That's not it.”

He grinned. Good to know. “Is my breath bad? Is that it?” He covered his mouth, blew into his palm and sniffed. Smelled like his toothpaste.

“No and thank you for reminding me mine is.”

Mitchell tugged on one curl before tucking it behind her ear. “We're in this together, Hope. Sharing the bed and all.”

When he settled his hand along the side of her calf, she stiffened, gaze snapping down there as if she remembered he was touching her.

“I should head back down so you can get some work done.”

Yeah, he wasn't letting her go there alone. Were the guys nice enough? Of course. But for him to let other men hit on his woman? No way, not a chance in hell that was going to happen.

His phone rang, shattering the spell between them. He retreated across the room to pick it up from where it rested near his computer.

“Mitchell.”

Hope slid from the bed and he watched her tentatively test out her knee before putting her full weight on it. Then she made the bed and pulled her hair into a loose ponytail.

“How're things going?” Tully's question snapped his attention from the woman sliding to the door like Mitchell wasn't watching her like a hawk.

Eyes locked on her, he refused to drop her gaze as she opened the door and slipped through. Only once the door closed did he find the wherewithal to turn his attention to the man on the phone.

With a grunt, he walked to the bed and flopped down on it. “I'm fine,” he said, switching the phone to speaker so he didn't have to hold it and then letting it fall to the mattress beside his ear. If he tried hard enough, he could imagine the bedding still carried her scent. Okay, he didn't have to try.

“How's it going out there?” Linc piped in.

“He's having woman trouble. Sounds all upset and moody.” No disguising the humor in Tully's words.

Problem was, Mitchell didn't find it amusing. He was angry and didn't like that she wanted to run from him.

“She know who you are?” Leave it to Tully to hit hard at the crux of the matter.

Nodding before he remembered they weren't there, he responded, “Yes. There is a kid here who recognized me.” But someone had alerted her prior, he believed, even if he didn't know who. Funny thing, she didn't much seem to care except

to try to put more distance between them.

“And?” Linc asked around the pop of a can top.

Knowing his friends, it was beer.

“I’m curious as to why there is a kid at a singles mixer.”

“Tully has a point, Mitchell. What’s going on over there?”

“Blow me. They needed a place to hole up. He’s here with his father who, by the way, is glad I’m out of the league.”

Both men went silent. Then they laughed. Mitchell didn’t say a word, having expected that. All three of them had to deal with fans who were less than polite to them. Hell, some were downright rude and vicious. Especially the ones who threatened them.

“Whenever you bitches are done.” He stretched out his legs while he waited.

“Right,” Tully muttered.

“Fuck no. I’ll be laughing about this for a while.” Linc cleared his throat. “Enough talk about the man and his son, I want to know why you’re up in your room moping when the woman you’ve got a hard-on for isn’t there with you.”

“I’m up here because you called me.” He adjusted himself through his pants and used his legs to shove himself up the bed until his head rested on the pillow she’d used. Yes, now he could definitely smell her. The delicate floral scent had a deeper musk this time and he wholeheartedly approved.

“So you’re jerking off while the woman is downstairs?”

“Why do I put up with the two of you?” He didn’t even respond to Linc’s question. Why not? Because he may have been ready to pull one out but he wasn’t going to admit that to them. The last thing that duo needed was more ammunition on him.

“You love us,” Linc retorted without hesitation. “And I know you’re ignoring my question, which is fine. We already know.”

He frowned and pushed up so he was on his elbows. Staring

across the room to where his computer sat on the table, he wondered what she'd been thinking when she'd woken and had seen him working.

“Mitchell!”

“What, Tully?” he snapped as he sat and slipped off the bed, pausing to straighten it up before grabbing his phone and walking to the laptop taunting him.

“We lost you there. Did you hear anything I said?”

“No. I have to go.” He hung up. Muttering a curse, he scrubbed his hand down his face and kicked the chair from the table before sitting. Phone by his elbow, he cradled his face in his hands and sat there for a while.

His game was important. The one he was working on currently was the third installment. The first two had sold like hot cakes and there was intense expectation for this one. When it released. Surprisingly, he didn't do sports games. He was deep into the fantasy and sci-fi world. Inicio had a fantasy series, *Shroud of the Fae*, which had put them on the map and now he was working on a sci-fi series, *Rulers of the Macrocasm*, that had players battling on different planets in outer space. This was the future of his company that he was contemplating ignoring. Damn her.

She had to go and worm her way into his heart. Which, for the record, had been firmly and securely behind a wall of iron. Or should have been. Fort Knox would have been an easier breach.

Along came this woman who defied everything he'd thought he'd wanted in a partner and found a way in. Not only that but she'd put down roots and sunk her claws into him.

He didn't like it.

Like that fucking matters. Why can't I respect her decision to sleep downstairs?

A loud crack snapped his attention and he bolted to the window in time to see a heavy branch fall from a tree and bring down a line with it. The lights outside didn't even flicker, they were out.

Yeah, that wasn't a good sign.

Back to his computer, he saved what he had done and shut it down. After picking up the mug he'd brought for Hope, he walked out into the hall and let the door close behind him. He made sure the door was locked, then went downstairs.

He'd gone up thirty minutes after Hope had vanished to make sure she was okay. Finding her sleeping had stirred his protective instincts. But he'd taken advantage of the time and worked while she hadn't moved in the bed...at all. Heck, she'd barely breathed and he'd stopped working to check on her a few times.

She'd woken up about a half hour after he'd put the hot tea beside the bed. Now, she was down here and that's where he wanted to be.

It didn't make any sense, these feelings. But it wasn't about making sense. Mitchell liked that she treated him like a person and not a dollar sign. And that she wasn't someone who wanted something from him and threw herself at him.

He went to the kitchen first and washed the mug in the sink of cooling soapy water. The air in the room was thick with the savory, mouthwatering scent of pot roast.

"You do realize you're a guest here, don't you, Mitchell?"

He smiled as he faced Naomi. "Yes, but I also know this isn't the easiest of situations for you." Reaching for the towel, he wiped his hands off on it then draped it on the hook. "I saw some branches come down. Everything okay?"

She flattened her lips. "My husband's out there cutting them up."

"I'll go help."

"Guest."

"Also a guy who grew up in this area, and I know how much something like that can cause issues." He moved to her side. "Just keep an eye on my girl for me?"

"Of course I will."

He gave her a smile and retreated back to his room to switch out the sweats for jeans and a thicker shirt. Shrugging into his jacket as he went down, he cast a final look over his shoulder before stepping out into the still-raging winter storm.

Chapter Five

“No way!” Hope shook her finger at Wendy who sat there, looking smug. “That has to be under the realm of cheating.”

“I sneezed,” Wendy corrected her. “You can’t punish me for allergies.”

Hope crossed her arms and glared at the woman who was putting up her hair in a black clip.

“Allergies my ass. It’s the middle of winter and you didn’t have any issues before. You were losing and knocked it over before I could take my turn and win.”

With a big production of sniffing, Wendy batted her lashes. “Allergies.” A large grin. “What does your block say anyway?”

With a decidedly *non-allergy* related sniff, Hope glanced down at the smooth block in her hand. “Would you rather live in a theme park or a zoo?”

Everyone looked at her and she blinked.

“What?”

“You have to answer,” Alistair said.

“Do I, though? I mean, thanks to someone’s *sudden* bout of allergies, the game is over.”

Popcorn flew through the air and hit her in the face. She swatted at it and picked it up from her lap before shooting Wendy another glare. Not sure why she bothered because the woman didn’t look any more bothered by that glare than the previous one.

“Fine. But everyone has to answer. I’m not going to be the only one.”

Erick nodded. “Let’s all take ten of them. We’ll merely avoid the talent part of the game, due to someone’s allergies.”

“Come on!” Wendy tossed up her arms. “I sneezed. *One time.*”

Sonya laughed and hugged her. “I’m glad you did because I was trying to figure out a way to get out of that without making it obvious.”

Erick handed out the blocks and they all settled into their seats. When every gaze landed on her, Hope sighed.

“Guessing I’m supposed to go first.”

“Yes.” Wendy held up some more popcorn and Hope chuckled.

“No need to threaten me.” She licked her lips. “I would pick the zoo.” Every time, every day. Animals over humans.

All three of them frowned. None agreed with her. They all would take the theme park. She got it, sure, but given her passion in life, it was obvious.

“Why the zoo, Hope?” Erick questioned. “Zoos smell and theme parks have a lot more food.”

“I understand animals and I don’t think that’s entirely true. A zoo has to carry food for both the people and the animals. You can’t feed lions cotton candy. They need meat. Plus there is going to be a medical facility and while it may not be state of the art, it’s going to be far more than a first-aid booth at a theme park.”

She shifted on her seat. “Take the one in Berlin, Zoologischer Garten. It’s the largest one in the world when you’re measuring the number of animals and is also a heritage site. They have medical equipment and lots of food.” She’d gone there to do an internship when she was getting her degree in animal behavior. So many fond memories.

Everyone nodded. “You make great points,” Erick said, sliding his chair closer. “I’m staying with you at the zoo. I’d like to know what possessed you to go to the zoo in Berlin. Are zoos here in the US not good enough?”

She narrowed her gaze at him for a moment before shaking her head. “Who’s next?” she asked.

Alistair held up his block. “Me.” He cleared his throat. “What’s the weirdest food you’ve ever eaten?”

Hope leaned back in her seat as she ran over a list of the odd foods she'd encountered. Traveling the world, she had gotten to experience a lot of different cuisines.

“Grasshoppers,” Wendy said. “I ate them when I was at a friend’s wedding in Thailand. And for the record, they weren’t so bad. A lot of what I ate over there was delicious.”

Sonya shuddered. “Nope, I don’t do odd foods. Undercooked meat is about as risky as I will go. I don’t even do sushi. Or that raw beef thing. What’s it called? Like tartar sauce.”

Hope laughed. “Steak tartare? Tartar sauce goes on fish. Or veggies—grilled, roasted, or fried. I’ve also had it on a crudité platter.” She flattened her lips. “Not about me, sorry.”

Sonya jabbed a finger at her. “That’s it. I don’t do horses.” She shook her head. “I mean, I don’t eat them.”

“Good to know you draw the line at eating them but will *do* them,” Hope teased. It earned her another handful of popcorn to the face.

Erick leaned forward, his shirtsleeves pushed up, showing off his strong arms. “I also won’t *do* horses or eat them. But I’ve had pufferfish. That was an experience I’m not looking forward to repeating. I was so certain I was going to die after I put it in my mouth.”

Alistair grinned. “Hope?”

“I’ve had a lot of strange foods. But one of the strangest would be hákarl.” She shifted on the seat, noting the lost expressions. “It’s from Iceland and is basically the rotting carcass of a basking shark. It’s been buried underground in a pit with stones on it to push out the poisonous internal fluids until it’s safe. It’s hung up to dry before it’s cut into strips and served.”

All of them looked like they were going to vomit.

She shrugged. “You asked. And for the record, I didn’t go back for seconds.” Gesturing to Alistair, she waved him on.

“Definitely not rotting shark, that’s for sure. I did have tuna

eyeballs. Had that over in Japan when I was in the service.”

Hope looked at him and smiled. “Thank you for your service.”

Alistair’s return smile was swift, and damn, he was attractive. “You’re welcome.”

Erick cleared his throat. “I’ll go next.” He made a big production of holding out his block.

Hope tugged the quilt that had been on the chair over her lap as she settled in deeper. The wind had picked up outside and she was glad she was inside. The fire popped and crackled and she loved the smoky campfire smell wafting around.

“Does your current car have a name? What is it?” He pinned her with a look. “Hope?”

“Nope.”

“Really?” Wendy asked. “You didn’t name your car?”

She lifted a shoulder. “Don’t have one. So nothing to name.”

“Mine’s Petey.” Wendy grinned. “He’s a cute little Cooper. Green and white.” A finger over her shoulder. “I’d say we could go see him but he’s probably buried.”

“I didn’t name mine,” Sonya added. “My friend says I should but he wanted to give it a girl’s name.” She shook her head. “Lucy, after the show. It’s a red sports car.”

“Mine’s Betty,” Erick said. “Big old Ford pickup out there. My dad had it before he passed and the name stuck.”

Reaching out, Hope patted his arm. “Sorry you lost your father.”

“Been a few years, but thank you.”

She removed her hand, returning it to her lap.

“Alistair, what about you?” Erick glanced at her briefly after he’d asked Alistair.

“Candy, of course.”

They all laughed.

“What are you driving?” Wendy angled toward him. “A new Ferrari or something like that?”

Hope shook her head. “No, I see him in a classic.” The man looked at her, eyebrows up.

“Really?”

“Yes, something like a Stingray from the fifties.”

Alistair grinned and leaned forward. “You’re good, Hope. And you’re right. That’s what I have. You’ll have to let me take you for a drive.”

“Sounds like fun.”

“What does?” Mitchell’s low voice reverberated through her.

She gulped and looked over her shoulder to watch him stride closer. No jacket but his sweater and jeans were completely *unfair* to her senses. He brought with him the crisp smell of outdoors. His face was ruddy from the cold but his eyes... those burned hot.

Alistair answered, “Me taking Hope for a ride in my vintage ’Vette.”

Mitchell barely glanced at the man but stayed focused on her face. “That a fact?”

“He offered.” *God, why do I feel like I’m cheating on him?* It’s not like they had any claim on each other. “Are you here to play the game with us? You look a little cold.”

“Don’t mind if I do.” He swiped a chair and wedged it between her and Erick, making the man move over a few inches.

Wendy and Sonya tried to hide their amusement behind their hands. Failed, but at least they made the attempt. Alistair didn’t even do that. His headshake was obvious, as was the grin.

Once he was apparently content between her and Erick, Mitchell draped his arm along the top of her chair. “What are we playing?”

“We were playing Jenga but that collapsed, due to allergies, so we’re asking questions from the blocks now.” Wendy stretched out her legs. “You can probably share with Hope.”

“Perfect.” Mitchell somehow moved closer.

Because suddenly there aren’t any more blocks?

“There’s a bag of blocks over there,” she said, pointing by Erick.

He reached into her lap and picked one up. “Good for them. Should I go next, then?”

Everyone but Hope said yes.

“What is,” he began, staring down at her, “the most satisfying noise?”

Heat slammed her and she gulped. “It doesn’t say that,” Hope protested.

Mitchell turned the block and brought it close to her face. “Sure it does.”

She read it as uncertainty welled up in her gut. “It does.”

“Can’t wait to hear your answer,” he whispered in her ear before pulling away. “Who answers first? Me? Or someone else?”

“Does it matter?” Erick groused. “You’re going to do what you want anyway.”

“True,” Mitchell said without shame. “I’ll answer. Up until now I would have said the roar of the crowd at a game, namely after we won the championship. Now,” he took a deep breath, “I’ve found a different sound to crave.”

Silence fell over them all. Holy crap, she could *feel* his gaze—and everyone else’s—on her and she kept hers firmly on her lap.

“Who’s next?” His voice was smooth as he posed the question.

“Not sure how I’m going to follow that up,” Sonya said. “But for me it’s the sound of my nieces and nephews when

they come to visit.”

His hand brushed over Hope’s skin and she trembled. It didn’t make any sense. Mitchell wasn’t looking at her. Sonya had his attention as she spoke, then he turned it to Wendy as she answered the question. But all Hope could focus on was the fleeting brush of his fingertips over her hypersensitive skin. They weren’t even cold, even though she knew he’d been outside. The material of his pants was damp toward the bottom and she nearly opened her mouth to mention how he should change into something dry.

“Hope?”

Alistair said her name and she blinked a few times. “Sorry. My turn?” At their nods, she rubbed her palms on the quilt still covering her legs. Determined not to turn her head to the right and the man who she knew, even for such a short time, had the ability to wreck her, Hope smiled.

“Rain.”

Alistair, still across from her, arched an eyebrow.

She expounded. Leaning forward, she spread her fingers before her after making sure the quilt remained tucked around her. “The sound of a rainstorm as it empties down. On a field, a body of water, even a forest. Or on the tin roof of a home—doesn’t matter. The rumble of thunder along with the crack of lightning.” She blinked as she realized her hands were nearly above her head as she spoke, and she shook her head, lowering them. “That’s *it* for me.”

• • •

He’d never been turned on by rain before. At least not talking about it or reminiscing about it, but after that explanation, he was. Holy hell.

Mitchell swallowed and made sure that his arousal was hidden from everyone’s view. The husky tone to her words as she spoke, the small hitch in her voice when she lifted her hands, like she was painting them a picture.

And for him, she did. An extremely visual, seductive image.

The way her eyes acquired this faraway look as if reliving the very moment she spoke about gripped him low and held tight.

Her laughter, sultry and husky, snapped him from his own thoughts. Blinking, he saw David had joined them and they were no longer looking at the blocks but setting up to play the game with the kid.

David coaxed him into playing and he found himself on the floor, his shoulder by Hope's leg as he played with Erick, David, and Alistair. Around them, the women talked about random things. He wasn't paying much attention to what Wendy and Sonya said but his brain latched onto everything that his Flykra said.

Once the meal had been eaten and they'd pitched in to help clean, David was taken upstairs to his room. Mitchell went to change and came down to find the fire roaring and Hope moving some chairs with Sonya as Erick and a few others, whose names he didn't recall, moved the larger furniture. The space in front of the fire was completely open by the time they were finished.

A woman named Collette who had been with the other group joined them. *To even out the numbers*, she said. Mitchell claimed a seat by Hope as Alistair took the one on the other side. Erick was a few seats away, watching.

They drew numbers from a hat that got passed around and he looked at his to see an eight. Stealing a glance to Hope's, he bit down to hide his frown when he saw a three. Still, it didn't hurt when she reached over and placed her hand on his, tipping it so she could see his number.

"What are we doing now?" he mock-whispered to her.

"No clue." She withdrew her touch and tucked her fingers up inside the sleeve of the sweatshirt she continued to wear.

Yeah, he approved. His primitive side was totally on board with her being covered in his clothing. And it turned out his primitive side wasn't that different than his everyday side.

Huh, go figure.

Sonya glanced down at the sheet she held. “Rules state you find the person with the same number as you and answer the questions on the sheet.” She lifted a stack of papers. “Okay, pair up and I’ll deliver the sheets. Oh, and I’m number six, for whoever has that.”

Mitchell groaned when he found he was matched with Collette. When Alistair moved away from Hope he was happy right up until Erick swaggered up to her and took a seat beside her, proclaiming in a loud voice, “Number three!”

Collette walked up to Mitchell and placed a hand on his arm. He gave her a slight smile even as he stepped away from her touch.

“Collette Tauls. It’s an honor to meet you, Mitchell. Do you mind if I call you that? I mean, it is a mixer. We’re supposed to be getting to know one another.”

Her blue eyes were bright and sparkled in the firelight, but it didn’t matter. They weren’t dark brown.

Gesturing to the chair, he waited until she sat. Manners that Tully’s mother and Linc’s father had drilled into him over the years wouldn’t abandon him, no matter how much he wished he was sitting with Hope.

“Mitchell’s fine.”

“Wonderful.” She sank her teeth into her lower lip. “Shall we?” Holding up a sheet she’d obviously got from Sonya, she waved it before him. “I’ll read off the first one.”

Hope laughed and it tore through him with gale-like force. Making sure the smile on his face didn’t slip, he nodded. “Sure.”

“Would you rather take an African safari or stay in an overwater bungalow?”

“Not sure, what about you?”

“I would take the overwater bungalow.” She gave him a flirtatious look from below lowered lids. “I have a great bikini that would be perfect. And if I were to tan topless no one

would be close enough for it to be an issue.”

“Safari for me.”

“I’m sure it would be interesting with the right person.” She tapped the paper with one bloodred nail.

“Exactly.” Once more, his gaze drifted over to where Hope and Erick were sitting. The man faced him and damn it, Mitchell knew *exactly* what the bastard was doing. Making sure he saw how close they were when he looked.

Erick gave him a smug grin and dipped his head to hold Hope’s gaze.

“Your turn.”

Taking the sheet, he did his obligatory turn. It didn’t take long for the nine questions to be asked and answered. Most people were laughing and having a good time, but he was not.

Collette was sitting next to him, closer than he would like, sipping on one of the hot toddies that had been passed around to everyone.

“I have to admit, I’m surprised that you’re at a singles mixer.”

He tipped his head down to look at her. She was great WAG material. And his mother would approve of her. Two strikes against her.

“Wasn’t expecting to be here.” He took a healthy gulp of his drink, his gaze locating Hope, who talked and laughed with both Erick and Sonya. Animated. That was far too tame of a word to describe her. She was *effervescent*. “Excuse me.”

But before he could make his way across the space to Hope’s side, Sonya whistled to get everyone’s attention.

“Okay, this next one is going to let us get up close and personal. Suck and Blow.”

His heart stopped for a few beats. When he finally realized what was going on, he had missed the discussion of rules. Didn’t matter. He walked to Hope and took a seat by her.

“What are you doing over here?”

“I’m down here at the games because of you, Hope. I’m not spending them across the room from you and I sure as hell...” He shook his head, not willing to admit the thought aloud. That would make it realer than it was already.

He expected her to become soft and gooey, or maybe not. Hell, he didn’t know what to expect with this woman who’d turned his life on its head in mere days. Because of that, he waited.

Hope blinked twice more and shrugged. “Fine, but I don’t plan on losing, so you’d better not let me down. You’d better *shine* at Suck and Blow.”

Dear God, the words rolling off her tongue were enough to make him give up monkhood. And hell, he hadn’t even contemplated another woman since he’d first learned of Shawnee’s infidelity.

The corner of his mouth twitched and he made sure their eye contact was solid before he leaned closer to her. “I excel at both of those things.”

She didn’t back away, oh no, not his Flykra. Hope bent at her waist, coming nearer to his mouth, eyes continuing to hold his. “All those years in the locker room coming to good use, I see.”

He gave a fake exasperated huff. “If you must know, it’s my best friends. They get so damn needy at times.”

Mitchell wasn’t positive what he’d been expecting from her with his announcement but her laughter wasn’t it. And again, like she was doing with everyone else, it wasn’t a sly chuckle in an attempt to flirt. This was open, full, robust laughter. Her head tipped back as she roared.

Damn it, there went his lips again, threatening to curve up at the corners.

His heart hadn’t been this light in a long time, other than when he hung out with his boys.

Hope Roman was something special.

Sonya unboxed a deck of *Lord of the Rings* cards and fanned

them out. “One card to rule them all.”

“Oh, oh! Can I have Aragorn?” Hope piped up from beside him, jabbing her hand up into the air. She looked like a kid in school, desperate for the teacher to call on them.

Wendy and Sonya agreed with her. Collette watched blankly until she looked at him, then her eyes heated and he turned away. Not a woman he wanted to engage with.

“You know who Aragorn is but you didn’t know who I was?” He put his attention on Hope.

“Of course I *know* who *Aragorn* is. I read,” she retorted. “But in this case, I’m a huge Viggo fan so, no offense, if he walks in here, I’m sucking and blowing him.”

It was official: Mitchell didn’t approve of that jealous feeling racing through him. “It’s Suck and Blow that you would play *with* him.”

She shrugged. “With him. *On* him. *For* him. Doesn’t matter. We’d come up with something.”

He grunted but when he looked at her once more, he noticed the amusement in her eyes and, just like that, the anger in his gut melted away.

Teasing. She was teasing him.

“Everyone, get to your places. And for the record, I think we need to do this with balloons as well.” Sonya slid off her chair. “One balloon per couple and we can do it to music, where you have to keep the balloon between you without popping it or letting it touch the floor. Then again, there is the one where you do it with a ball. Or fruit...we could get a hard piece of fruit and do it.”

Erick cleared his throat and Sonya blushed.

“Cards. Oh, I have them. Pick your spots, people.”

Mitchell snuck a glance at Hope, who sat next to him, her bottom lip caught in her teeth as she smiled in slight embarrassment at what he presumed to be Sonya’s last comment.

“I get you for fruit and the balloon,” he muttered, bending to speak in her ear.

“We’ll have to see how good your skills are with the card first. I, for one, have exceptional skills at this.” She didn’t glance at him but continued looking ahead. “I could rival a hoover. Just saying.”

There wasn’t going to be relief in his pants anytime soon.

Chapter Six

Hope wanted to hide. Officially hide in a corner until this game was over. What had she been thinking when she'd challenged this man beside her? Oh, that's right, she hadn't been. At least not with her brain.

Her ovaries on the other hand, yes, they could be blamed for getting her into this mess.

That's my story and I'm sticking to it.

She tuned out the rules coming from Sonya's mouth and tried to calm down her heart rate and breathing.

And I have to turn to this man on my right and pass a card to him with nothing more than my lips. Or get one from him. Either way the result is the same. Our lips almost touching.

She'd be lying to herself and the entire universe if she pretended she wasn't hoping they did this a few times, using a balloon and, hell, she'd figure out the fruit. Hope smiled as Sonya grabbed Erick's shirt and tugged him close before slamming their mouths together.

The whistles and catcalls began and Hope put her fingers in her mouth and joined in. "What about the card?" she called out.

The two sprang apart like they were teens being caught by their parents, flushes racing up both of their faces and necks.

"Yes, well," Sonya said. "I forgot to suck."

"Looks like you were doing fine from this angle," Wendy hollered.

Alistair hooted and drummed his hands on his thighs.

Laughter filled the room and mixed in with the crackle and pop of the fire. Sinking down further in her chair, Hope glanced about once more. She didn't have to look to the windows to know the storm hadn't lost any of its fury and once more she was exceptionally glad to be in here instead of out there.

Erick picked up the card and held it aloft for everyone to see. Then he placed it on the arm of his chair, dipped his head, and when he came up, the card was plastered to his lips.

“Ohh, good suck, Erick.” Alistair’s comment earned him a glare.

Sonya took it from him then turned to pass the card along to the person beside her. Jokes and off-the-cuff humor fell from the group as everyone waited to see who would drop the card. The closer the turn came to her, the more nervous she became.

Collette had the card now and Hope didn’t want to see her passing it to Mitchell, so she glanced to her other side and caught Alistair pursing his lips over and over again.

“Do I want to know?” Logic told her she didn’t and yet the question slipped free anyway.

He grinned and did it a few more times. “Gotta make sure this is good for you.” He rolled his shoulders. “Feeling like I should do some lunges or something like that. Get limbered up.” His eyebrows bounced up and down. “You know, in case you drop the card on purpose and it ends up being a real kiss.”

“Pay attention, Hope. Mitchell is waiting for you.” Sonya’s words pulled her attention from Alistair.

Gah, if only that were true. She turned her attention and found the man there, card plastered to his firm mouth as his eyes held hers.

She bit the inside of her cheek as she leaned closer to the man she shared a bed with. “I’m confused,” she muttered. “Am I sucking or blowing here?”

He narrowed his eyes and reached out to tug on a curl. Hope nearly curled up with a purr at the simple touch. Instead, she put her lips on the other side of the card, determined not to think about how Collette’s lips had touched this card as well.

Mitchell’s gaze didn’t drop from hers and she swore his heated while they were locked like this. His eyebrows rose and she gave him a small nod. She was ready. When he pulled away, she held the card and turned immediately to Alistair. As she’d done with Mitchell, she leaned over to meet the man

who was to take the card from her.

Unlike with Mitchell, she didn't feel anything more than passing a card between two people. Alistair winked at her before he drew back and turned to move to the next person.

"He seemed more than anxious to have you drop the card." Mitchell's whisper skated along her ear and neck.

"No more than Collette did with you." She didn't look at him but followed the card as it made its way once more to Erick.

"Are you jealous?"

"No reason to be. It's a singles mixer. And we're both single."

He stiffened beside her ever so slightly and she would have, *should* have, missed it but Hope acknowledged she was far more attuned to his body than she should be.

"Are we, though?"

His question was barely audible and she ignored it, determined not to make a fool of herself more than she already was.

"Good fun, good fun," Sonya said, taking the card from Erick and returning it to the deck. "Next game is another icebreaker, of sorts." She reached behind her and pulled out some dice. "We roll and the number we get correlates to a question we have to answer." She dropped the dice in a mug only to reach in and pull out one, leaving only one in the container. "First time around we use one, second time, we add this other die and the questions get more personal."

"Who goes first?" Wendy asked, standing. "And who wants more drinks?"

Drink orders fell fast and she nodded, taking them all in memory. Sonya looked at Hope and grinned.

"You're up, Hope." Sonya pointed at her.

"Wait, what? Why me?"

"Because we're almost besties and that means I get to pick

on you.” She rattled the mug, then stopped and picked up a small piece of cardboard which fit over the opening. “There, a makeshift table as well.” Sonya slid off her chair and walked the distance to where Hope still remained curled up in the soft seat.

“Well, almost bestie, I see we are going to have to discuss the parameters of our relationship.” She sent a wink to offset her words.

Sonya propped a hand on her hip, jutting it out as she stood there, a frown tipping down her bright pink lips. “No parameters. It’s an open relationship.”

She frowned. “Not that open.” Hope took the coffee mug along with the piece of cardboard and settled. “I’m waiting for Wendy to come back. Where are the questions?”

Erick waved a hand. “I have them. So once you roll, call out the number and I’ll read off the question.”

Her leg shot a twinge through her and she gulped down her whimper, shifting on the small loveseat to try and alleviate the pain.

Wendy brought the drinks and passed them out. Making sure she didn’t drop the mug with the die, she reached for her cup and took a sip of the hot toddy. Warmth spread up from her chest and out.

Oh, this was delicious.

“Ready whenever you are, Hope.” Erick flicked the sheet of paper in his hand and grinned.

Mitchell took hold of her cup and she gave him a small smile as she shook the mug with the lone die in there. Flipping it over, she lifted the cup and stared at the number peering up at her.

“Five.”

“If you could spend the day with one fictional character, who would it be?”

She grinned as she glanced at Sonya and Wendy. “Besides Aragorn, of course?”

They both nodded and returned her grin. Beside her, Mitchell grunted and pushed her drink at her.

Curving her fingers around the mug, she tried—and failed again, but hey, she tried—to ignore the flipping her belly did at the brief contact with Mitchell’s hand. “Easy. Falkor.”

“*The NeverEnding Story?*” Shock colored his tone.

She grinned up at him. “That movie is a classic and anyone worth their salt would know it.”

“Not Atreyu?”

“Falkor could fly me anywhere and he looks so fuzzy. I wouldn’t say no to visiting with Atreyu but no, I want Falkor.”

He grunted. “Just when I think I have you figured out.”

“Alistair,” Erick said. “You’re up.”

She passed the items to him and leaned against the arm of the seat, not wanting to admit it brought her closer to Mitchell.

Partially listening to Alistair, she struggled not to pay attention to how close Mitchell was.

“How’s your leg? I saw you wince.” He shifted, his arm brushing against hers. “Do I need to check it?”

Yes. Yes. A thousand times yes!

Hope gave a small shake and replied, “I’m fine.”

See, look at me, I’m being good and not taking advantage of this situation. Right?

Right.

Now, if she could just get her body on board with her brain.

They played more games but she sat out Twister, hating the jealousy that crawled up her spine and lodged in her chest as she watched Mitchell and Collette wind around each other.

The fire was built up more, popcorn was popped over the open flames, and s’mores were made. Stomach full of food and sore from laughing, Hope burrowed down into the seat as she sleepily half listened to the conversations going on around her, hushed and muted.

“Come along, Flykra, time to get you to bed.” Mitchell’s strong hand curved around her upper arm, encouraging her to sit forward and climb out of the seat.

Sonya and Wendy both waggled their eyebrows at her and shot her a very noticeable thumbs up.

“See you two in the morning,” Wendy called out as Hope got to her feet and gingerly put weight on her leg.

“Night, Wendy.”

“Are you two rooming near each other?” Collette asked, reaching out a hand toward Mitchell.

Hope barely bit back her snarl as she angled herself in front of Mitchell. “You could say that. We’re sharing a room and a *bed*.”

Crap, had she snapped that out there like a jealous girlfriend? From the looks on everyone’s faces, yes, that’s exactly what she’d done.

Well, poop.

Chapter Seven

Mitchell couldn't stop grinning as he followed Hope up the stairs to their room. And he didn't want to stop. *Their room*. Two words he had no problem thinking about. Hell, he enjoyed that label.

She'd been jealous. No other way around it. Hope had been jealous of Collette and damn if that didn't make him feel good. Never in his life had he been so tempted to tuck a woman against his side as he had when she'd stepped in front of him and staked her claim.

Dragging his gaze up her full figure, he bit his lower lip. His hands itched to earn permission to explore those dangerous curves.

At their door, he reached around her, making sure to brush his body against hers, then unlocked and opened the door for her.

“After you, Flykra.”

There was a decided chill in the room and Mitchell closed the door before immediately heading to the fireplace to add some wood to the embers. He crouched down and got to work.

“I'm sorry.”

He paused in blowing on the embers to gaze at her over his shoulder. She remained near the door, hands wringing as she held them in front of her.

“For?” He arched an eyebrow.

“Blurting that out down there.”

Damn, this woman impressed the fuck out of him. Even now, she didn't look away from him but held his gaze straight on.

He couldn't help but smile at her, admiring the small furrow she got in her forehead as she tried, most likely, to figure out what his issue was.

“Why are you apologizing for telling the truth? We are sharing a room.” He dragged his tongue along his lower lip. “And a bed.”

“Still not my place. Especially if you were interested in Collette or someone else.”

There was someone that had snatched his interest. But she wasn't down there or in any other room. No, that woman was right here in front of him, making him harder than steel.

“She has nothing that interests me.”

Hope was an obvious skeptic to that statement. “I think I need to lie down.”

She moved by him and vanished into the small bathroom. When she came out later, he had the fire burning and he stood by the window looking out into the darkness. Pulling his gaze from nothing, he watched her move in the window's reflection as she made her way to the bed and sat with a sigh.

Mitchell gave her a few moments and walked to the bathroom to get ready himself. When he stepped out in a pair of workout pants, she was sitting in the exact same spot, rubbing the nape of her neck. But she'd changed. Her hair had been pulled up into a messy bun, exposing the curve of her neck. He wanted to push his nose into her skin and smell. *Kiss. Nibble. Touch.*

Without giving himself time to talk himself out of it or ask permission, he shuffled over the mattress on his knees until he was behind her. Brushing her hands away, he placed his own there instead and began to give her a massage.

Hope went tense for all of ten seconds. Then she melted like a pat of butter on a hot skillet, with a moan that shot directly to his groin.

“Oh God, your hands are magic.” Her low southern drawl pulled over his skin, much like silk sheets would.

And God, he craved more.

It wasn't all he wanted. Mitchell wanted this woman on silk sheets, her curls spread over his bedding, lips wet from their

kisses, parted as she moaned and cried out his name. He needed her naked beneath him, spread wide as she took all of him deep inside her. On her hands and knees, his grip holding tight to her hips, fingers digging into her flesh as he claimed her.

He shook his head and bit his lower lip hard enough that the sharp metallic taste of blood burst through him.

Hope dropped her head forward, giving him more access to her neck and shoulders. He took advantage. Working his fingers into her muscles, he stared at her smooth skin. God, he couldn't come up with a name for the color.

Brown was too boring and who knows, he could be waxing poetic, but he swore her skin had flecks of gold in it. A shimmer.

Definitely waxing poetic.

“Keep this up and you may never get rid of me. Fair warning.”

Mitchell inched closer, making sure her ass settled at the V of his thighs, pressing against him. “I’ll keep that in mind. Harder?”

The low moan she expelled ran up his cock and tugged.

“Yes, harder.”

He would be broke if he heard that voice on a sex line. As sure as he knelt behind Hope Roman right now, he'd willingly spend all his money to hear her moan and groan. He listened, digging his fingers in a bit more. Mitchell didn't want to hurt her, so he paid attention when she flinched and backed off slightly.

“Tell me about you, Mitchell Anderson.”

Old suspicions burst to life and exploded in front of him. He tensed. Hope's touch centered him and he blinked to find one of her hands resting on his wrist.

“I'm sorry, I don't mean to pry.”

Didn't she, though?

He needed to keep distance between them. “Not much to tell,” he said, removing his touch from her body and sliding off the bed. “I have one sister and my mother.”

Mitchell waited for her to bemoan him stopping the massage but all she did was take her hair down from the bun it had been in and readjust herself on the mattress, sitting so she was against the headboard.

Her smile, while slightly strained, remained. “That’s nice. I don’t have any siblings. Always thought it would have been nice to have someone around.” Her shoulders hunched forward until she corrected her posture. “Not be so alone.”

“Do you need to call anyone and tell them where you are?”

He beat himself up about that. How hadn’t he thought of it sooner?

“No. I don’t have anyone.” She picked at the quilt, not holding his gaze.

Interesting how *this* subject kept her from staring into his eyes but when she was apologizing, she didn’t flinch.

Damn it, he *couldn’t* stay away from her. On the bed, he sat facing her and dug his short nails into his palm to keep from reaching out to her.

“That can’t be true. Maybe no family, but friends? There must be a few people who would be worried about you.”

She flattened her lips and hesitated, only to shake her head like she’d just talked herself out of sharing something with him. “Not a one.”

“I’ve not known you long, Hope, but I would be worried.”

She rolled her eyes and leaned forward enough to pat his hand briefly. Then she put back the distance he’d thought—*wrongly*—that he wanted...needed between them.

“You wouldn’t even know my name if we met in different circumstances. I’m not your type of woman to hang out with, if you were even the kind of guy to hang out with one. Personally, I find it hard to believe you are. You don’t strike me as a guy who has women friends.”

“What does that mean?”

“Really?” She crossed her legs and smoothed her palm down her thigh before clasping her hands together. Hope canted her head to the left and blinked. “How many people do you have in your life who look like me? And how many of those are because you went out of your way to speak to them, not because someone else in your life introduced you to them?”

He opened and shut his mouth. *Fuck!*

“I also bet that how many of the women you dated in the past, and perhaps married, if David got it right, looked like me. I can answer that. None. I’m willing to bet almost anything I own that your women were more than half my size. And not even close to my color.”

Unease filled his stomach but he couldn’t refute it. Not a single word she’d uttered. Why not? Because her words were complete fact.

This time, her smile was less humorous and more knowing. “That’s what I thought.” Her tone wasn’t full of anger or hurt, only acceptance. “Don’t worry about it, Mitchell. I’m not angling to be anything special in your life. Just pointing out that because you’ve been allowed to realize how fucking awesome a person I am doesn’t mean a lot of people I meet don’t have preconceptions about me. I don’t fit society’s idea of beauty and I’m okay with that. You know why? Because I’m happy with how I am. I’m happy with *me*. I’ll never be the size or the color of the women you normally have on your arm.”

She stretched out on the mattress, making sure to burrow under the blankets. “This storm will be over soon and we can go our separate ways. I was only asking because I was curious, but I get it. I’ll keep my thoughts and questions to myself. Good night.”

With that, she turned and gave him her back. The wall slammed up between them and he hated it. Wanted to tear it down and bring her joy and warmth into his life again.

“Hope.” He reached out and hesitated just shy of touching her.

She didn’t even move. Neither did he, not until she began to snore lightly. Only then did he get up from the bed, shut off the light, and sit at the table he’d been working at, using the firelight to help him make it there without injuring himself.

Putting in his earbuds once he saw there was a signal, weak but there, he pressed a number on his phone and waited.

“What’s going on, man? Everything okay?” Tully’s voice held no trace of sleep.

“No.” He scrubbed a hand down his face. “It’s not.”

“Give me a second. Get Linc on the line.”

He added his friend and within two minutes, they were all on the call.

“Mitchell?” Linc’s tone was concerned.

“Do you two think I’m shallow?” He made sure to keep his voice pitched low to avoid waking the woman sleeping in the bed he wanted to be in with her.

They were silent before they both answered as one. “Yes.”

“Fuck you both. What are you talking about?”

“Your mother is one of the shallowest people in the world. She did a number on you, so yes, you are.”

“Your mother raised me more than Vera did, Tully. And Linc’s father. How the hell am I shallow?”

“Women shouldn’t be more than a size two—on rare occasions a four could be pulled off, but she would need to be on a diet. Never have one in double digits.” Linc’s recounting of words his mother had drilled into him since he could remember soured his gut.

“This woman, Hope,” Tully began. “She’s nothing like what your mother deems to be a proper woman for you, is she?”

He looked over to the huddled woman sleeping. “No, she’s not. But I can tell you what she is.”

They waited.

“She’s fucking perfect.”

• • •

Hope woke tangled in Mitchell’s arms. And his legs. Where the pillow wall had vanished to, she couldn’t begin to say.

And damn her for enjoying how the hard wall of muscle was pressed against her. Even if all it did was remind her how out of her league this man was. Right now, it didn’t fucking matter. Her hands were up under his shirt, palms pressed to his back. They eagerly soaked up the man’s warmth and he was a goddamn heater. One of her legs sat wedged between his and he had his up and draped over her hip, locking her to him. The most intimate part of his body pressed hard into her. His palms were on her back and ass, like he couldn’t bear to keep distance between them.

If only that were the truth.

As comfortable as it was, and however nice, her bladder wasn’t anything to ignore. Even so, she didn’t rush to untangle their bodies.

I don’t want him to wake.

Whatever the excuse she wanted to go with, the end result remained the same. Her moving at a slow pace. Almost free, Mitchell shifted and brought her right up to his chest. The hand that had been on her back slipped up to cup the nape of her neck as the one on her ass brought her tighter to him, allowing her to feel his substantial erection.

“Flykra,” he moaned into her hair.

She longed to know what that meant, but she also refused to be a sympathy fuck. Or a notch on his bedpost.

It’s probably a pet name he calls all the women he meets so he doesn’t have to remember their names.

Marshaling some fortitude, she began again to untangle their bodies. This time, she got away, went to the bathroom, and

then snuck downstairs.

In the kitchen, helping Naomi with breakfast again, she thought about his question last night. That surely someone would be missing her. Maybe at one time there would have been but seeing as she'd stood over his grave as they'd buried him, she could confidently say there wasn't anymore. And the only other person who would, João, didn't even know she was up here because he was out on his own assignment and she'd not spoken to him in months. Not that they didn't communicate, he was basically her best friend, but when he was out on assignment, he went radio silent, so she didn't expect to hear from him until after he was supposed to be home. She had her editor but wasn't expecting to speak with her for a while yet. Her job was a solitary one and all her speaking engagements weren't for months yet. There was no reason for a single person in her life to be concerned with her wellbeing.

Bad on one hand and yet perfect on another. She could purely enjoy her time here and the people she met, regardless of the circumstances that had gotten her here. Hope truly liked meeting new people and traveling the world, but she also didn't mind being by herself as she had been the majority of her childhood.

She didn't push her knowledge on people. A lot of people had a hard time wrapping their head around her doctorates and degrees. Everyone had assumptions and she found that a person's true self was revealed when they put you in a box and overlooked you. Again, fine with her. She had nothing to prove. She knew her worth, like she'd told Mitchell.

“Are you okay, Hope?”

She glanced up from the bowl of eggs she was whisking to find Naomi's concerned gaze on her as she stood at the large wood stove, cooking breakfast.

“I will be.”

The woman wiped her hands off on a towel and approached.

“You know you're a guest and don't have to help.”

“It helps keep my mind occupied. Plus, you weren’t expecting me as a guest, so it doesn’t feel right to take advantage.”

Naomi flattened her lips but merely reached for the brioche and began slicing thick slabs to dip in the egg batter for the morning French toast. “You are far too young to have to keep your mind occupied. Everything okay?”

“I was returning from burying a friend when I got in that accident, and I guess I haven’t taken the time to process everything.” She willed back tears she wasn’t ready to allow freedom.

“Honey,” Naomi said, reaching out to cover one of Hope’s hands. “I’m so sorry for your loss. Were the two of you close?”

Tears burned and she furiously blinked them away. “He was the closest thing I had to a father. I’m going to miss him.”

“Of course you are, baby.” Naomi wrapped her arms around her and gave her a hug. She smelled of cinnamon and warmth. Comforting. “It’s never easy to lose family.”

“I don’t suppose it is.” She forced a smile. “I don’t mean to be maudlin. Apologies.”

Naomi backed up to her spot and wagged the knife in her direction. “You have nothing to apologize for. You’re allowed to grieve.”

It didn’t help that the final gift he’d given her had slid down the mountain in her rental car.

Hope stayed in the kitchen and helped, opting to eat in there with Naomi. She wanted to go up to her room and cry but didn’t want to do that in front of Mitchell.

“He’s eating, if that’s what you’re wondering. He’s looking for you and my guess is he’ll come in here when he’s finished.” Naomi plucked her dishes from her. “If you’re looking for some time to yourself, I would go now.”

She took Naomi at her word, gave the woman a hug in thanks, and headed for the stairs. The room was empty and

Hope headed directly for the bed and crawled beneath the blankets. Mitchell's earthy scent filled her nose as she snuggled into the pillows.

Then she allowed the tears to come.

When she woke, she knew she wasn't alone. The sound of keys clacking reached her and she could *feel* Mitchell in the room with her. Doing a mental confirmation that she hadn't stripped down to nothing, she sat and pushed off the bedding.

He sat facing the bed, working on his computer. A steaming mug of what smelled like coffee was at his left. Those brown eyes lifted over the lid of his device to find her.

"Feeling better?"

"Sure." She wanted to yell *no* and see if he would hold her. God, she could cry for a few days.

He ran his gaze over her before grunting and looking back at the screen.

She didn't have it in her to try and play nice. Better to leave the room. After making the bed, she took a deep breath and walked to the door. At least her leg was feeling better.

The moment her fingers curved around the handle, he spoke. "Do you know computer games?"

She paused, frowned, and glanced to where he sat watching her, his gaze sharp and intense. Also, *hot*.

"No. Why do you ask?"

"Wondered if you would be able to give me your opinion of one."

God help her, she longed to. Anything to be closer to him, even though it wasn't smart and she needed to remember they weren't a couple. They were barely friends.

"I'm sorry, I've never played one in my life."

She turned the handle.

"Not even a version of solitaire?"

"I've used real cards." She forced a small smile. "I'll let you

get back to your work. Sorry if I disturbed you.”

Something flashed in his gaze, but she dipped out of the room and headed downstairs before she could overanalyze what she thought she'd seen or give in and sit close to him, allowing herself to be surrounded by his scent.

She wove through the main room, nodding greetings but not stopping. Sinking to a seat near the fire, she looked out the window.

“Looks like it's coming down harder than it was yesterday.”

She gave Alistair a brief smile as he claimed a seat near her, only to return her gaze out the window and to the wall of white.

“Any idea how long we'll be here? I know the plows can't get through but I'm amazed by how fast it's coming down.”

“This is a storm the likes of which they've not seen in years. I think Naomi said close to a century.”

Fucking perfect.

“Reminds me of a time when I was in the Hakkōda Mountains. Did you know that Aomori City gets the most snow in the world?” She'd been doing a story on sparsely populated Higashidori village's abalones and sea urchins, after which she'd visited Aomori City for a while to enjoy the snow.

“Where's that?”

She shook her head with a smile. “Japan. Sorry, my mind tends to wander.”

He leaned close and nudged her arm with his. “Don't worry, Hope. We'll keep you occupied.”

“Thank you.” Try as she might, she wasn't sure how much joy she'd interjected into her tone. She didn't often get lost in thoughts of places she'd been. *Must be the fact I recently lost my mentor.*

Alistair stretched his legs out in front of him and laced his fingers together, resting them over his flat stomach.

“So, tell me about you, Hope. What makes you tick? What's

your favorite dessert...and what's your idea of a perfect date?"

It wasn't possible to stay distant with his infectious tone. She placed a hand over her chest, batting her lashes. "So personal, and so soon? Why, Alistair, I'm not sure I'm ready for such an inquisition."

He laughed and rolled his eyes.

Hope liked him. Wished she'd been attracted to this man. Or anyone else here besides the one she shared a room with...by default.

"I'm pretty much a what-you-see-is-what-you-get gal. Dessert wise, I love a good key lime pie, but I don't turn my nose up at any good food. Life's too damn short for me to deny myself things that make me happy."

Chapter Eight

Standing off to the side, Mitchell observed Hope as she spoke with Alistair. Things had been strained between them since he'd stiffened up at her question last night.

It sucked. He hadn't meant to hurt her with his reaction but damn it, his guys were right, his mother had done a number on him. He clenched a fist and took several deep breaths.

This should be perfect. She was keeping out of his way so he could do exactly what he had convinced himself he wanted to do. Bury himself in work.

Why then do I keep coming to find this woman?

He *couldn't* stay away from her. She wasn't seeking him out, it was him coming after her. And in cases like he was faced with now, he wanted nothing more than to wedge himself between her and the man she was talking and laughing with. Not a viable option.

Okay, it was, but it wasn't one he should act on. Delano, Linc's father, wouldn't be pleased with his behavior and the man had made it abundantly clear how proud he was that all three of them had manners and knew how to treat others. Especially women.

He forced himself to retreat upstairs to the room. When he shut the door behind himself, he wasn't met by the relief he was used to feeling when he didn't have to be around people. No, this time there was an empty spot in his stomach that he didn't much care for. He wanted to fill it.

Mitchell walked to the table and stared down at the lid of his computer, not making a move to open it. A knock on the door came as a welcome intrusion. He strode to the door and opened it to find Naomi's husband Phillip standing there.

"Yes, sir?"

"I'm sorry to bother you, son. I know you're probably very busy but we're running low on wood and I was wondering if you wouldn't mind helping me bring some more in."

Physical activity. Exactly what he needed.

Immediately thoughts of a naked Hope flashed through his mind. Swallowing hard, he nodded. “Of course. Let me grab my coat.”

Once he shrugged into it and they were in the hall, he closed the door behind him and followed Phil down to the first floor. It wasn't easy to avoid stealing a peek into the living room in a desperate attempt to snag a glance of Hope.

The cold slapped him with fervor the moment they were outside. He turned up his collar and wished for Monterey once again. He trailed the man as he followed a rope running from the main house to the barn. The icy pellets belted his face, making him think this was less snow falling and more sleet. Either way, it hurt like a mother. He angled his head best he could to protect his exposed skin.

The two of them loaded up sleds, hauled them to the porch, and carried the wood inside the back door to line it up against the wall. They made a total of three trips before Phil was content with the amount they had. Mitchell carried up the logs and placed them in front of the rooms, letting Phil go in and add more for each fireplace.

At his room, he opened the door and pushed in, arms loaded with wood, and carried it to the tall frame log holder that was nearly empty. He dropped the logs in and swore as pain licked up his palm from the slivers that speared him.

“Fucking shit!”

“What happened?” Hope's question came from behind him and he turned in time to see her move from the door toward him. He shook his hand and opened his mouth to tell her nothing when she scowled up at him. “Give it to me.”

Yeah, four words he would be reliving in his mind. Although with an entirely different meaning behind them.

Allowing her to take his hand, he ignored the flip of his belly at her touch and stared at her, unwilling to miss a moment of her expression.

“Christ you're cold.”

Her voice alone pushed heat into him. “Helped Phil with bringing in more wood.”

“Phil, huh?” She moved them to the bathroom, still holding his hand.

Mitchell followed her. Willingly. The hold she had on his hand didn’t matter one bit. He would trail after her anywhere.

“Phil. Naomi’s husband.” The room was small and he couldn’t help but notice how easily the tiny space allowed her exotic scent to filter to his nose.

“I know who he is.” She opened the mirrored medicine cabinet and pulled out a first-aid kit.

One he’d not even known was there. However, it would explain how she’d been able to do her own bandages.

Her fingers couldn’t even close around his wrist but her hold on him was ironclad. Not that he had any intention of moving from her.

“How can they not have tweezers in here that are worth a damn?”

“I have some.”

She snapped her head up to his and he had an uncommon urge to press his lips to hers. “Where?”

“In my pants.” When she glared he chuckled. “Really. In my pocket. My Leatherman has tweezers in it.”

She cocked an eyebrow at him. “And here I was thinking you were telling me you had something small in there.”

Yeah, he inched closer, loving how her eyes widened, but still she held his gaze. “*Nothing* in there is small.”

Her lush mouth twitched. “Are you taking it out? Or did you need me to *search* for it?”

Holy fuck. If this kind of amusement and happiness was what his friends had with their women, no wonder they would move the world for them.

“Anytime you want your hand in my pants, Flykra, you’re

welcome to slide it in.” Using his left hand, he reached across his body to his right pocket and pulled it out. “Here you go.”

When she took it from him, he watched her as she looked at his Leatherman. It was matte hunter green and graphite.

“This is nice. Heavy.”

Mitchell swallowed his response which would *definitely* have been sexual in meaning.

He showed her where the tweezers were because he kind of liked her holding his hand and didn’t want her to release him to locate it. But she did and he could barely stop the whimper of disappointment. Seconds later, her right hand gripped his and she was using her left on the tweezers.

“You’re a lefty?”

She remained focused on his palm. “I’m ambidextrous but I’m more comfortable with my left for delicate things.”

There wasn’t a shred of bragging in her tone. She had simply made a statement to answer his question. Hope angled his hand and swiftly plucked out the first splinter. She didn’t stop to clean it but moved on to the second and within moments had that one pulled free as well.

Mitchell didn’t move as she cleaned his palm. Then she looked up at him, a shy smile on her face.

“I think you’re fine.”

“Likewise, Flykra.” He brushed the back of his uninjured hand along her soft cheek. “Thank you for taking care of me.”

“What are you calling me?”

“Something in a different language.”

He waited as she pondered his words, taking the opportunity to slide her fingers between his. The air in the bathroom grew thick between them.

“You speak other languages?”

“I do. One of my first teammates in the pros was from Denmark and I didn’t think it was right that he had to learn our

language but we weren't expected to learn his."

"Hmm, go figure."

He removed the miniscule distance between them, keeping her hand entwined with his. "What?"

"I'm not used to Americans giving a damn to learn anyone else's language. It's been my experience they're all 'you're in this country, learn to speak English,' or 'I'm traveling and am a guest, you should speak it to make *me* feel better.'"

"Travel a lot, do you?"

"I do." She cleared her throat. "I should get going downstairs and out of your way."

She untangled their hands and slipped by him. By the time he had his head out of his ass, she had vanished.

"Good job, asshole."

He glanced at his hand and smiled as he realized she'd jetted with his Leatherman. How was it this one woman continued to turn his world on its axis? Going to his cell phone, he scowled when he realized there wasn't any signal.

Had to happen sometime and it was probably going to be sporadic until they got out of this current situation. He wanted to head downstairs and be around Hope but he made himself stay in the room. Working until lunch, he had just stored the computer when the door opened after another soft knock.

Hope poked her head in and wouldn't meet his gaze. "Apologies. I'll be out in a moment."

"This is your room as well, Hope. You don't have to run away because I'm here." He rose from the table and strode toward her.

Now that she was right there, he couldn't maintain the distance. His body fucking craved to be closer to her.

"How are you feeling?" He gave in to the urge and moved some of her curls behind her ear.

There was a flash of heat in those eyes he couldn't stop thinking about. She gave a small shrug. "I'm okay."

He wasn't. Eyes drifting down to her plump lips, he smothered the groan punching at him to escape.

"Let me change your bandages."

Mitchell had expected an argument but was shocked when she responded.

"Okay."

...

If there was a photo by the word *insane* it would be hers. Why else would she be subjecting herself to this? Hope didn't need him to change the bandages on her forehead. She was capable of standing before the mirror and handling this on her own.

But his offer had come and she hadn't been able to say no.

Weak. I'm so weak.

And she didn't care. For the moment, she longed to be weak and seek protection and shelter from someone stronger. No, not *someone*—Mitchell.

She didn't speak as he led her across the floor of the smaller room to the bathroom. Much like they'd done when she had removed his splinters.

"I...I have your Leatherman." She licked her lips. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to take it with me."

"Are you sure about that?"

She stiffened and reared from his touch. Did he think she was stealing his things?

Mitchell grasped her chin and clucked his tongue. "Bad joke. It's my turn to apologize. I know you had no intention of walking off with it." He peeled off the first bandage then gave her a smile. "I was trying to figure out if you wanted to return it to my pocket so you had that excuse to put your hand in my pants or if you were distracted by me when you ran."

Heat surged. She licked her lips and noticed how his gaze tracked the action without even attempting to hide it.

“Why are you so set on the untruth of me running from you?”

He held her stare as he pulled off the second bandage. “You’re the one who leaves this room, not me.”

She poked him in the chest, frowned, and did it again, testing the firmness. There wasn’t anything soft on him, while there was more than enough on her. “I was trying to be respectful and give you space.”

He inched closer, pushing her finger more against his rock-hard torso. Totally unfair. Did he have any part of him that wasn’t hard and attractive?

“Maybe space from you is the last thing I want.” His gaze blazed down at her.

God, this wasn’t proper. Her legs trembled and she was positive he could hear how hard her heart was beating.

“Thought we established that I’m not the kind of woman that’s in your life.”

He clenched his jaw but his touch was infinitely gentle as he cleaned the cut. The silence stretched as he put on two more bandages.

“We did no such thing.” His voice was low and rich, the perfect pairing to his masculine scent.

The urge to lean the rest of the way and bite his lower lip smacked her hard and she had to self-correct. “Really? Because that’s not how I remember that talk going.”

“Want to have it again?” He dipped his head so they were nearly nose to nose. “Because I remember you shutting down and giving me your back in our bed.”

Our bed. God, the thought made her shiver. If only. If. Only.

Maybe he had a point. But that didn’t mean she wanted to relive how much larger her size was versus the other women she’d seen by his side. She’d not lied to him—she was confident with her size. She was the size she was, and she didn’t strive to become a single digit clothing-wearer. She wasn’t unable to move about and do things because of her

weight. Hope lived an active life, was in shape, and according to her doctor, was in incredible health. She simply didn't have a skin-and-bones body type.

But her hesitation with Mitchell was more than that. She'd nearly given up her life to a man before and he'd turned around and destroyed her. She wasn't falling for that again.

Swiping her tongue along her lips, she huffed. "Let me make sure I'm understanding this correctly. You're mad because I respected the pillow boundary and wanted to sleep?"

"The fucking pillow boundary was your idea—one you violate every night, and I for one am goddamn pleased you do because I get to have you pressed against me as we sleep." He released her chin and bracketed her in between his arms, his body, and the edge of the sink. "If the only time you're willing to trust me is when you're sleeping, I'll take that." His nostrils flared. "For now. And you didn't want to sleep, you wanted to avoid talking to me."

Like right now.

"Not at all how I remember it."

"Shocking," he snarked.

"Don't cop an attitude with me, Mitchell Anderson. I'm not going to stand here and let you do that because of who you are. Let's recall last night."

His lips twitched and he nodded. "Let's."

Mitchell nudged his leg between hers and she bit the inside of her cheek to keep a disastrous and all-telling moan contained.

"Are we staying here or taking it to our bed?"

"There's nothing we need to be in bed together for, other than sleeping, and we don't even need to be there together for that." She really should take her hand off him...and move away.

His gaze hardened. "This is going to be an entirely different discussion if you want to talk about that. One thing at a time. You running from me."

“Argh!” She smacked his chest. “I don’t run from you. We were discussing how your world is lacking people like me and I asked you a question. Then *you* got pissy and closed down. I’m not asking to be anything important in your life, Mitchell. I simply wanted you to admit that I’m not anything like the women you’ve been with before.”

He snapped his hand around her wrist, keeping her palm against his chest. Damn it, she could feel him, hard and thick against her belly. Her legs weakened and Hope was fairly certain she was about to lose what little sanity she had left.

“You’re right, *Flykra*. I don’t have anyone like you in my life. Because there isn’t anyone like you...anywhere.”

She rolled her eyes. “Please, is that the best line you have?”

Mitchell took away any space between them and Hope tipped her head, simply to be able to maintain eye contact with the towering man.

“No line. No spin. Not anything but the fucking truth. Whether or not you believe me is up to you. You’re right, I didn’t want to talk about it because all that does is remind me how fucked up my childhood was and how much my mother’s twisted views got to me, despite my best friends and their parents showing me how wrong she was. No, I’m not blaming my mother completely. I was there and I’m now an adult. I have to take some responsibility.”

She had a degree in psychology but nope, wasn’t going there. “I’m not going to appease your conscience, Mitchell. I refuse to fill that role. Look, I will forever be in debt to you for what you did for me but other than that—”

He kissed her.

Holy shit. Mitchell Anderson is kissing me.

His hands cupped her face, holding her at the angle he wanted. The calluses on his palms and fingers were a tantalizing roughness along her skin. Firm lips covered hers as he nipped the lower one. When she gasped, he pressed the advantage and slipped his tongue in deep.

Hope still held a hint of the romantic in the corners of her

heart. She'd thought it would never happen to her, especially after her previous debacle of a relationship, but that hadn't stopped her belief in happily-ever-afters and fairy tales. Yet that wasn't what this was.

Mitchell demanded, dominated, and took. Hope melted and gripped his shoulders, needing something to anchor her. He crushed their mouths together, his tongue twining around hers as she flicked it.

The moan that escaped, hell, she didn't know who it came from. Him. Her. Both?

Powerful arms trapped her as he thrust his hands into her hair, his square nails biting into her scalp as he growled.

“Fucking delicious.”

Hope pulled away and wavered between being happy and pissed that he'd stopped when she did. His fiery gaze burned her. His hands still burrowed in her hair.

She didn't mind that.

“You,” he rasped. “You, Flykra, are like the word. Unique. One of a kind.”

“I don't want to give you the wrong impression.” Those were some of the hardest words she could ever push out of her mouth.

“What impression is that?”

He didn't kiss her again but neither had he allowed her to put space between them. His gaze wasn't any less intense now and his grip in her hair was still as strong.

“I'm not looking to be an experience for you, Mitchell. We can be friends but—”

And his lips were back. This time, she met him, thrust for thrust. Parry for parry. Twisting in his arms to get closer, Hope took all she could as she sought more.

He tasted unlike anything she'd had before. Decadent. Rich. Darkly sensuous. Addictive.

Giving in to her own need, she pushed up on her toes and

wound her arms around his neck, plunging her fingers into his silken blond hair. The strands were cool, as they had been when she'd done this the first time. That time, he'd stopped her. This time, a low rumble left his throat as he yanked her closer, knotting one hand in her hair and splaying the other along the top of her ass.

Knock, knock!

They both froze. Hope would have sprung away from him, however, as he had her plastered to his chest, she could only pull her mouth off his. When he pivoted to glance at the door, she bolted. Yanking out her hair tie as she went, she had part of her hair covering her face when she answered the door to find Wendy there.

“Hey, came to see if you were coming back down?”

“On my way.” She gestured to her forehead. “Just got new bandages.”

“Great. Let's go. The guys want to challenge us to poker.” Wendy turned and went toward the stairs.

Teeth sunk into her lower lip, Hope glanced behind her as she walked out the door. Mitchell stood there, in the middle of the room, watching her. His heavy-lidded gaze remained on fire and she felt every *single* flick of heat. She closed the door and took a deep breath.

Holy shit, I'm in so much trouble.

Chapter Nine

How long he stood there, staring at the door like he could see through it, Mitchell wasn't sure. But at some point he shook himself free, walked to the bed, and sat down.

Still rattled.

How the fuck hadn't he known that a kiss could alter his life so much? Dear God, his insides continued to perform as if they were part of Cirque du Soleil. His legs, weak. His heart, pounding harder than it had for his first NBA game and faster than after they'd won the first championship.

He stared down at his palms and flexed his fingers, imagining the brush of her hair against them. What it had been like to grip her hair and hold her still for him to plunder the depths of her mouth. The incredible way her curves molded against his frame, soft and welcoming, yet at the same time firm.

Exhaling, he closed his eyes. Already well aware of how it was sleeping in the same bed with her, now everything was amplified. Her taste was ingrained on his tongue, reminding him in a not-so-subtle way how much more he craved. How much more of *her* he craved on every level.

Shit!

Mitchell flopped back and laid a forearm over his eyes. He couldn't forget how it had been having those plump, pillowy lips beneath his. Using his free hand, he readjusted himself and restrained himself from giving in to his need to follow her downstairs.

Hell, they'd been talking about her running, and he knew that was precisely what she'd done. Not that he blamed her. He needed a few minutes to work through this. Not because he had any doubts, no, but because he had to remind himself that he had no right to go downstairs and pick her up only to carry her right back here where he could strip her naked and *feast*.

Tully said this wasn't a thing. I can't beat my chest and

demand she submit to me. He quirked his lips. Okay, so he *could* but he imagined her reaction would not be good.

God, he could go for a conversation with his best friends right about now. Their advice would be nice. Hell, even if they just listened to him as he got it all off his chest.

Rolling over onto his belly, he yelled into the mattress. Meditation. He needed to meditate. Mitchell pushed up with a groan and held himself there for a moment. He didn't move until his arms began to burn, which took a while, but when they hollered at him, he hopped off the king-sized bed.

It wasn't perfectly made and as he fixed that, he could only think about messing up the bedding with one Hope Roman. He balled his hands in the quilt he'd finished smoothing out.

Head in the game.

With a curse, he stomped over to his computer and powered it up, slumping down in the chair. Still no internet but he could save his work to his laptop. Drumming his fingers on the tabletop beside him, he waited for the *Inicio* icon to pop up.

Mitchell lost himself in his game, stopping to save and make sure he had power to continue. When he was down to a quarter left, he shut it down and sat at the table while he tried to figure out the next step for him and Hope.

Do I want to pursue that kiss? Fuck yes!

But she'd been clear about not becoming a notch on his bedpost. Trouble was, when he thought about her, looked at her, he didn't see a notch on that corner post. He saw something far more long term. What he saw was...his forever.

That fucking scared him to death.

However, he hadn't gotten his Rookie of the Year and NBA MVP in the same year, a few other MVPs, multiple selections to the All-Star team and All-Defensive teams or his two NBA championships by being timid and not going after what he wanted. Hell, there were still records that stood since he'd retired. And since he wanted Hope, he had to go get her. After putting his things away and making sure the fire had been banked and wouldn't take long to coax back to life, he closed

the curtains against the snow that continued to fall from the dark gray sky.

He couldn't concentrate. Yanking the door open, he went downstairs and didn't even bother looking toward the kitchen because he heard her laughter in the main room.

Mitchell stepped in the room and looked around. They had one of the coffee tables set up by the fire where Hope and David sat across from one another. They were playing cards. Wendy had pulled a chair up behind Hope who was on the floor and it appeared she was playing with Hope's hair.

Erick and Alistair held a conversation with Wendy, Collette, and Sonya, even as they put in small commentary about the game taking place between Hope and David. From the serious look of concentration on David's face, Hope wasn't taking it easy on him.

As he stood on the sidelines, trying to remember why he'd wanted to shut himself away, he realized they were playing War.

Fuck, he wasn't able to stay away from this woman. Before he could contemplate talking himself out of it, he was striding up to where she looked perfectly comfortable, seated on the floor.

One thing was for certain: being away from her for only this short time definitely hadn't done a damn thing in curbing his desire to kiss her again. Not one iota.

Everyone glanced at him, Collette watching harder and longer than most. He didn't care. Hope flicked a quick gaze in his direction then returned her attention to the game. Mitchell sank down beside her, making sure one thigh of his touched hers. Then he bent his other knee and rested his arm across it.

"Seems like I'm missing all the fun."

He took it as a good sign she didn't try to pull away from him. However, she wasn't staring at him with adoring eyes either.

Not a fan. And not because he wanted her as focused on him as he was her, okay, perhaps that was part of it, but because he

didn't know where he stood. Where *they* stood. And his Flykra didn't hide her emotions. That he could say with the utmost confidence. So, if she watched him and allowed him to see her, she couldn't hide.

“What's the game, David?”

The boy's face positively glowed. “We're playing war.” He sobered. “I'm losing.”

“It happens. Keep trying.”

A determined nod as they flipped the next cards. Hope won again.

He turned to the woman who was fast becoming his obsession. He knew that people watched them but he didn't care. If this finally claimed her in front of the other men there, *good*. To his mind, she wasn't available.

“Flykra?”

“Yes?”

His heart thudded in his chest. She responded to his name for her, even if she didn't look at him.

“How are you feeling?”

“War!” David hollered, sounding gleeful.

Hope looked at him with a not-so-mock glare. “This is how it's going to be? Distracting me to help this little man win?”

Mitchell reached over the coffee table to fist bump David. “*He* knew I played basketball.”

David grinned. “Center. Spot number five. The pivot. Most important position on the team.”

Another fist bump. “Exactly.” He nudged her thigh with his.

“He had great stats in the game, too. He was the best.” David frowned at the stack of cards before him.

Hope didn't seem all too impressed with that statement. She gave her competitor a grunt of acknowledgment.

They flipped their “war” cards and David gave off a good-natured groan as he was, again, defeated. Hope showed no

mercy, just cackled as she collected all ten cards. Mitchell noticed the boy's father wasn't far away, keeping an eye on his child.

In his periphery, he watched as Wendy continued to play with Hope's hair. Mostly, he realized, she was stroking it. The action seemed to please Hope. Naomi brought out finger foods and some drinks. People inched in closer and the conversation grew louder.

Within ten minutes, he was participating in his own game of war, with Hope, David, and Collette. After David finished dealing out cards to everyone, Mitchell piled his thirteen into a stack and cut his gaze to the woman beside him.

Mitchell dampened his lips before leaning over to her. "Fancy a side bet, Flykra?"

She gave a sniff. "Like?"

Yeah, he approved of her competitive side. "A kiss."

"Not that my vote here matters," Wendy interjected, surprising him. "But I'm for it. I say you play for a kiss."

The woman was as subtle as a freight train. Didn't matter, Mitchell approved of her "help" with his quest.

"A kiss?" David frowned as his face scrunched up with disgust. "She's a *girl*." The derision *girl* was mentioned with had everyone laughing.

Mitchell nodded as he moved his gaze from Hope to David and back to her. "Yes, yes, she is. But that works because I quite enjoy kissing girls."

Hope snorted. "Of that I have no doubt."

Was that jealousy he heard? Maybe not, but hey, he was going to claim it.

My fantasy, after all.

"I'm a one-woman man, Flykra."

Everyone flipped a card. Collette won and took the four.

"One hit wonder? Is that what I heard?" Hope's smile, more

like the baring of teeth, only succeeded in heating his blood.

Wendy chortled and the others suddenly seemed very interested in the conversation.

David shook his head and swiped the next bunch of cards as he'd had the high one. "He said he was a one-woman man." A bounce of his shoulders. "But I *still* don't understand why he wants to kiss *girls*."

Mitchell made sure he didn't let Hope look away from him. "Just one, my man. I only want to kiss one."

• • •

Relieved to be seated, Hope wasn't quite sure what was going on. Then again, perhaps she was still upside down in the car—about to die. The human brain was remarkably adept at creating situations to deal with other stressful ones. And as that made sense, she was running with it. Which would explain why she was fairly certain Mitchell Anderson had informed a room full of people he wanted to kiss her.

If I was, it would explain all the crazy that is going on around me. On the other hand, if I'm here, I was an idiot for running from this man when I could have participated in mind-blowing sex. I'm sure that man has moves I've not seen before that I would be most grateful to experience.

"Flykra?"

Crap, her thoughts had gone astray and she'd completely lost track of the conversation. Blinking, she found Mitchell watching her with no less intensity than he always did.

"What?"

"The side bet?"

"Sure thing. I'll take that bet."

His eyebrows arched. "For a kiss?"

She allowed her lips to curve up. "Absolutely." Hope acknowledged that she sucked at flirting and while in her mind she appeared sexy and attractive, in reality, she probably

appeared like she had gas.

Mitchell sucked in a sharp breath. “Excellent. Let’s play.”

Three words that took her mind down a road it shouldn’t be on. Especially not around this man.

But, *come on*, playing with this man would be incredible. She had this sense that she was only seeing the tip of the iceberg with him. He tried to come off as serious but there was a joker and prankster lurking, yearning to escape.

She rolled her shoulders and fixed her gaze on the table before her. Wendy’s fingers stroked through her hair and she fought the urge to close her eyes and purr.

Wait... Maybe she did.

“Keep making noises like that, Flykra, and you’re going to drive me insane.”

Leaning into Wendy’s touch as Collette took the next hand, she gave Mitchell a half grin. “What can I say, she’s got a magical touch.”

He leaned closer, his lips feathering along the shell of her ear. “Will you purr like that for me when I stroke you?”

She gulped. “My hair?”

One shoulder rose and fell in a lackadaisical shrug. “Sure.” They flipped cards and he and Collette were at war.

Wendy tugged her hair and she tipped her head to look at her new bestie, eyebrows lifted in silent question.

Oh my God! Wendy mouthed.

Biting off a snort of laughter, Hope returned her gaze to the table in time to see Mitchell collect the cards. Then the game continued. He never relented in the touch of his thigh to hers and there were numerous times even that his arm brushed hers.

It wasn’t fair. Were she smart she would use her autogenics to help her relax. However, as each of the six stages focused on a different sensation in the body, and this man beside her was *all* too consuming, she wasn’t sure that would be productive.

Collette was the first one out. David followed her and then it was just the two of them.

“You should go sit over there,” she said, gesturing to the other side of the table.

“I like it here. Has everything I want.”

Fluttering in the pit of her belly. “Fine.” She angled her body a bit more toward him, so she could see him better. Not enough to stop Wendy from playing with her hair, however.

There lurked trouble in his gaze. David was on his knees, leaning on the table watching them. “War!” the boy hollered, like he still played.

Sure enough, they’d both flipped a nine. She caressed the top of her pile. “Ready?”

“Bring it.”

Three facedown cards and she hovered over the fourth, not flipping it yet. Mitchell lifted his head and speared her with his gaze. His hair tumbled forward, partially blocking his eyes, but she couldn’t miss the heat there.

“David, can you count down for us to flip this one?” Hope gave him a smile.

“Yes!” He bounced a bit and inched closer.

Heck, the table had to be digging into his gut by this point, but the boy didn’t seem to care.

“Three.” A dramatic pause. “Two.” And a longer wait.

“Sure you don’t want to double down on the bet?” Mitchell interrupted the countdown.

“Why should I? Even if I were to lose, I still have more than three-quarters of the deck. If you lose, however, you’re out.”

“I’m counting, Mitchell.”

“Yeah, Mitchell,” she sassed. “He’s counting down...to *your* loss.”

How the hell this man managed to get so much intensity in his gaze, she couldn’t even begin to contemplate. But her

body's reaction was something she'd only thought happened in romance novels and movies where the ugly duckling got the hot guy at the end. Not that she viewed herself as an ugly duckling, but she was definitely not the prom queen.

"Will it be, though? My loss? A kiss is a win in my book, Flykra."

"I'm *still* counting here."

Everyone laughed. "Apologies, my liege," she replied with a wink. "Please."

"We have to start over now." David glared. "Three." Once again with the dramatic pause. "Two." His gaze narrowed like he was expecting them to start talking once more.

Hope mimed zipping her lips shut and wriggled her fingers over her top card, waiting for the moment where she could flip it over. She wasn't losing this one. Not a chance.

"One."

They flipped the cards and she smirked before cheering, lifting her arms as the women watching the game echoed her. The men all gave a collective groan. She'd won. A queen to his nine.

Reaching for his cards, she scooped them toward her. "I believe this means you are out of the game, Mr. Anderson."

"I'm thinking you cheated." His words weren't mean and there was a huge smile on his face.

"Those who lose generally do." She stacked the cards then shuffled with the easy grace she had with them. His gaze snapped to her movements and she put down the deck and got to her feet.

Mitchell followed her up, his face still a bit uncertain.

"You get your kiss."

Her belly clenched again. "That's right, I do. I mean, I wanted a kiss from David but he made it very clear how he feels about kissing girls."

Mitchell's expression remained amused as he nodded. He

was close enough to her she could feel his heat but no body parts of theirs touched. Yet.

“Maybe when I’m older, Hope, I’ll want to kiss you, but right now I don’t even like kissing my mom.” The little boy gave a small, one hundred percent adorable grin.

She sent him a smile. “It’s okay, David. I will survive.”

Mitchell sidled closer, his strong body brushing hers. “Who gets all the love you have to give?” His question was hushed but she felt it all the way to her toes.

Damn it! This man knows Gloria Gaynor.

“Are you going to kiss Mitchell, since you won?”

Yes! Her body clamored in the affirmative.

Thankfully, she snapped her mouth shut before it could punch free. “No.”

Mitchell lifted a blond eyebrow and held her gaze with a challenge. “No?”

God, it would be so easy to allow herself to accept a kiss from him. But she had to stay strong. Keep a distance between them, which didn’t allow her feelings to get any more involved. If she allowed her heart to get in on this, it was only going to hurt. She needed walls to stay safe. Allowing exploration of feelings with Mitchell wouldn’t end well for her. Not with a godlike man who made her want...more.

“Flykra.”

That name he called her, whatever it meant, rumbled up from his chest, hitting *all* of her spots. Hell, probably some she’d not even known were *spots* until that second.

Shoving down her need to experience the firm press of his lips against hers once more, she tipped her head to the left, over his broad shoulders, and grinned at Alistair. “I have someone else who gets my kiss. Alistair?”

“Hell yeah! Sorry kid, ignore that outburst.”

Hope snorted as he pumped his arms up in the air.

Mitchell's eyes were nothing more than slits. His muscles flexed in those *beautiful* and powerful arms of his, but she shuffled by him and walked over to Alistair.

"I knew those lip push-up exercises would pay off." He rolled his shoulders and cracked his neck. "One taste of these lips, baby, and you're never going to look anywhere else."

She rolled her eyes, knowing full well he wasn't even looking at her but behind her at Mitchell. If the man had turned around or not, she didn't know, and she wasn't going to peek.

"Better make it good."

"Best you've ever had." He opened his arms and beckoned her in close.

Now she had no doubt Mitchell was watching her. The back of her neck prickled from the gaze she would *always* be able to identify.

Alistair wrapped his arms around her and dipped his face to hers.

"You're playing a dangerous game, darling. That man looks like he's about to give himself a heart attack. Or a stroke. Then again, he could be planning how he's going to kill me and dispose of my body in this frozen wasteland."

"Are you saying you don't want the kiss?"

His grin was pure sin. "Fuck no, I want it. I'm letting you know he's not happy."

She shrugged. "It's a singles mixer."

"So it is." He tightened his hold on her, bringing her in close and putting their lips millimeters apart. "Hope Roman?"

"Yes?" She didn't struggle against his hold but she wasn't affected by it either. All Mitchell had to do was look at her and she felt her response pulse through her, like her heart pumped it through her veins. This, with Alistair, was nothing more than fun.

"I'm going to dip you and kiss you now."

She gripped his arms, automatically comparing their size to Mitchell's. While Alistair had strength, he had nothing on the basketball player who spent an inordinate amount of time on his computer.

Alistair did exactly as he promised. Dipped her so they weren't facing Mitchell. He held her there, eyes locked on hers as his lips brushed ever so lightly along hers. That was it. Even though he kept them in that position for a lot longer—until the catcalls and whistles reached a pinnacle.

He gave her a wink and drew his head back with a loud *smack* as he placed her upright on her feet.

"I *love* being the recipient of winning kisses," he tossed out as he bowed to the cheering that still continued. "Best. Kiss. Ever."

Mitchell was the only one who wasn't joining in. The man stood there, watching her, and this time the fire in his eyes wasn't passion. She yanked her gaze from his and smiled over to Alistair who still basked in the attention. Taking his hand in hers, she bowed along with him.

A few others sat down to play some cards and David, who had been by Mitchell, stayed put as the man strode closer to her, his face a mask she couldn't read. Tension rolled off him but his expression remained etched in stone.

"Playing with fire, Flykra."

"Having fun."

He bent his head. "You were much more flushed from the kiss *we* shared. I'll prove it to you later." He walked off.

Hope closed her eyes and struggled to find her breath.

Playing with fire? Hah! That was a laugh. She was directly in the path of a river of lava and the problem was, even knowing it would burn, she wasn't running to safety. Self-preservation was suddenly an unknown.

Chapter Ten

Anger burned through Mitchell as he leaned against a wall and watched Hope pick out some food for lunch as she joked with Wendy and Sonya. God, simply seeing her in Alistair's arms had been enough to push him to a place he didn't believe another woman would ever get him.

It didn't make sense. Even when he had learned the depth of Shawnee's deceit and betrayal, he'd been mad, but not jealous. Mad because he'd fallen for her lines and had believed she gave a fuck about him. This right now with Hope? Nothing but pure jealousy.

It burned him, and not in a good way. The furthest thing from good. One of the nine circles of Hell. Lust because that tore through him. Gluttony because he would never get enough. And violence because the other men looking at her incited that in him. The flames ate through his chest and stomach like acid. His jaw ached from clenching it so hard and he really, *really* longed to kiss Hope to wipe away the taste and any miniscule memory of Alistair she might have.

Fuck!

Not what he should be thinking. Because when he thought about the way the man had bent her back, all he could wonder was if his tongue had dipped in her mouth. Had he been privileged to taste the sweetness Mitchell wasn't above claiming as his own?

This woman had screwed him up in the head. She wasn't pushing for anything. But *he* wanted *everything*.

God, even the sound of her laughter drove contentment through him. And he craved more. Once she picked a spot to sit, he thrust from the wall and made his way toward her. Prowled like a predator stalking his prey. Which made sense. He was hunting her. Alistair had been on his way in her direction, but Mitchell shot the man a glare anyone should be able to interpret.

Back the fuck off.

Man must have a death wish because all he did was grin and continue on his initial path. With Wendy on one side of Hope, Alistair took the other and Mitchell growled low in his throat as he approached. Without slowing, he dragged a chair for himself up to the group. Hope turned and gave him a soft smile over her shoulder, one that turned to a look of confusion as he spun the seat so he could straddle it. Directly behind her.

Correction, not directly, he was slightly toward Alistair so he could see over Hope's shoulder and to the plate of food she balanced on her knee.

"What are you doing?" she asked him as he leaned forward, reached around her shoulder, and snagged a piece of apple from her plate.

"Socializing. I was told it was rude to hide up in the room."

Sparks flickered in her eyes but she didn't argue. "And plucking food off my plate?"

He reached his arm around her once more and lifted a piece of cheddar. "We're sharing a bed every night. Something wrong with sharing a plate, Flykra?"

"What are you calling her?" David interrupted. "Her name is Hope." He popped a sandwich in his mouth and chewed.

"Mind your manners, David," his father said.

Mitchell didn't care one way or the other if the boy asked questions. It's what children did. Lord knows he'd asked enough growing up.

"I'd be interested in knowing myself," Hope muttered, turning away from him.

"All you have to do is ask," he murmured in her ear before dragging a finger along her neck and shoulder, celebrating her shiver.

Hope didn't respond. Instead, she turned to Wendy and started talking about the games they were planning on playing this evening. Some were probably going to be repeats, as they had only planned on two nights for the mixer, but the weather

had lengthened everyone's stay.

Mitchell didn't participate much in the conversation, but he was here, being social. It was a win. And he hadn't growled at any of the males.

Much. The growl leaving him when he first approached didn't count because no one had heard it escape.

After lunch, the storm ramped up once more and Mitchell checked his phone, even though he knew there would be no signal. The moment he realized he was right, he shoved it in his pocket and scanned the room for Hope. Spying her seated by a window, away from those gathered, her feet resting on the cushion and her arms wrapped around her shins, he walked toward her. He couldn't stay away.

Hope had her hair drawn up in some half-up, half-down style but he could see some of her curls had been left free to cascade over her temples. His sweatshirt covered her and he smiled when he noticed his socks on her feet.

Thinking she was lost in thought, when she glanced over at him and gave him a small smile, he paused. "Everything okay?"

"Taking a minute."

Without asking, he sank to the cushion by her feet and made sure her toes brushed against his thigh.

"Do you need anything? Drink? Medication? Nap?"

"Trying to get me into bed, Mr. Anderson?"

He stretched his arm along the top of the settee, simply to keep from reaching for her curls. Moving his fingers along the microfiber material, he grunted.

"And if I was?"

"I'd ask you if you needed some medication."

"I don't."

"Pretty sure that's what everyone who needs some says when they don't want to admit anything." A grin teased the corners of her mouth and his heart sped up.

“We have to talk about that kiss, Flykra.”

Everything about her shut down. Hope hadn't moved but the wall she'd slammed up was unmistakable. All the warmth he'd come to crave in their short acquaintance vanished like a steel door had been closed.

“No need,” she said, waving a hand like it hadn't been the slightest bit consequential.

Like fuck it hadn't. And they sure as hell *did* need to talk about it.

Then repeat it.

And move forward from there.

“It was nothing more than a kiss. Alistair kissed me. We kissed. I kissed Alistair again.”

There went his jealousy. It was pumped full of gas and rose to the surface.

She blinked and tucked some curls behind her ear. “It's a singles mixer. None of it meant anything.”

He shifted his leg, pushing into her toes more, unwilling to let that go. “Is that what you think, Flykra?”

She gulped and returned her gaze outside to the wall of white. “What language is that?”

Okay, he could do this. But she was sorely mistaken if she thought he was going to let their discussion of the kiss drop.

He dragged his tongue along his lower lip, swearing he could taste her unique flavor lingering there. Hope still wasn't looking at him. Mitchell didn't like that. Not at all.

That was deliberate because there was nothing but white outside. You couldn't even see the surrounding trees. He knew the men had been up on the roof shoveling off the snow so it wouldn't collapse, but if this continued, they would have to go up again tonight.

“Faroese.”

She pulled her incredible gaze from the window and looked

directly at him, showing him that emotion which had been lost moments ago. It was her turn to lick her lips and he snapped his teeth together to keep the groan from rolling out of his mouth.

“Why do you speak Faroese? I know you mentioned Denmark. Are you from there?”

God, her excitement and enthusiasm was addictive. He wanted to keep this spark about her.

“One of my teammates was from the Faroe Islands. He spent time learning English, and I thought it would be nice for someone else to learn his language in case he got homesick. So I learned it and Danish.”

“That, Mitchell, is one of the sweetest things I’ve ever heard.”

He shrugged, embarrassed. “Wasn’t that big of a deal.”

“I disagree.” She placed a hand on his thigh and his body snapped to. “If it wasn’t that important, not only wouldn’t you have done it, but you also wouldn’t still speak it to this day.”

He flushed and put his hand over hers, smoothing his thumb along the softness of her skin. “Perhaps that’s the only word I know.”

“And what word is that?”

God, why hadn’t anyone told him that teasing a woman was such a turn-on? Okay, not *any* woman, this one. Holy hell, *only* this one.

He wasn’t ready to tell her. “How can you be so sure about what I would or wouldn’t have done?”

When she bent closer to him, his gut tightened much like it used to before he stepped on the court for championship games. Mitchell couldn’t stop himself from moving that same distance, eyes locked on hers.

“I’ve got something to tell you.”

Her voice was barely above a whisper. Mitchell strained to hear her but he refused to look away. She fucking mesmerized

him. From the way she sank her teeth into the pillowy softness of that plump lower lip—enticing him—to the slight flare of her nostrils and her thick curved lashes that gave her an unintentional sultry look.

“What’s that?” His tone matched hers. Low. *Intimate*.

“For a big bad NBA player, you’re actually nothing like you want people to think.”

“How so?”

She didn’t speak for a few charged seconds then she gave him a twinkling look. “You’re all hard on the outside, but inside you’re gooey...”

Forehead to forehead, he tried to rationalize what would happen if he gave in and kissed her. “Did you just quote *Red* to me?”

“Look at that,” she praised, drawing away from their intimate bubble. “Not only a pretty face.”

Fuck, he wanted to kiss her but in his periphery he noticed they were getting *all* of the attention.

Oh, Flykra, I’m not sure how I’m going to let you go when the time comes.

...

Hope watched the door like a hawk, knee bouncing and moving faster and faster the more her nerves jacked up. Her lower lip was caught in her teeth but she didn’t pull her gaze from the front door.

They were outside. Phillip the proprietor, Mitchell, Erick, and David’s father. All were outside to get some of the snow off the roof. A dangerous job to be sure. Some were on the roof, and some were holding lights and ladders.

Personally, she was a mess and simply wanted all four of them with their feet on the ground, safe, and indoors.

“Here.” Sonya walked up and thrust a cup of tea under her nose. “You look like you could use this.”

“Thanks.” The warmth emanating from the porcelain mug penetrated her palms. After curving her fingers around it, she brought it to her mouth and took a drink, only to sputter as the burn lanced its way down her throat. “Holy shit, what did you put in this?”

Sonya laughed and wrapped an arm around Hope’s waist. “Did you think I was going to give you plain tea?”

“Yes. That’s exactly what I thought—a nice cup of spiced chai.”

Sonya moved some of her vibrant red hair out of her face. “I did. Just because the spice had some *additional* spice doesn’t mean I didn’t bring you a cup of tea.”

“Christ,” Hope wheezed. “Warn a gal next time.” She took another sniff. Now she could smell the spiced rum. “Not sure if this is going to make my hair fall out or grow me some on my chest.”

Sonya snorted. “That would be interesting. Bare except for your chest.” She winked. “We could market that.”

“We?”

She made a grand gesture to herself. “Umm, which genius gave the concoction to you? That would be me. So, yes, us. *We* could market your hairy chest.”

“You have a hairy chest?” Wendy popped up. “You know waxing can be your friend. Does it cover your boobs? Or is it like a line down between them?”

Hope and Sonya shook their heads.

“I don’t have a hairy chest.” How had this conversation gotten so out of hand?

“No judgment,” Wendy assured her. “I am curious, though. Is it hairier than Mitchell’s? I watched him when he played for the Leviathans. His chest wasn’t overly hairy, just the right amount for a woman to push her fingers through.” She sighed as her eyelids fluttered down.

Sonya took a drink of her own concoction, a smirk dangling off her lips. Hope glared.

“I do *not* have a hairy chest.”

Wendy moved closer to them so she could see them both easier. “Enough of my fantasies. I don’t think Mitchell would mind. The man can’t keep his eyes off you, so if you do, he’d be okay with it.”

“I don’t have enough alcohol in my drink for this conversation,” Hope muttered. Truth be told, she wasn’t sure there *was* an amount of alcohol she could consume which would make this conversation okay.

“You know, if you had a lot, you could shave it into a design, like people do on their head or their vages.” Wendy pursed her lips. “Vagagas? Vajayjays? I haven’t the faintest idea what the plural for vagina slang is.”

Hope rubbed a knuckle against her temple. “Because it’s not something to be talked about. And, again, I don’t have chest hair so there will be *no* designs shaved into it. I’m fairly certain the two of you have been drinking a lot more than me.”

They grinned at her and nodded shamelessly.

Figured.

Sonya wrapped an arm around her and placed a loud smacking kiss to her cheek. “I have no judgment about your hairy chest. We’re still besties.”

“I *don’t* have a hairy chest.” *Why, oh why, am I entertaining this insanity?*

The two women she was seriously debating never speaking to again shared a look followed by a solemn nod.

She gulped down her own spiked tea, relishing the burn as it warmed her all the way. Spiced rum was one of her favorites. And whatever this one was, she approved.

“Why are we standing here?” Wendy plopped down on the edge of the seat Hope was utilizing. “We should be in the other room with people, drinking and having fun.”

Sonya leaned closer and perched on the other side of Hope. Their legs all pressed into hers. The seat wasn’t designed for three people. Especially when one of them wasn’t that petite.

“We’re waiting for the menfolk to get home.”

Hope pushed up from the seat and plucked their drinks from their hands with a *tsk*. “Waiting for them to get home? How much have you had? They’re not out pillaging a village or hunting dinner to be cooked over the open flame.” She put the mugs on the front counter, where they couldn’t be broken by her friends who had no filters and overzealous motions.

“Ohh, Vikings.” Sonya’s voice kicked up a few notches. “Mitchell could play a Viking. He’s got that hot, sexy, I’m-dirty-in-all-the-*right*-ways vibe going on. I can see him storming in to pillage our friend here.” She gestured with a thumb to Hope.

How the hell did this woman get to Vikings? Her fault for mentioning pillaging.

A loud thump could be heard and Hope looked up as fear shot through her. She wished again that all the guys were back inside.

“Oh yes,” Wendy continued, apparently not the slightest bit concerned with the outside goings-on. “I can see him, pushing into the village, burning huts, until he sees her. Slow motion, the wind whipping through his hair, braids at his temples hanging down, adding to the hotness sexy factor. All of that while his gaze still burns her. He’ll stride over to her—no one will even attempt to stop his progress. Once there, he’ll pick her up and throw her over his shoulder before carrying her off to his longboat. Boathouse. Wait, what are those things called? Whatever, either way, he is going to pierce her with his sword.”

Both women roared with laughter and Hope rolled her eyes.

Melodramatic saps. This was what she had to deal with.

Sonya bounded up and thrust her hips forward as she danced around.

Coughing from laughing so hard, Hope guided her to sit where she couldn’t poke anyone’s eye out with her violent hip gyrations and roving hands.

“I need both of you to do something for me.”

They nodded, watching her with wide eyes.

“Sit here. *Quietly*. No talk of chest hair, Vikings, vaginas in any term...and wait.”

She looked at her watch. They’d been out for close to an hour. They needed to come in and warm up—the temperatures were plummeting as the seconds ticked by.

“We can do that, right, Wendy?”

“Do what?”

Hope got yanked to the chair, her wider hips pushing their way between the two women. Neither appeared to care, each placing a hand on one thigh and patting it like she needed to be consoled.

“Sit here with our friend and not talk about her vagina or how much she wants to touch the hairy Viking’s chest.”

Wendy nodded. “Right. Of course we can.” She mimed zipping her lips and shoving the key down her top. Seconds later, though, she had her left hand pulling the top away from her chest and her right digging around in her cleavage. “Ohh,” she whisper-shouted seconds after unlocking her lips with the invisible key she’d retrieved from her tits. “What if she’s on edge because she wants the Viking to play with her vagina?”

Thank *God* she couldn’t showcase her embarrassment.

Opening her mouth to respond, she tore her attention from Wendy to find the four men watching them, expressions a mixture of intrigue as they did their best to pretend they hadn’t heard anything. Well, for three of them. Mitchell hid nothing.

Without contemplating the consequences of her actions, Hope lunged up from her seat and ran to Mitchell. “You’re okay,” she whispered against his chest as she wrapped her arms around his wet and very cold torso.

Two heartbeats later, she realized something. He wasn’t holding her back.

Shit. Swallowing her fierce humiliation, she lowered her arms and went to step away.

Mitchell didn't let her move, though. His arms snapped tight around her, bringing her flush against his body.

"I'm okay," he murmured, his large hands stroking soothingly along her spine.

She simply held on tighter, not caring about the moisture soaking into her skin and clothing. Damn the tears for pricking her eyes as relief poured through her.

"I promise." He spoke directly by her ear. "I'd planned on changing clothes before doing this to ensure you stayed dry and warm." His words were soft and intimate. "But you shot that to shit. And I'm curious, in this scenario you ladies were talking about, who plays the Viking?"

Hope shook her head, determined not to divulge that bit of information.

"You're the Viking, Mitchell! In case you were wondering!" Wendy hollered and Hope wanted the floor to open up and swallow her.

"Now *that* is what I wanted to know, Flykra." His words rumbled along her ear.

Hope didn't want to pull back, afraid he would see all of her shame.

"I need a welcome like that," Erick announced. "Ladies? Any takers?"

Tuning out their responses, Hope focused on how she was going to step away from Mitchell like everything had been planned.

"Upstairs, Flykra. I have to go upstairs and change. Want to come with?" He put enough space between them to look down as he tipped up her chin. Hope shook her head. She could handle the chill and wet he'd given her. If she followed him up, there would be a lot more wet, and *that* she didn't need to think about. "Fine," he huffed. "Your decision. I'll be right down." A wink and a quirk of his lips. "So *damn* good to know *I'm* the Viking."

The ghost of a kiss he brushed over her trembling mouth

had her needing that seat once more. He vanished up the stairs while she took gulping breaths, reining in her raging hormones.

Or trying to.

Chapter Eleven

Mitchell slumped against the door to the bedroom, chest heaving as he struggled against the lightheadedness swarming him. No one, other than those he considered his family, had ever been concerned for him. Not like Hope.

He hadn't missed the fear in her gaze as she'd run to him. Without slowing or hesitating because of the condition of his clothing and cold skin, she'd wrapped her arms around him and uttered two words that shook the already shaky foundation of the final walls around his heart, knocking the shackles off and disintegrating them to a powder so fine it would blow away with his exhale of shock.

So many years of people pretending to care. Pretending to be a friend. All with a hidden agenda. His name, money—who knew what they'd desired?

Not this woman. He bit his lower lip. As much as he longed to buy it wholeheartedly, he was cynical. He couldn't help it. Well, he could and he *was* working on it, but years of dealing with his mother and then Shawnee and their deviousness and schemes... Even though, if he thought about it logically, Hope hadn't shown him one damn thing similar to those two women, aside from being the same sex.

But I'm not logical all the time, even though I am trying to move on from all this shit.

He shut down those thoughts. Right now, he wanted to return to Hope and tuck her against him, have her laughter in his ears and her smile in his sight.

Stripping, he walked across the floor to his bag and pulled out some dry clothes. He wrung the wet ones out in the bathroom then hung them over the chair, which he repositioned by the fire.

For a drawn-out moment, he stood there, hands curved around the back of the chair as he stared at the flames. Using the heel of his palm, he rubbed it over his chest.

“Fuck!”

Head down, he flexed his grip on the solid wood. Searching for clarity, he shook his head as it danced out of reach. He needed it. Desperately. He wasn't able to merely *push* the absurdity of the entire situation out of his thoughts.

Sinking to the floor beside the chair, he crossed his legs and took several deep breaths, seeking that calm to get himself recentered. Mitchell settled his hands on his thighs and closed his eyes.

Slowly the room's sounds faded. The crackle and pop of the fire became white noise around him as he allowed thoughts to slide from him. It all faded, leaving him with the peacefulness he'd craved.

Time didn't register until he came to from his deep meditation and realized thirty minutes had slipped by. He cracked his neck and rolled his shoulders seconds before he pressed the heels of his hands against his eyes. So much for going right back downstairs.

Reaching his hands up over his head, he stretched. First to the left, then right. Another roll of his shoulders and he could claim to feel marginally human now, at least one in control of his emotions. A low moan escaped as Hope came to mind, but he swallowed it and jumped up.

If his best friends were here, he'd joke with them, but they weren't and he still didn't have any service on his cell phone, so reaching out wasn't even an option. Honestly, he could really use a talk with them but that wasn't happening...

Opening the door, he stepped into the cold hall and once he secured the door behind him, headed down the stairs. Halfway down, he paused at the music and laughter which came from the main room.

Day one here, he'd turned around and gone back up. Now, he wanted to be part of the group. Sit beside Hope and allow himself to *be* in her sphere of happiness. He took the remaining steps a few at a time and strode to the doorway.

There he paused. Scanning the room, he noticed all the

people gathered in front of the fire, not looking the least bit put out by their current snowbound situation. Hope, Sonya, and Alistair all had something on their heads and he moved closer, wanting to see.

Hope still wore his sweatshirt and he didn't even bother hiding his smile. Any lingering cold he'd been feeling was banished the moment she peered at him over her shoulder, giving him a wide grin. A bent paper antenna fell forward and bobbed in front of her left eye.

"Joining us?" She reached up and flicked it out of the way.

Her entire expression was open and hopeful. Face shining, she gently bit her lower lip and he had to gulp back his resulting moan. He dropped his gaze to her lips, smirking when she parted them slightly. In his mind, she whimpered or moaned his name. This lighthearted feeling was new to him but he'd come to realize that being around Hope was like a constant adrenaline spike.

And he was addicted to that juice.

"Of course." He walked up to her and tugged one of her curls, taking a gander at the paper crown with...space antennae on it before walking around the chair she was in to claim a spot next to her. It wasn't even a spot made for two. More like a loveseat, but he completely approved of how she inched over, giving him space without him having to nudge. As if she simply accepted the fact that he was going to sit next to her.

"What are we doing?" There had to be a story behind her crown and he wanted to know what it was.

"Karaoke."

His gut sank. "Seriously?"

She nodded her head without looking at him. Hope was leaning away from him over the arm of the couch, looking at something with Wendy. And while he approved because he had a great view of her ass, he wanted her closer.

Mitchell tugged on her top until she came toward him with a huff. Hell, even that could—and did—set off a tingle in his

limbs.

“What?” She ran her gaze over his face, some of the lightheartedness leaving as a furrow appeared. “Are you feeling okay? Warm enough?”

Not giving a damn about how this looked to everyone else, he leaned in close so their foreheads touched. “Going to have to cuddle tonight. No pillow wall.”

Her lips twitched. “You scale it anyway.”

He moved so his lips were by her ear. “And will *always* do so.” When he pulled back, he noticed they were the center of attention, but he waited to see her reaction.

Hope smiled. “I’d expect nothing less.” She patted him on the thigh, fingers brushing the inside of his leg, kicking steel into his cock. However, she didn’t continue touching him, but popped out of the chair, adjusting the paper crown—whose antennae were falling out to the sides now—and smiled at Wendy who also rose.

Together the women stood closest to the fire as Wendy pointed a finger at Erick who was operating the machine. When Tavares blared through the speaker, he grinned. “Heaven Must Be Missing an Angel” was a song he knew well, thanks to Mr. Delano Conner. The man did love his funk music.

She and Wendy belted out the words, hips shaking and gyrating in a manner that only added more tightness to his pants. Every time her crown slipped, she slapped a hand to keep it in place, the move placing his focus on her breasts as they pushed against her top.

When they finished, he cheered along with the others. But he shook his head when she crooked a finger at him.

“I don’t sing, Flykra.”

He expected her to stick out her bottom lip and pout. Mitchell should have known better. This was Hope. She simply shrugged and moved on. “Kung Fu Fighting” was next and he growled low in his throat when Alistair joined her for the song. In his mind, there was no reason for the man to put

his hands on her, yet he did. *Constantly.*

When they finished, she didn't sit by him but took a chair beside Erick. He frowned at her and she only blinked at him, adjusting her crown once more. Hell, the attention she paid it, the fucker should be made out of jewels, not plain paper and covered in a marker/crayon combination.

The beginning strains of the next song pierced the air and she squealed, jumping up, her crown slipping off until she stopped it again. Erick stood with her and the moment the man's arm wrapped around her middle, Mitchell started to get up. With a curse, he sat fully in the loveseat, digging his feet into the floor. If *he* wasn't willing to sing with her, what right did he have to stop *her* from having fun?

Zilch.

He tried so hard to keep that outlook but the song they had chosen was a slower one and Erick made a big deal about holding her close.

Mitchell's jaw hurt so bad from clenching it, he figured he would be visiting his dentist as soon as he got home to fix whatever damage he was doing. It killed him a little bit every time he watched her press into Erick.

She fits me better because she is my Flykra.

After that song, she again sat beside Erick and they cheered on the others who got up to sing. Then Hope pointed at another song with Erick and he nodded.

Fuck it. He'd had enough. Mitchell stood and strode to pause in front of her, doing his damndest to block her view of everyone else. "What song are we singing?" His muscles went taut in readiness. For what, he wasn't sure, but he fucking wasn't going to sit through one more song while another man danced and sang with *his* woman.

She slipped from the chair and stepped in front of him, facing away from those gathered. "I didn't think you wanted to do this."

Mitchell slid a hand around to settle upon her neck, partially to ground himself with her touch and partially—mostly—to

make sure everyone knew she wasn't available.

"I got tired of seeing you in another man's arms."

Her smile grew, even as she shook a finger at him. "You definitely have a way with words, Mitchell. They teach you that when you were playing all those big games?"

Settling his left hand on her hip, he swept her close. "I took a few classes."

"I hope one of those classes was for the Hand Jive."

"You know *Grease*?"

"By now, you shouldn't be shocked by what I know, Mr. Anderson." She sank her teeth into her lower lip and it was a move he wanted to repeat. "I'm a well-traveled woman. There are a *lot* of things I know." A wink. "Let's do it. Erick, give me some music so this man and I can dance."

While he wasn't Fred Astaire or, hell, not even John Travolta, Mitchell could dance. Something else Mr. Conner had insisted the boys learn. He'd taken Linc to lessons and included Mitchell and Tully as well. He'd insisted that dancing was something everyone should know how to do.

Mitchell wasn't the only one up there who could dance. So could Hope, and he shouldn't be surprised by that. All of her everyday motions were smooth and elegant—even while she was recovering from her knee injury—announcing to the world she was confident in her body and sure of how to move it.

By the end of the song, everyone was up making fools of themselves and having an incredible time. Spinning her out and bringing Hope in, he didn't even hesitate. When she settled against his chest, her curves molding along his body—as they should be—he cupped the back of her head in one hand, fingers delving into her curls, holding her still, and he kissed her.

Inhaled her.

Devoured her.

Lost himself.

• • •

Short-circuited.

That's what Hope's brain did. She had no other explanation for what happened and why she hadn't immediately pulled away from this man and his touch.

He was *kissing* her.

And not in the privacy of their shared room, but in front of everyone gathered by the fire.

Mitchell slid his tongue deep into her mouth and tangled it with hers. Her entire body vibrated with need and a craving for more. Before this man she had never experienced such intensity.

Not even the ex-fiancé had done so much to her with a kiss. And hell, she'd believed herself in love with that man.

A whimper rolled from her to him as she dug her fingers into his shirt, anchoring them closer together. *More*, her body chanted. Any thought of self-preservation dried up and floated away like a fallen leaf in the wind.

He bit her lower lip as he broke the kiss. When his eyes locked on hers, they swirled with heat and a desire of his own. It took a few charged seconds before she realized where they were and heard all the catcalls and cheers that came from those around them.

"About time," Wendy hooted as she walked up beside her, grinning from ear to ear. "I swear all this tension between the two of you was making it so I needed to step outside and cool off."

Mitchell pulled her closer and tucked her against him. Hope didn't fight him on it, she wanted to be pressed to him. He was so warm and damn it, he smelled so good.

If she wasn't so wrapped up in her own business, she could easily see herself turning into any of the groupies this man had just to get a glimpse of a simple smile. But no, she couldn't and wouldn't go down that road again. She'd nearly given it

all up for a man before.

He dipped his head to brush a kiss along her forehead. “I knocked your crown off.”

Damn if the man didn't sound proud of that fact. And he should be.

Taking it from Alistair, Mitchell gave her a small, private grin as he set the dilapidated paper crown again on her head. One of its two accordion antennae was falling off but she didn't care. The way Mitchell was holding it in his hands made her wonder if this wasn't an actual dream and he was about to place a real one on her head.

Even though she wasn't pressed to his side at the moment, his heat still surrounded her and she watched him as her crown, which she'd made earlier with David before he'd gone upstairs, was replaced on her head. She tipped her head ever so slightly in thanks, willing her body to calm down.

It wasn't working.

And it went off the rails even further when he tugged her to sit beside him on the loveseat. This time, when he draped his arm along the back, he threaded his fingers into her hair. Playing with it. Giving her small tugs every so often.

She gulped and realized that everyone still watched them.

“Surely there's more music to be sung.” She gave Erick a pointed look.

He held up his hands. “I'm looking for something fast that won't make *some* of us in the room tempted to do the horizontal mambo.”

Fingertips skated along the nape of her neck.

“Any music works for that, Erick.” Mitchell's comment had her squeezing her legs together.

Sonya tucked some red hair behind her ear and mouthed, “Oh my God!”

Beside her, Mitchell chuckled and Hope longed to hide in a corner. She wasn't typically the center of attention. At least,

not in these types of situations.

Mitchell, it seemed, didn't have the slightest problem with it because he smiled down at her. "What do you think about that, Flykra? Only some kind of music or *any*?"

Seriously, how the hell was she supposed to concentrate and give a halfway intelligent answer when his slight touches were driving her insane? She wanted to climb him like a tree and indulge in every single fantasy she'd ever had, and some she might come up with later.

But she'd faced a lot of things in her day and she wasn't one to back down from a challenge. *Which is exactly what this is.*

Steeling herself not to freak out about touching him, Hope placed her hand on his thigh, like it was something she did every day, her fingers brushing the inner part. His body tensed and the grip on her neck grew tighter. Not painful, no, but dominant. She liked it.

"I think *any* is a stretch. I like most music," she admitted. "But I'm not a fan of metal and don't think I could get in the mood if it were blaring around me. Hearing para-militant, violent, and verbally offensive phrases doesn't put me in a romantic mood. But almost anything else and I'm down." She skimmed her fingers along his leg, like she was petting him.

"Sing-along songs?" Erick asked.

Mitchell snorted beside her and she cut her gaze to him for a brief glare. "Why not? I would assume at some point, if you have kids, you're going to be hearing those just to keep them occupied in order to give yourselves five minutes alone." Her lips twitched. "Or don't you think you can get it on to 'The Wheels on the Bus'?"

He cocked an eyebrow. "With you, the music will make no difference, and believe me, I promise it sure as fuck won't be five minutes, Flykra."

Wendy's eyes widened in her direction. Unable to resist, Hope patted his leg. "It's okay, Mitchell. You can work up to it. I'm sure she'll give you some wiggle room."

There went that grip on her nape again, another flex. It was

accompanied by a low growl. Then he bent into her, his powerful body molded against hers, and for one flash of time—more like a few—it felt right.

“Make no mistake, there *will* be wiggling. And screaming. And *begging*.”

Was it wrong that she longed to bite his lower lip—just sink her teeth into it? “I didn’t peg you as a beggar. Screamer? Yes.” She wagged her eyebrows, holding his gaze despite the fiery warning flaring there. “Look at what we’re all learning here at this mixer about one another.”

Laughter sounded around them. Without warning, he bent his head and claimed her mouth once more. He surged through her mouth, licking the sides and tangling his tongue with hers. “I bet I can make you scream louder.”

Yeah, she didn’t back down from a challenge. Pushing closer because she wasn’t ready to put some space between them yet, her gaze moved from his eyes down to his mouth and up again.

“I’d have you begging in no time.”

“Never a doubt in my mind, Flykra. Not a single one.”

He slid his hand along her neck and heat singed her skin at his calloused touch. Lust curled in her stomach and she sank her teeth into her lower lip.

“Like I said,” Wendy commented. “*I* need to cool off after that.”

Mitchell smiled, his gaze not leaving Hope’s face. Rolling her eyes, Hope turned her attention away from the unforgettable man at her side and toward the group of people she would forever consider her friends. With one exception: Collette. However, *that* woman didn’t deserve her time or thoughts. It helped she wasn’t down here tonight.

The windows surrounding them shook with the force of wind and snow still slamming into it. She was so glad Mitchell wasn’t outside anymore. She’d been concerned earlier. If he had been out there now, she *really* would have been worried.

Almost like he could read her mind, he tugged her closer to him, brushed his lips over her forehead and asked, “Who’s singing next?”

For the next hour, she remained pressed up against Mitchell Anderson, a man she didn’t want to admit had come to mean so much to her in the short time they’d known each other. She rested against his strong body and listened to the laughter and joy flowing through the room.

What she thought was mere moments later, Hope stirred and blinked, surprised to find she’d dozed off. The fire burned low and she couldn’t see anyone else down here, though she couldn’t miss the man beside her. His arm still draped around her, however, it wasn’t along her shoulders anymore. He had his hand along her side, long fingers stretched out over her in that same possessive way. She *really* didn’t mind.

He flexed his hand and settled it along her side. Hope tipped her head up to find him watching her in the flickering firelight.

“You could have left me down here.” She blinked. “When did everyone else go up?”

“About an hour ago. I wasn’t leaving you.”

She enjoyed those words far more than she should. “You must be tired.”

He wagged his eyebrows. “If I am, are you going to put me to bed?”

Her lips twitched. Honestly, she couldn’t help it. To put it simply, he made her laugh.

“Why is it you sound hopeful about that?”

He helped her sit up and she closed her eyes and stretched. When she opened them, he was staring at her like he wanted to take a bite out of her.

“Because I am.” He reached out and grasped some of her hair that had slipped from the loose bun she’d gathered it in and slid it over his fingers. Mitchell bent closer to her, brushed his lips along her cheek and whispered, “Let’s go break into the kitchen and make hot cocoa.”

Chapter Twelve

Mitchell watched as Hope stirred the milk in the pot, heating it to the point where she could add in the chocolate bar. She'd allowed him to pin up her hair and he'd mimicked a style he'd seen on her before, half up and half down. He loved it. More than that, he enjoyed the strangely intimate task of putting her hair up.

It didn't hurt he'd discovered she was ticklish behind her ears.

As she stirred the pot with a smooth wooden spoon, he rubbed the nape of his neck. Hope stood on one leg, her left foot flat against her right thigh. The woman looked perfectly comfortable.

He recognized the position from one of Shawnee's friends who was into yoga. "Do you do yoga?"

"Not so much anymore. I did for a good number of years. That and meditation. This, the Vrikshasana, is about the only pose I do anymore. More like an instinctive pose now than about yoga." She broke the chocolate bar into smaller pieces before slipping them into the pot, stirring slowly but steadily. "Do you do yoga? Is that a thing basketball players do?"

"My ex-wife had a friend who did it."

Damn it! He'd not wanted to bring *her* into this conversation.

Her brow furrowed and she poked her tongue out of the left corner of her mouth while she focused on the pot before her. Mitchell moved up to the stove and propped his hip against the counter, eyes on Hope. He wanted to know what she was thinking. Despite his desire not to, his mind skated down the road of having to buy something shiny when a woman got upset and the whole give-them-whatever-they-wanted to ease the slight. It didn't make sense and Hope didn't strike him as one who did that, but his scars ran deep.

"So, not a basketball thing then?" She flicked her tongue

over her lips.

“Not for me,” he admitted, noticing how the milk began turning a dark, creamy brown. She never stopped stirring it, her moves calm and easy, like she’d done this numerous times before.

“What did you do? Do you do? Do do?” She snorted and shook her head. “Is there a thing you have that you do?”

The spoon clunked against the side of the pan when she dropped it to cover her face. Mitchell bit back his laughter, both amused as heck and thrilled she’d moved on instead of dwelling on him mentioning another woman.

“Oh my God. I can’t talk. You know what, I’m going to stand here and stir. Perhaps I can do that without sounding like I need help.”

When she picked the spoon up once more, he watched as she put her left foot on the floor as well. Only then did he move closer, dipping his head to brush his lips along the curve of her exposed shoulder, relishing one hundred percent in the tremble that she couldn’t hide.

“Meditation is my thing.”

As expected, she looked up at him with a shocked expression. “Really?”

“Really.” He brushed his hand along the small of her back as he moved the mugs closer. “Is it ready?”

Her response was to hold a spoonful up for him to sample. “You tell me.”

After blowing on it, he took a sip. Perfection. There was something else in it he couldn’t identify. What had she added? Hell, he’d been here the whole time and couldn’t recall her putting anything else in. Sure, he may have been a bit distracted, but still.

Mitchell nodded even as he said, “Oh yeah. Let’s drink this.”

He held the mugs while she poured some into each. It hadn’t taken him much time to build up the fire on the stove and he

made sure to bank it so it would fire up quickly in the morning. Then he picked up both mugs and carried them over to the counter with the stools, pleased that she slid onto the one beside him instead of across from him.

Mitchell sat after she did, noticing the small, pleased curl of her lips as she curved her hands around the warm mug and put it below her nose for a deep inhale. The resulting groan was nearly his undoing.

“Tell me more about meditation and why that’s your thing.”

She angled her head to look at him in the low glow of light and his heart skipped. More than once. Innocent seduction was what this woman was. If she knew how much she turned him on, she didn’t act like she cared. Her hair tumbled around the softness of her features, and he longed to cup her face, pull her in for a kiss, but he stayed put and watched her. Her plump full lips were driving him to distraction, especially as he knew how they felt beneath his.

Perfection.

Two hours later, they finished washing up their mugs in the cool dishwasher and left them overturned on a clean towel. Mitchell stayed beside her as they tiptoed up to their room, trying to make as little noise as possible.

They were good until they hit their floor and walked past a room with the bedframe squeaking. He heard her snort of laughter before he settled his hand against her and nudged her along to *their* room. He didn’t know whose room it was nor did he care. He wanted Hope in their bed.

Tension simmered between them as he closed the door behind them. Hope brushed her hands down her thighs and gave him a wobbly smile.

“I’ll be out in a moment.”

Mitchell leaned against the door as she swiped up the clothing she slept in. Yep, his. She paused at the doorway to the bathroom and he forced himself to stay where he was. The lure to follow her was much like the Sirens calling the sailors, and he should be tied up or have something over his eyes so he

couldn't see her. Sure, it was their voices but for him with this woman, it was everything. Everyfuckingthing.

He went to the fire and added another log so it wouldn't die out overnight. The room wasn't hot by any stretch, but he didn't give a damn. Right now, they were about to crawl under the blankets and would be fine. Personally, he was all sorts of happy to keep her warm. It would be no hardship to cuddle up to her body and hold her tight.

All.

Night.

Long.

Mitchell remained crouched before the fire when she walked out wearing his shirt and pants, her hair down around her face.

Christ. This woman is fucking perfect.

"All yours." She walked toward him, her hips swaying slightly as she moved.

It took an act of God for him to tear his vision away from her waist and pull it up to her face.

"Can I help?"

He rose. "Nope, all set. Didn't want it to burn out overnight." Great, now he was rambling.

"Okay." She headed to the bed.

Fingers digging into his palm, he went to the bathroom, grabbing his clothing on the way. "Be right back."

Not only rambling but also stating the obvious. Tonight, he was like a boy hoping to get lucky for the first time. Scowling as he swapped out pants for boxers, he yanked them up. Even his hands were sweating.

He blew out the candle that she'd lit in the bathroom, plunging the room into darkness. The low glow from the embers gave him enough light to see to the bed where Hope had already crawled in. His eye twitched as he saw the lump of pillows she'd erected as a wall between them, but he held his tongue.

Sliding into bed, he immediately rolled toward her, aware that she remained on her back...for the moment.

“Can I tell you something, Hope Roman?”

Mitchell gave in to his urge to touch her hair while he waited for an answer. Using two fingers, he wound her curls around them, loving the sensation as they pulled over his skin. She hadn't used the hair tie one of the other women had provided her. All her wild curls were free.

“If it's whether you have permission to touch my hair, I'd say you're late in asking.”

There was no heat to her words and he was fairly certain he heard her purr low in her throat.

“Would it help if I said your hair was on my side of the pillow wall?” He dipped his head slightly, allowing himself to smell her hair.

“No, but as long as you don't stop stroking, I'll allow it.” Hope moved closer to him, even with the wall still between them.

“I want to stroke it all right.” The words were free before he could even consider censoring them. He waited for her to pull away or snap at him for his comment.

She didn't do either. Her breathing hitched before she wrangled it under control.

“What did you want to tell me?”

It may have been his imagination but he swore he heard a hint of breathlessness in her question. For the life of him, he couldn't remember anything beyond the softness of her hair in his fingers and a craving for it to move along his skin.

The room was dark except for the faint glow of the banked fire. It didn't offer a lot, but it allowed him enough light to see the curvature of her face. Releasing her hair, he touched her left cheek before turning her head to him.

She didn't fight him and they were face-to-face, sharing the pillow wall. Her warm breath fanned over his mouth.

“I’m going to kiss you, Hope Roman.”

Leaning in, he thought he heard her mutter, “About damn time,” but he didn’t stop to ask or confirm his suspicion. He simply kissed her.

As her lips brushed against his, he realized he’d made another mistake. There wasn’t now, nor would there ever be, anything “simply” when it came to this woman.

A low rumble slipped free as her mouth molded to his. Mitchell slid his hand up from her cheek to sink into her hair, needing more of it cascading over his skin. Needing more of *her*.

Possessiveness flared to life and he knew this moment was changing his life...forever. True, it had changed the moment his and Hope Roman’s lives had intersected but this was the final nail in the coffin, for lack of a better phrase.

She reached over their makeshift wall and dug her fingers into his biceps as a small mewl of want escaped her.

Nothing mattered to him but this woman and right now. Not the snowstorm. Not his mother. Not his ex and not his company. All his focus zeroed in on the woman sharing the bed with him.

The kiss changed. No longer tender or exploratory, it became a tangled mess of hungry need, their tongues tasting, thrusting, and tangling with each other. God, he couldn’t get enough of her. His cock, hard and thick, pushed angrily against the pillows between them.

A wall he wanted to toss to the floor. There shouldn’t be a damn thing between them. Not even clothing as far as he was concerned.

Suddenly, she wrenched out of his arms. “Oh God, Mitchell.”

No!

Hand on the back of her head, he yanked her to his mouth once more, not willing to give up the taste of her, not yet.

God, not *ever*.

• • •

Hope didn't want this dream to end. Mitchell Anderson was kissing her like his need for her surpassed the one for his next breath. He had her in his grip as if he was loath to release her, not that she wanted him to. She wanted to be closer.

If not for the damn wall of pillows she had put up between them. It wasn't because she didn't trust him, it was more that it had become habit. And the moment that registered, she moved over the pillow wall, making sure to scatter them away so she could get closer to the man who tasted like nothing she'd ever known.

He pushed his left hand into her hair and skimmed his right down her side to her hip, until he was cupping the back of her thigh. His palm heated her through the fabric of the pants she'd put on. Damn her for wanting skin on skin. Damn him for making her crave it from him.

Her mind sent out one last warning, that this was only going to end in pain for her. She shut it down. This was something she wanted. Needed. Was taking.

"Mitchell," she muttered against his lips, firm and yet soft.

"I'm fucking addicted to your taste, Flykra." Small peppered kisses followed his statement and she arched into him. Wanting more.

She wound her arms around his torso, nails skimming along his shirt. He captured one wrist and she held her breath, waiting for him to tell her to stop. He didn't speak, just pushed her hand beneath the cotton of his top so her palm settled upon his heated skin.

Following his demand, she slipped her other hand under as well and ran them over the taut muscles of his back. The man purred as she petted him, indulging in the tactical exploration. The deep vibration made her tremble as she realized what his reaction to her was. This was pure, visceral, and unable to be faked.

His kisses continued as she wriggled closer. Mitchell finally

moved away from her lips and worked his way down her neck as she tipped her head, offering him easier access.

She couldn't make out the words that slid from his mouth in between the fluttering kisses. One: they weren't in English and two: she was trying not to come apart in a splinter of pleasure from the touches of a man who'd not even ventured below her neck yet. Though his body was pressed tight to hers, and she got to feel, up close and personal, the hard length of his cock as it rubbed against her core.

His growl grew as he rolled over, pulling her on top of him, settling her between his legs. Immediately, she rolled her hips and he grit his jaw. Brown eyes had laser focus on her face as she drew her lower lip into her mouth.

Mitchell clutched her hips, skimmed his palms down to her thighs, and gripped. She nipped the inside of her cheek, keeping her moan contained. He frowned up at her and tightened his hold.

"I want it all, Flykra. Moans, whimpers." He smirked. "Screams."

Hope dragged her tongue along the seam of her lips. He surged up as he yanked her flush against him, aligning her core to the hard presence of his cock. His arms ran up her back, keeping her to him with one hand clasped around the nape of her neck.

"Mitchell."

His response was to leave more mind-blowing kisses along her chin and down her throat. She succumbed with barely a struggle, tipping her head. Wanting more. He latched onto the skin, right below her suprasternal notch. She giggled.

He froze.

Spearing her fingers into his hair, she tipped her head to meet his expression. "I'm not laughing at you."

He lifted an eyebrow but didn't speak.

"Where you're kissing me. Trying to mark me. Right below my suprasternal notch."

“Your what?”

“That’s what I was laughing about. I know this because I had a friend who was a doctor and he took great pleasure in telling me this was one of the first things he remembered. Instead of calling it the jugular notch.”

His expression sobered. “You said had.”

“Calvin passed five years ago.”

Hands stroked her skin, below the shirt, offering a level of comfort she needed without having to ask.

“I’m sorry.”

“He did it saving someone’s life, so he went out how he would have wanted.” A sad smile for the one she’d lost. Forcing a smile, she leaned in to kiss him. “I didn’t mean to bring the mood down. Calvin always makes me happy when I think of him.”

Mitchell stretched up and nipped at her lower lip. “Do you want me to stop?” She tensed. “I will if that’s what you want, but full disclosure, Flykra, I have no desire to stop until I’m buried fully inside your heat. No, that’s not correct. I don’t think I’ll want to stop, not even then.”

“Don’t stop.” Two whispered words that tumbled from her mouth seconds before his lips were once again on her skin. Branding her.

Not ever.

Lower he moved, leaning her back yet supporting her with the strength of his arms. He rubbed against her breasts and she gasped. Sparks of awareness shot through her, making her tremble even more.

Head back, she sank her teeth into her lower lip, not even attempting to stifle her moan. Then her world shattered. He took one nipple in his mouth, shirt and all. Synapses on overload, purely from that one move, she wriggled on his lap. A louder, lower growl escaped his mouth, vibrating the hypersensitive tip.

How was it her body was set to go up in flames already?

Shifting her hips against him, she opened her mouth to say something but only a small purr came out. He fisted his hands in her top and drew it tight around her chest, mouth never leaving the breast he focused on.

Hands grasping at air, she finally gripped his shoulders and held on as he moved from left to right, giving both his undivided attention. Brain scrambled, all she could do was enjoy and revel in the experience of his touch, his caress, his highly *intense* focus.

“Hope,” he growled out seconds before his mouth was on hers, giving her the breath she’d lost. Then, just as fast, he stole it again.

But was it really stealing if she wasn’t arguing that he could have it? She didn’t think so. Then normal thoughts stopped.

This man kissed her in a way she’d never been kissed before. His strong arms banded around her, anchoring her to his unyielding, powerful form. Mitchell dominated her mouth, tasting her like a man in the desert did water, desperate and all-consuming. Scoring her fingers down his chest, she wound her arms around him again, seeking and finding his hot skin beneath his shirt.

Her emotions were out of control and she wasn’t processing them fast enough. And faster still, he switched their positions, placing her on the bed below him, like she didn’t weigh more than a feather. His hardness dug into her as she instinctively widened her legs to cradle him there.

“Still with me, Flykra?”

He punctuated his question by squeezing her ass.

“Yes!” Her affirmation spilled from her lips in a gasp.

That was all the time she had to provide an answer because he took her mouth again in a show of dominance that made her long to submit to anything he wished, so long as he didn’t stop touching her.

Like before, he moved down along her chin and his rough stubble rasped the skin of her throat, only adding to the sensations she was now hyperaware of moving in her body.

His fingertips brushed her hip then dipped inside the sweats below her panties.

She sucked a sharp breath and he was there. Again. Over her.

“Yes?”

Hope wanted him more than anything. She stabbed her fingers into the unruly hair on his head. “Yes.”

His smile was wicked. “Good.” He squeezed harder and she whimpered as he ground his erection into her while he returned to kissing.

Her nose overflowed with his scent, their combined faint hint of sweat, and her arousal. Mitchell put them nose to nose, took a deep breath, and inched down after brushing one lingering kiss on her mouth. He pushed up her shirt and helped her remove it before swearing.

“Christ, you’re beautiful.”

Hope felt it. Sure, she’d had self-esteem issues in the past—who didn’t? Now she was comfortable with her weight, but something about Mitchell’s tone and the hitch in his voice, combined with the way he paused as he stared at her, made her truly *feel* it.

“There’s not enough time for what I want to do to you, Hope Roman.” He ran his hands down her chest, swiping his thumbs over her taut nipples before skimming down over her rounded belly to her waist and the top of the pants she still wore. “I want you naked. Beneath me. Above me. Beside me. I know you said yes, but I’m asking once more, just to be sure.”

She couldn’t reach his shoulders, not with him sitting up. She could, however, touch his wrists, thick and strong, so she curved her fingers around them. “Yes, to all of that, Mitchell.”

He slipped his thumbs in her waistband and licked his lips. “Then lift your hips for me, baby, because you’re wearing too many goddamn clothes.”

Chapter Thirteen

Mitchell inched his way to the edge of the bed, bringing her pants and panties with him. Eyes trained on the woman lying on the bed, her bare skin becoming exposed inch by torturous inch to his gaze, he nearly slipped off the mattress. Feet on the floor, he drew her clothing over her knees, pausing to place kisses on the inside of each one.

Her aroma drifted to his nose and he wanted to taste her and prove she tasted better in real life than she did in his dreams. Her pants were beneath his knees as he sank to them, cupping his hands under her calves before he tugged her toward him.

She stiffened the barest of moments, but he saw it and lifted his head from where he stared at her pussy to find her gaze on him. He wanted to feast on her like a starving animal. He tugged a bit more, spreading her legs wide, opening her to him. He was surrounded by her heady, spicy scent.

Dipping his head, Mitchell kissed the inside of each thigh before brushing his nose so close to her his breath danced along her skin, but he didn't touch. No matter how much he longed to do so. Eyes up, he waited for her to look at him. The moment their gazes locked, he put his mouth over her core.

Her taste coated his tongue as he dragged it up and it didn't take him longer than his next breath to know he wouldn't get enough of her. Any of her.

Her hips bucked and he shook his head, unwilling to cheat himself of the time he craved to explore every inch of her. With his left hand, he lifted her leg and draped it over his shoulder, the heavy weight only egging him on. He needed both legs clamped around his head, heels digging into him as he enjoyed her.

Up and down he lapped at her, dipping his tongue in only to retreat when she would shift against him.

“Mitchell.” A warning? A plea? He wasn't sure.

His right hand gripped the inside of her thigh, his hold

unwavering, and he pushed her more, needing more space for his shoulders so he could indulge. She was shameless in her begging and he loved the way his name dripped off her lips. But it wasn't enough.

He flicked the tip of his tongue over her clit and she grabbed a handful of his hair—tugging without mercy as she tried to hold him to her.

He had no plans to leave where he was. His rhythm was... there was no rhythm. Fast and slow flicks of his tongue. Nips of his teeth and deep sucks. Everything he did ramped up his own need but also increased it in the woman sprawled out before him as a feast. She couldn't hide it from him. Not honestly.

The way she wriggled, begged, and threatened told him all he needed to know. When she sank her other hand into his hair and yanked as his name tumbled from her lips in a low cry, he pushed his tongue deep inside her, taking all her cream. Thumb on her clit, he rotated it, not allowing her to come down from her high. He wanted her to continue floating until he was joining her. They could settle together. After.

Mitchell reluctantly withdrew his tongue from her and licked his lips as he watched her wriggle before him, her skin shining with a sheen of sweat. He pushed a finger inside her heat and focused on the way her full lips molded his name.

Shit! Her pussy gripped his finger like a vise. Sucking in a sharp breath, he began moving it slowly, mimicking what he longed to do with her. And he told her.

“Mitchell,” she gasped, interrupting him.

He nipped and licked the inside of her left thigh. “What, Flykra?”

“Need you.”

Thank God because his cock was on the cusp of declaring mutiny. He rubbed himself with his heel and groaned.

“You ready for me, baby?”

Her tongue flicked over her lips as she nodded, her fingers

loosening their grip in his hair before smoothing down part of his face.

“Yes, Mitchell.”

One final kiss to her pussy and he stood, fingers attacking the waistband of his boxers. Her dark gaze never moved from his hands as he pushed them down, his cock springing free, long, thick, and hard.

A low moan filled the air and he realized it came from the woman he craved more than his next breath. He grasped himself and stroked as he watched her. Her parted lips, pointed nipples, spread legs, damp core, all of it. Waiting for him.

She lifted a hand to him and he stepped away, knowing if he touched her right this second his final thread of control would snap.

“One second, baby. Protection.”

A single nod but she didn't take her gaze from him. Dick hard and angry he was not inside her, Mitchell stepped to his bags and ripped into the one he used to have condoms in. He'd not been seeking female attention and hadn't been carrying them but thankfully he found three. Tossing the partial strip on the bed beside her, he returned to the mattress, loving how her breathing kicked up a notch when he kneeled on the bed.

Moving over her, he kissed her, willing himself to take his time. Make it last. Make it incredible for her.

“Flykra,” he whispered against her mouth.

The heat from her body encompassed him and he needed more. Hope wrapped her arms around him, holding him tight.

She nipped his chin and his lower lip. “I want you inside me, Mitchell Anderson. One night, I want to know what it's like to be yours.”

Claiming her mouth in a bruising kiss, he followed her down as she sank into the mattress. He couldn't speak or something about forever would tumble from his mouth. Lips fused together, he fumbled like an untried youth to open the condom. Her fingers dug into his shoulders as he drew back

but he only put enough distance between them to cover himself, then he lowered right onto her curves.

“You are mine, Flykra.” The words slid free and he didn’t even attempt to stop them.

Her nails dug into his skin as she widened her legs, welcoming him into her. Forehead to forehead, he reached between them, grasping the base of his shaft, notching the large head at her opening.

“For more than just tonight,” he mumbled in Faroese.

She locked her ankles against the small of his back and purred as he slid home. Mitchell didn’t slam into her. He wasn’t a small man and hurting her was the last thing on his mind, so despite the need raging in his blood, he would take care of her.

“Yes,” she hissed, nails stabbing him deeper.

Once he sat fully inside her, he struggled for breath. Shit, she was tight. Wet. Hot. Liquid heated velvet.

“Still with me?”

He opened the eyes he’d not realized he’d closed when she settled a palm along his cheek. “I won’t break, Mitchell.”

I very well could, Hope Roman. You already have a grip on my heart.

Eye to eye. Lips brushing. He drew back slowly, taking in as much as he could of her expression in the low light. The flush of her skin. The sweat beaded at her hairline, the few curls stuck along her cheek. The air mingled with the scents of her arousal, her minty breath, and the smoldering fire.

In and out, he moved, her slickness growing with each stroke. Mitchell’s control was frayed, and he knew he couldn’t continue like this for long. Hope unhooked her leg and dragged it down the outside of his hip and over his own. When her foot skimmed over his calf, his control snapped. Fell apart. Came completely unraveled.

He took a shuddering breath as the head of his cock sat notched against her and squeezed his eyes shut, only to open

them and promptly lose what was left of his breath. In no world was this woman not beautiful to him.

“Hope.”

One word. Her name. That was all he could utter.

She flexed her internal muscles and they skimmed along the sensitive skin of his cock. He growled and thrust deep, reveling in the slight arch of her spine and how she sank her teeth into that enticing lower lip. Rising up, he dug his fingertips into her full hips and lifted her enough to change the angle of his strokes.

Faster.

Harder.

Deeper.

“Yes, Mitchell,” she cried. “Please. Harder. I need it harder.”

Although loath to leave the snug heat of her, he pulled back and flipped her so her ass was toward him. Gripping her hips, he yanked her flush to him—no time for finesse—and slammed deep inside her pussy.

“Yes!”

He obeyed her command, the headboard slapping against the wall in time with his ferocious strokes. Beneath him, her body curved, arching to his touch, seeking more as her nails dug into the bedding below her. Mitchell knew his fingers were going to leave imprints on her skin and he was okay with that. She should be carrying his mark on her body. He wanted everyone who looked at her to know she was taken. That he belonged to her and she him.

Her curls were a wild mess as they moved with every motion Hope made, practically begging him to grip and tug on the strands. He pulled her head so he could look her in the eyes and take possession of her mouth as he fucked her, but he couldn't bring himself to release the punishing grip he retained on her hips.

“Mitchell,” she moaned, body tensing beneath him.

He bent at the waist, leaning his weight on her and craving the feel of her smooth skin against him. “Come for me, Flykra. Give me what I want.”

She listened.

• • •

Hope came awake slowly, her body satisfied in every single way. Muscles a sated pile of goo and a goofy smile on her lips, she took a deep breath and realized that she remained wrapped up in an iron grip. Mitchell had his arms around her, keeping her plastered to him.

Nearly lying on her, his hands were possessive in how they held her. One of her legs was wedged between his and she was pretty sure he had his anchored on her hip. His hand, which happened to be on her ass, flexed as she lay there. Unlike the other nights when she’d woken in his arms, this was *so* much more.

“You’re thinking too damn hard for this time of the morning, Flykra.” His low voice rumbled in her ear and spread warmth through her entire exhausted body. “You should be sleeping.”

She should move away but she didn’t. Instead, she pushed closer to his heat and brushed her lips over his pectoral.

“Maybe you didn’t wear me out,” Hope teased.

“Fighting words, baby.” A nip on her neck as he rolled her to her back and rose above her. “But, since you pointed it out...allow me to rectify the situation.”

Whatever she’d been about to say was stifled when he slid inside her, hard and ready, stretching her used muscles and making her moan in pleasure. Skimming her nails up his bare arms to the base of his neck, she teased him there, fingers twining with his hair.

“Hold on to me, Flykra, I’m going to wear you out now.”

Four hours later she rolled her decidedly sore body from bed, alone this time. A smile teased the corners of her lips as

she reached for his shirt and tugged it on over her head before padding over the wood floor to the window. The chill reached her easily but when she drew open the curtains she squinted immediately. No clouds. Nothing but the brilliant sun shining down.

Reality hit her with a force and speed she didn't like. Whatever fantasy world she'd been living in with Mitchell was at an end. Her insides twisted at that knowledge.

She wasn't assuming they would move in and get married, living happily ever after, but damn it, she'd just had him.

“And now I have to let him go.”

“Not getting rid of me that easily, Flykra.” His arms closed around her, stopping her immediate jump. His lips covered her squeal of surprise and damn if she didn't sink into him.

“When did you come in?”

He turned her into his chest and wound his hand in her curls, tugging slightly so she glanced up at him. Mitchell had a fascination with her hair, and she loved it being stroked, but when he played with it, there was something else moving through her. She could feel him in a far more proprietary manner. And she liked it. A lot.

“I was coming to wake you.” His brown eyes twinkled. “Pity you were up already. I had plans...”

Good God. Her legs trembled and she gulped as she tried not to give him a bigger head than he had already. He dipped his head closer until his warm breath, with hints of coffee, flowed over her.

“Want to know how?”

“How what?”

He nipped her lower lip, his chuckle dangerous and enticing. “How I planned on spreading your legs and putting my mouth over you—”

She slapped her hand over his mouth. “Stop.”

A careless shrug and she cautiously moved her hand. Damn

it, now she had a vision of his blond head between her thighs, his scruff abrading the sensitive skin as he did what he'd done so freaking well the night before. Her breathing came in short choppy breaths.

“I came up to get you. As I'm sure you can see, the storm finally moved on overnight. Plows are out and we should be able to leave later this afternoon. I wanted to see if you'd like to take a walk outside with me after I get some food in you.”

She didn't have outdoor clothing but the idea of walking out in the beauty that surrounded them was too good to pass up. “I'd like that. A lot.”

His grin grew seconds before he squeezed her ass. “As much as I love seeing you in nothing but my shirt, you'll want to put something else on before we head down.”

“Just so you know, Mitchell Anderson, I'm keeping your sweatshirt when we part ways.”

A flicker of something flashed in his eyes, only to vanish before she could focus on it. His smile made her gut flip.

“Get dressed before I toss you on the bed and pretend you're sleeping so I can wake you.”

She dragged her nails down his chest as she moved away from his intoxicating touch. “If that was supposed to be a threat, you failed.”

“Flykra,” he rumbled behind her.

Swiping up the clothing she was going to wear, she ducked into the bathroom, cleaned up, then dressed in record time. Not that she typically took a while but she *was* hungry and anxious to be outside. She wasn't a woman who spent a lot of time indoors.

She stepped out in her jeans and Mitchell's shirt and sweatshirt. He pointed at the bed and she found a pair of his socks waiting for her. No argument from her as his socks were much warmer than her thinner ones.

The moment she sat on the edge, he was there, crouching before her, tugging on the socks then putting on and tying her

hiking boots. She didn't even try to stop the smile—just reached out and pushed her fingers into his hair, stroking his head.

Mitchell looked up at her, eyes heating immediately.

“Food and outside,” she said.

He grumbled low and skimmed his hands along the outside of her jeans before he rose.

“Let's go then.”

There were plenty of looks from her friends as she walked into the main room with Mitchell beside her, his hand resting on the small of her back. Wendy waggled her eyebrows and pointed to a spot beside her.

After getting the pancakes, bacon, eggs, and fruit she wanted, she took a seat by her friend.

“Morning, Wendy.”

The woman grinned even as she chewed her bite, moving her fork in small circles.

“Before you say anything, I heard the bed in your room as well.”

Her friend's eyes grew wide and her face flushed red.

“That's what I thought,” Hope said as a cup of coffee was placed next to her right hand. Mitchell took a seat with only a cup of coffee. Turning her head toward him, she blinked. “Not eating?”

He flicked his tongue over his lips as he ran his gaze along her face. “Had some earlier. I'm sure I'll eat something later.”

It was winter, *right*? Because holy crap, she was certain she was at the equator with the heat in his gaze and words.

Wendy kicked her under the table and she tried to shoot her a glare but fell short of the mark.

“Are you coming outside with us, Wendy?”

“Definitely. I think we could all use some time outside. Maybe a snowball fight.” Her eyebrows bounced.

More people, Collette included, filed in and joined them after loading up their plates. Hope had a difficult time concentrating on the conversation floating around her. More like conversations, but all she managed to think about was Mitchell and how he'd watched her with such passion when he'd mentioned that he was going to eat something later.

They cleaned up and once everyone was bundled up, they went outside, the cold crisp air taking her breath immediately.

The sun shone down with a vengeance. Didn't cut the chill but it sure as hell made everything sparkle. With an absent smile at David's cheer, she walked to the corner of the porch and rested a shoulder against the post.

He didn't say a word, but she knew Mitchell was behind her. He had this presence about him that her body couldn't ignore any more than she could command her heart to stop beating.

"I get the Norman Rockwell paintings now. And why so many photos are of the northeast." Her breath puffed in the cold air.

Mitchell didn't press up against her. She had mixed feelings in regards to that, but he gripped the railing before him as he stood next to her.

"It is beautiful here."

"Then why do you look like you're about to come out of your skin?"

"What are you talking about?" He turned his head to her.

She didn't meet his gaze but kept hers on the barn before them. *I'm sure this looks fucking stunning at night with soft yellow light reflecting off all the snow.* "You're tense. Almost like you're regretting having to leave whatever cocoon this place has created for everyone."

"Offering to help me relax, Flykra? I would definitely take you up on it."

Deflection.

She knew it as surely as she knew she was standing in Vermont with a man she wouldn't ever forget, not as long as

she lived. However, as positive as she was with that bit of knowledge, she was the same with another tidbit. He wasn't her man. Mitchell was not hers to protect or worry about.

If he wanted to redirect, she wasn't stressing.

Angling her body toward his, she rested her head against the post, grateful for the dark pink knitted skullcap she wore to help retain her heat. Too bad her boots weren't insulated against winter weather, but Mitchell's socks helped keep her toes warm.

And she'd not even gone down in the snow yet. Unlike some of the others.

"Sure thing," she replied, pushing down her personal desire to wrap him up tight in her arms and beg him to share with her. Hope closed the few steps between them and placed her left leg by his on the rail, close enough to touch but she didn't. "How would you like me to help you relax?"

He sliced his gaze to her and she was snared, unable to look away. His was magnetic and she apparently had the opposing pole because she was drawn right in, ready to do anything and she did mean *anything* he requested of her.

"Not going to push as to what you think is bothering me?"

"No." *Yes! Tell me! Let me help you.* Beyond him, she watched David come along the stretch of porch, his small gloved hand running along the railing, balling up the snow as he moved.

"So if I said sex?"

"I'd say it's too cold and probably a lesson a young boy doesn't need at his age...or we could go up to the room." She didn't blink, didn't waver.

Mitchell faced her and stepped into her space, cutting off all view of anything but his wide chest and that harshly angled face. "You would, wouldn't you?"

"Of course." She ran her fingers up the zipper of his coat. "You're extremely gifted in that area, Mitchell Anderson. It would be no hardship for me to indulge and allow you to claim

that I help you relax.” Hope smiled up at him.

He shifted against her, pressing the hard length of him into her belly. Settling his hands on either side of her, he grunted.

“You know,” he said, his voice a tease of the passion to come. “When that snow goes down my neck, I’m throwing you over the rail into the rest of it.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.” She licked her lips, noting how he tracked the motion. “You’re caging me in a corner. My hands are on your chest.” She patted said chest, proving a point.

“I played in the NBA, Flykra, I know what’s going on around me at all times. Situational awareness.” He brushed a light kiss along her lips before he spun and snatched David up off the ground, making the snow fall from his hands into her face.

“I’m sorry, Hope,” David called. “I was trying to get him.”

Laughter burst out of her and she didn’t even try to control it. “That’s okay, David. We’ll just have to get him now.” She scooped some up from the rail and put it in Mitchell’s face.

As he sputtered, she tried to jog by him, but even though his eyes were closed, he grasped her wrist, effectively halting her. “Oh no, Flykra. I warned you what would happen.”

That rumble of his went directly through her bloodstream to her clit. Hope fought the urge to rub her thighs together. “I didn’t see any go down your neck. It went in your face.”

His black leather glove finally moved from his face and she sucked a harsh breath at the intensity of his gaze. Amusement. Lust. Hunger. All mingling together.

“And you’re going into the snow.”

Hope held up her hands, shaking her head. “Now, Mitchell. Let’s not be rash here. We’re adults.”

He shook his head, sending droplets of water from his hair onto her. “Right now? I’m pretty much a kid.” He lifted her up. “One who is going to make good on his promise.” Mitchell carried her along the porch and she squirmed in his arms. “I’m

not going to drop you until I have you where I want you.”

“What if you drop me and there’s something hard beneath me.”

He paused by an open spot that had snow up to the railing. “You had something hard beneath you all night and you survived fine.”

She opened her mouth and screamed as he launched her over the rail and into the deep pile of snow.

• • •

Hours later, Hope made her way down the stairs of the inn, amazed and more than a bit saddened that her time here had come to an end. They’d waited for the plows to make it through and now it was time to leave. There was a thread of excitement that they were no longer stranded here, but she couldn’t ignore the underlying sadness.

Sure, the circumstances had been unorthodox—the weather tossing them all together—but hell, she’d never forget the time...or the people. Waving goodbye to Naomi, she stepped outside. The air took her breath away but now there was no more sun offsetting the chill. If anything, it was colder now than earlier.

She walked down the steps to those gathered. David and his father had left, already on their way home, having said goodbye earlier. She’d watched Mitchell on one knee, speaking with the child, giving him all his attention. Damn it, that had kicked her hyperactive ovaries into a higher gear.

Now, it was her, Mitchell, Wendy, Sonya, Erick, and Alistair. Exhaust puffed from the vehicles, which were warming up on the cold night.

Wendy bounced up to her after using her hip to bump the door closed on her green and white Mini Cooper, Petey. She slid her arm around Hope, resting her head on her shoulder. Hope smiled as she gazed around.

She’d been so right; the inn was stunning at night. The

yellow lights from inside spilled out warmth on the snowy landscape, welcoming people without saying a word.

For a child who'd lived in the system and hadn't really had any place to call home for herself—other than the room she'd had as a child—this spot, she was going to miss. This inn and the time she'd spent here meant more to her than the infrequent stays in the studio apartment she rented in Atlanta.

She had no real ties to the area, other than she'd gone to university in Florida and had come up to Atlanta at the behest of her mentor, Professor Karl Jones, for her first real job in the field. She'd never left. With the international airport there, it was easy enough for her to get to the locations she needed to reach in her travels as a well-known science journalist.

She didn't have any trips planned for a bit because she was waiting for her editor to let her know about the one story she'd really wanted. Being on the move so much, she had no connections with people who would be worried for her.

But this group, these women especially, made her think that if she went missing now, say after a car crash, they would call and search for her.

“We will stay in touch,” Wendy said, squeezing her tight.

“Of course.”

“I don't want this to sound weird but I'm glad your car flipped and you got to stay here with us.”

She understood and nodded. “I couldn't have asked for a better place to land. Or better friends to make.”

“I bet. That hard body would be a great place to settle.”

A bark of laughter escaped and Hope rolled her eyes. “I was talking about the inn.”

“I was talking about the hot Viking you were sharing a bed with.”

“I got that.”

Wendy chortled. “I know you did. More than once!”

Another hug and Wendy pushed a sheet of paper into her

hand. “My number for you to put in your phone when you get it back.”

Damn it! Actual tears burned her eyes and she furiously blinked them away.

“Thank you, Wendy.”

Her new friend drew back. “For?”

“Being my friend.”

“Awww, honey. You’re a fucking incredible woman. Anyone with half a brain would be your friend.”

This time their hug was joined by Sonya.

“I’m too cute to be left out of this love circle.”

Hope and Wendy laughed before holding her tight. *I have friends. I made new friends. João is going to be so proud of me.*

After the trio split up, she got hugs from Erick and Alistair. All the while, Mitchell’s gaze burned into her.

“You and me and a ride in my Stingray when the weather permits,” Alistair whispered in her ear.

“Sounds like fun.” She brushed her lips over his cheek, stepped back, and found herself plastered against Mitchell’s side.

“We need to go.” His low rumbled words pushed over her skin and she nodded.

“Of course.”

At his SUV, he opened the door, and she nearly purred at the warmth welcoming her. After *another* round of hugs, she climbed in and buckled her belt while Mitchell shut the door and strode around the hood to the driver’s side. The short time he was in the glow of the headlights was more than enough for her to moan and shift on the seat.

Control. I need to have control.

When he climbed in and got them headed out of the parking lot, she cut her gaze to the left and stared at him.

Then again, do I really need it?

Chapter Fourteen

Hope sat in silence beside Mitchell as he cautiously navigated the winding mountain road back to Rock Falls. The roads hadn't been passable until nine at night and he'd turned down the chance to stay one more night in order to head home. And take Hope with him.

"Warm enough?" He reached over and settled a hand on her leg ever so briefly before returning it to the wheel.

"Fine, thank you." She wasn't looking at him, her head was angled away and he hated it.

This wasn't the woman who had played in the snow, laughing and joking with everyone. Engaging in snowball fights. Nor was it the woman who had taken a walk with him around the property, stopping off in the barn for some deep kisses and heavy petting. And it certainly wasn't the one who'd hugged the group they'd been with like she missed them already and they'd not even left the parking lot.

"Hope, talk to me."

He didn't want to be shut out. Before they'd left the B and B, he'd called his friends to let them know he was fine and that he was coming home tonight. In doing so, he was well aware they'd make sure his place was warm and had food. He hadn't told them he would be bringing a guest.

She's so much more than that, isn't she?

Yeah, he needed to *not* be having conversations with his subconscious while he was driving.

"Just thinking."

God, he wanted to hold her hand. Stroke his thumb along it while their fingers were intertwined.

"About?"

"Everything." He caught her shrug in his periphery.
"Nothing."

“I’ll have a new phone for you at the house. I also asked the State Patrol to bring your things there when they locate the car. It’s not going to be a high priority since you’re safe, but they’ll get it eventually and return your items. Tomorrow, I’ll take you shopping so you can get some clothing of your own until they bring yours.” He adjusted his hold on the wheel. “Is there somewhere I can take you?”

He didn’t want to take her anywhere other than his place.

Damn it, she continued to keep her gaze away from him. Unease rose in his gut. Then she reached for his hand, head still averted, but she *reached* for him. Much as she’d done when hanging upside down in her car, she squeezed him briefly.

His heart stuttered before kicking up into a staccato that couldn’t be quantified. It simply was. Crazy, jolting. Perfection.

“Those are material things, replaceable. Life isn’t.” She took a deep breath. “Thank you. I appreciate everything you’ve done for me.”

“You have to know by now, Hope Roman, we’re a package deal. You’re the Ren to my Stimpy. The Pinky to my Brain, the ___”

“If you say yin to your yang, I’m going to throat punch you.”

“When did you become so violent?” He couldn’t stop his grin, even when she took away her touch.

“When you began equating me to cartoon characters.”

She’s engaging with me. I’m not about to let it end. “Abbott to my Costello?”

She snorted and shifted in the seat, facing him instead of giving him her back. He approved.

“Pass.”

He pursed his lips briefly. “Lennon to my McCartney.”

“I’m not sure why I’m shocked you even know of John

Lennon or Paul McCartney. Doesn't seem like your type of music."

He slowed for the next corner. "The Beatles are legendary. So that's a *no* then. Tom and Jerry? Mario and Luigi? Batman and Robin? Burger and fries? Bacon and eggs?"

Her laughter spilled free, making the entire interior warmer. "Now I'm hungry. And no to all those."

"Bert and Ernie? Bugs and Daffy? Laurel and Hardy." He smirked at her. "Woody and Buzz. I'll let you guess who is who there."

"Next it'll be Han and Chewy, or R2D2 and C3PO."

"Who?"

Her outraged gasp was too much, he couldn't even pretend not to laugh. "Kidding, I know my Star Wars." He sped up a bit, needing to get this woman safely to his house. "I would say Kirk and Spock."

"*Not* Star Wars."

"I know that, Flykra. How about Lucy and Desi."

"You should stop now." Even with the warning, her voice was tinged with humor. "It would be bad form for me to punch the driver."

He huffed in false indignation. "The Wonder Twins?" She growled, actually growled at him. "Fine, fine. You're right. What we did had no part in family. Not without a ring on it."

"That an offer?"

For a man who had recently been divorced and was still dealing with the aftermath of his ex-wife, he didn't find such a statement fearful.

"Need to make an honest man out of me, Flykra? Tie me down and stake your claim?"

She went still for a moment. "Can't say that I do."

Mitchell wasn't a fan of that answer. "How about Freydis and Egil?"

He watched in his periphery as her face scrunched up. With a slight shake of her head she said, “I don’t know those names. I mean, I’ve heard of Freydis, one of the most famous Vikings. But I don’t know Egil.”

Two names from his computer game. Why he’d tossed them out there, he wasn’t sure. All he could do was grunt. They came down the mountain and he took a deep breath when the city lights of Rock Falls broke through the distance.

“Rock Falls?” Her voice was a bit higher than normal.

“Yes. Are you okay?”

And she was looking out the window. “Sure.”

Mitchell wanted to push but he let it go and got them to his house. He opened the garage door and backed in, deftly avoiding both Linc’s truck and Tully’s Acadia. Well, actually it was Dawson’s but the man drove it like he owned it.

He exhaled slowly as the garage door lowered. The moment he undid his belt he pinned her with a look. “Stay put.”

She frowned at him but he ignored it, getting out and moving to the passenger side to open her door for her. Hands gripping the frame, he gazed down at her, lost in how her eyes somehow managed to sparkle in the dome light and the overhead garage light.

“One more thing,” he said.

She paused in unhooking her belt to meet his stare. “Which is?”

The connecting door leading to his kitchen flew open and his best friends in the world crowded through the doorway.

“My best friends are here.”

Both of them stopped short when they saw Hope sitting in the passenger seat. Then with warm—quite possibly shit-eating—grins, they continued toward the car. Mitchell had the faintest urge to snarl and snap at them, warning them away.

Linc moved around the hood while Tully took the rear. They gave him a hearty hug and while Tully was smacking him on

the back with a, “So fucking glad you’re okay, man,” Linc pushed him away from the door and was helping Hope out.

“My name is Linc Conner.”

A small squeal escaped. “I know who you are. Holy shit, you played for the Pennsylvania Dutchmen.” She cleared her throat. “I’m sorry, I know you didn’t come to your friend’s house to be fangirled.”

Jealousy rose inside him and didn’t abate when Linc flashed that winning smile of his, one well known to charm the panties off the ladies. It didn’t matter that Mitchell knew no other woman could turn Linc’s head other than Emma, and the same in regards to Dawson for Tully.

Whatever he and Hope had, it was new. It wasn’t even anything that had been given a name. At least not aloud. Only in *his* mind, Hope Roman was his.

“How is it,” he growled, stepping from Tully’s hug to grip the doorframe with his left hand as he glared overtop Hope’s head at Linc, “that you know who *he* played for but not me?”

Tully smirked, stepping up beside him, giving a playful nudge. “I played for the Capitals. And in honor of full disclosure, I’m all for fangirling. You know, if it helps.”

“It doesn’t.” Mitchell jabbed his elbow into Tully’s side and the man laughed but he still didn’t take his gaze off the woman standing between them all.

Hope *finally* tore her gaze from his ex-best friend and looked toward him and Tully. Damn it! He recognized the appreciation in her gaze and the smile that she gave Tully curdled his gut.

Jealousy, he realized, had made him its bitch.

One.

Hundred.

Percent.

Hope angled toward him and Tully, but not enough to turn her back on Linc who continued to send him a smirk over her

head. “I didn’t watch hockey but I do know who you are and who you played for.”

Yeah, he wasn’t going to let this happen.

A derisive snort escaped. “So you know baseball and hockey but not *basketball*?”

Her lips quirked as if she were attempting to hide her smile.

Tully moved by her, stepping closer to Hope. “Ignore him, my dear. He’s moody. Come inside with me and Linc. We have food ready for you. Though he neglected to mention he was bringing you with him. I get it.” He took her arm and guided her away from Mitchell and through the door. “I wouldn’t want to share you either. Let’s get you fed. He’ll bring the bags. He’s very good with manual labor.”

“Tully,” Mitchell warned.

Linc patted him on the shoulder as he too walked away. “Don’t be long. Then again, take all the time you need. We’ll be getting acquainted with your woman.” He vanished inside the house and Mitchell swore as Linc’s lingering laughter danced around him.

...

Hope couldn’t stop looking around. Even though the place was clearly in the stages of remodeling, it was fantastic. In fact, it was bloody gorgeous. The bones of it were incredible and from what she could see, the living room and the kitchen were finished.

“Wow, this is amazing.”

Tully and Linc were behind her. Both were incredibly handsome but they didn’t make her heart skip all the beats like Mitchell Anderson did. Their camaraderie was unmistakable, and she could see the love they had for one another, even in the short time she’d witnessed them together.

Right now, both moved up to stand beside her.

“It is, isn’t it?” Tully settled his hand on the small of her

back.

Normally, she wasn't a touchy-feely person, but she wasn't uncomfortable by the hand upon her, even if the man was large, tatted, and bearded.

"He's doing all the work himself," Linc chimed in.

She longed to explore it all. "He's doing an incredible job."

Tully guided her to a large marble island and pulled out a stool for her. "Here, you sit and I'll fix you a plate."

Hope hooked her feet along the rail and closed her eyes as a snort of laughter escaped. "No one would believe this. Hell, I don't believe it myself and I'm here."

Linc lifted his head and pinned his jet eyes on her. "What don't you believe?" He held up a bottle of wine and one of water. She pointed at the water.

"I'm sitting at a kitchen island and have one famous player getting me a drink and another dishing me up a plate of what looks and smells like some mouthwatering, going-to-be-delicious goulash."

Tully slid the plate in front of her with a smile as he tossed a towel over his right shoulder. Linc set the glass of iced water to her left and both men stared at her with little grins.

"It's homemade," Tully said, taking a moment to stroke his beard, flexing one arm and the incredible array of tattoos there. "My fiancée made it and I brought it."

"Are you eating with me?"

Linc nodded and said, "Get me some food, Tully, I'm hungry." Then he claimed the stool right next to her.

"Linc!" Mitchell dragged him off the stool and took it even as he inched it closer to Hope. "Sit on the other side of the island. Then again, bring the stuff to the table. I have one, we may as well use it."

Both his friends sent her a wink before she lost her bowl, her water, and found herself alone in the kitchen with a scowling Mitchell.

“I didn’t mean to intrude. You could have taken me to a hotel.”

“No, he couldn’t have!” Linc hollered.

“Absolutely not!” Tully added.

Mitchell turned her on the stool, then stood and bracketed her in, his face directly in front of hers. “Your bags are in my room. I want you in my bed, Flykra, but I have a guest room if you’d feel better there.”

She cupped his cheek, trying not to preen when he pushed into it, his scruff abrading her palm. “Why are you moody? Are you tired? You were the one who had to drive the roads.”

“They’re flirting with you.”

“Your friends don’t give a flying fuck about me and if, and I do mean *if*, they are, it’s only to get a rise out of you.”

He nipped her lower lip. “I much prefer the rise *you* get out of me.”

Mitchell snagged her hand when she went to drop it from his face. After pressing a kiss to her palm, he tugged her from the stool and led her into the dining room. Tully and Linc were seated, talking softly among themselves, only to stop when they entered. One set of black eyes and one the color of the sea dropped to where they held hands and then back up before they stood.

“That is a huge table,” she blurted. “The craftsmanship is incredible. I bet you can have a feast on there.”

His eyes smoldered. “I will be later.”

Heat twisted in her gut at the promise those words held. His friends smirked at the two of them. It wasn’t like he’d lowered his voice. Tully pointed his fork at her and Mitchell.

“Well, we know what you get for dessert, but what about the rest of us?” He shook his head. “We brought you dinner.”

“That you didn’t make, asshole,” Mitchell snapped with no heat as he held a chair for Hope, his hand trailing up her spine as she sat down. “I’m sure Dawson or Emma baked something

for me. They both love me more than you two louts anyway.” His friends sat again. He captured her hand once more and kissed the back of it before making sure her food was before her. “Hope, Emma is Linc’s fiancée and Dawson is Tully’s. Both women are far too good for those guys. You’ll love them.”

Curving her hand, the one he’d released, around the spoon, she thought about how he assumed she would meet the women who held the hearts of his dearest friends. Her grip slipped and the spoon wobbled. *This isn’t permanent.* As she tightened her hold, she noticed Linc watching her as Tully and Mitchell traded barbs back and forth.

This time, there was no humorous glint in his eyes. No teasing smile on his lips. Assessment. Judgment. Searching.

She got it, she did. Linc was looking out for his friend, and she was glad Mitchell had someone like that in his life. Hope didn’t know all that much about professional sports but imagined the life was not for the faint of heart.

They watched one another for a few charged moments. Mitchell placed a large chunk of crusty sourdough bread on a small plate.

“You need to eat, Flykra.” He dragged his knuckles along her cheek, his touch jolting her focus from Linc to move to him but not before she watched the ex-baseball player’s slow grin. “Staring at it isn’t helping you. Tomorrow you’re going to the doctor to have them check you out from the accident. Eat your food and you’ll get some dessert. I’ll even make you some hot cocoa.” He pressed his leg into hers as he looked at her, his hair tumbling down over one eye.

“Pretty sure I made the hot cocoa, not you.”

He wrinkled his nose, the earlier frustration gone. “I got you the pot and stoked the fire. I get some credit.”

“I bet he stoked a fire.”

“Shut it, Tully,” Mitchell snapped, chucking a piece of bread at him without pulling his stare from Hope.

Tully deflected it without losing the food on his spoon. That

was impressive.

“Are you three always like this?” She ate a bite and moaned in appreciation. The goulash was warm and delicious.

“Yes,” they answered as one.

Hope loved every minute of dinner, despite being exhausted. Short of João, her photographer friend, she didn’t have this kind of friendship with anyone. Sure, she had Wendy and Sonya’s numbers and had promised to call, but that wasn’t like this. Years and years of being together. Having a trusted friend at your back.

It’s great to see but I have to admit I’m jealous. Not an ugly jealousy, but one that amplified what she didn’t have. And the fact that these three extremely alpha men, ex-professional players, thought so highly of their friends’ women—hell, it amazed her.

She took a sip of the warm tea that Linc had brought her. The main meal had been finished a while ago but they still sat around the Amish-built table, coffee and tea being served with a large slice of chocolate cream pie, also homemade by Tully’s better half, Dawson.

“Wait a second, let me get this straight. Your fiancée, Dawson, has a pet goat she earned *after* being on a *scavenger hunt*?”

Damn if Tully didn’t look proud. “A billy named Faust.”

“Oh well, that name says so much. I want to meet these women.”

Mitchell had pulled her chair right up to his and had moved her right leg so it was draped over his lap, and he kept his palm settled on the inside of her thigh. He didn’t make a big deal of it, just squeezed her leg when she tried to move away. His fingers made idle sweeps along her inner thigh.

“Later today. It’s already well after midnight.” Mitchell kissed her forehead. “You wait here, I’ll get these guys on their way.”

She stood and ignored his frown. “Thank you for dinner. It

was delicious.”

Tully was the first to arrive at her side, not even being the least bit subtle in shoving Mitchell away from her before he pulled her tight to his massive chest. “Thank *you*, Hope Roman, for bringing my best friend into the world of the living once again.” He kissed her cheek.

“My turn,” Linc said with a smile. He too pulled her close for a hug. Both of these men were large and held her like she was the most delicate flower. “You’re his woman so you’re *our* family. You need anything, you come to me or Tully. Go to the community center, someone there will know how to find me.”

“God, let her go. You have your own women. Leave mine alone.”

Mitchell pulled her from Linc, who winked and waggled his eyebrows. “You’re simply jealous you’re not getting our hugs now. We like hugging Hope more. She smells nicer and is softer.”

“Linc speaks the truth,” Tully confirmed.

“Get out,” Mitchell grouched as he herded them to the door.

When the three of them moved out the front door, she began gathering up the dishes. Mitchell met her at the dining room table when she returned for the pie, grasping her wrist when she went to pick it up.

“My turn,” he growled, eyes aflame with lust.

“For?”

“Dessert. Come here, Flykra.”

Heat burned through her, and she grew slick with desire simply from his touch and those four words.

Gah, she was hopeless.

It never crossed her mind to say no.

Chapter Fifteen

“Hi, Hope!” Dawson waved her in, her fingers curled around a wineglass stem, the nails intricately painted. “We’re in the kitchen.”

Hope stepped into the home. The smells in the air made her mouth water. The moment Dawson closed the door, she wrapped her arm around Hope. The woman wore an oversize sweatshirt with the name of Tully’s ex-team on the front and a pair of black pants, looking all kinds of comfortable. Gray socks were on her feet and her hair was piled on top of her head in some sexy design Hope wouldn’t be able to duplicate with step-by-step instructions and all the time in the world.

“I’m so glad you could make it.”

Honestly, she hadn’t thought there was a choice about attending tonight. Mitchell had told her that the girls, which was what he called Dawson and Emma, had invited her for dinner. That had been it, not if she’d wanted to go or anything like that.

Ergo, here she stood, unsure what was going to happen. Even so, those smells...*delish!*

“Thanks for having me.”

Dawson watched her for a moment, sipped—okay, glugged—the rest of her wine and laughed. “Aren’t you cute. Like there was a choice.” She nudged her in the direction of the kitchen.

Emma stood at the stove, one hand on her full hip, wearing a blue polka-dot shirt and jeans. She shot Hope a quick look and smiled before staring down at the stovetop and using her fingers to flip what was in the skillet.

“Good to meet you, Hope!” Emma’s brown hair had been tossed into an easy ponytail and her blue eyes were welcoming.

“You, too.”

Dawson moved to the counter. “What’s your poison?”

Unable to ignore the scent of whatever was frying, Hope gave a quick look at the array of bottles in front of Dawson. Mostly wine but she noticed something she preferred.

“The Cachaça, please.”

“Coming right up.” Dawson reached for a glass and the bottle.

Hope sidled up to Emma. “What are you making? It’s not naan, is it?” She licked her lips. “Looks close but thinner.”

Emma shook her head as she reached in the pan and pulled out the golden-brown, delicious-looking flatbread. “No, this is roti. I affectionately refer to it as naan’s lanky younger brother.” Emma added another pat of butter to the skillet and the pop and sizzle pulled a growl from Hope’s stomach.

Before she knew what was happening, Emma switched places with her and Hope was in charge of the roti before her.

“I’m going to burn it.”

“You’ll be fine,” Emma replied, moving behind her to check a pot on the stovetop. “If you don’t want to use your fingers to flip it, there are tongs there. Dawson, put that one in the tortilla warmer, please.”

“On it.”

“Don’t eat this one.” Emma gave her a pointed look.

“I’m hungry. You can’t honestly expect me to leave all this alone when it smells so good. I’m *hungry*.”

“My child has better manners.” Emma clucked her tongue and replaced the lid she’d removed earlier.

God, the smell of curry permeated the air, making her mouth water even more. Even so, the banter between the women reminded her of sitting with Mitchell and his friends. That easy camaraderie and comfort with someone.

Within fifteen minutes of her arrival, they were sitting around an oval dinner table not quite as large as the one Mitchell had.

More like the one Mitchell had me on. Repeatedly. She shifted in the chair and squeezed her thighs together. She didn't need to relive that and become all hot and bothered at girls' night. Or whatever this was.

"What do we need to know about you, Hope Roman?" Dawson pointed her spoon at her, once she'd pulled it from her mouth, sparkling clean and without a hint of the delectable curry on it.

She swallowed her own bite, picked up the glass, and sipped her Cachaça. "I'm a product of the system." She shrugged. "Or I grew up in it. Went to college. Got some degrees. Went to college again. Got some doctorates. Fell for the wrong guy and it ended badly. Now I'm focused on my career and traveling the world as a science journalist. I also do speaking engagements here and there." A shrug. "Not my favorite thing but my mentor always said it was important to give back, that you never know whose life you'll change by simply talking to them."

Both women stared at her. Blinked then stared longer. They glanced at each other and then back to her.

"I don't know where to start with that." Dawson reached for more wine. "You don't act like you're above others because of your brain and accomplishments."

"I do," Emma said. "Degrees *and* doctorates. That's fucking incredible. But I want to know about this dumb man first, then we'll get back to all your brain power. Give me a bit more time to come to terms with that. I don't even have a high school diploma and you're a freaking doctor!"

Hope looked at Dawson, who merely smiled at her. "We like to talk dirty. One of Emma's first nights with us we discussed how often she used her vibrators and how fast she goes through batteries."

Emma stuck out her tongue. "That was B.L."

"Before Linc?" Hope ventured.

"Exactly. Now, tell us about the stupid man."

"We were dating and I thought I was in love with him. He'd

never been fully okay with my leaving for a job. I suppose he figured I should be around for him whenever he wished. He,” she twisted her lips, “was in his family business. He’d asked me to his house for dinner one night and I foolishly thought this was the night he would propose to me.”

Dawson tapped against her wineglass with a sole fingernail. “This man, I’m going to call him Jackass. I’m guessing he was rich and figured the world owed him everything?”

Hope enjoyed a few more bites of the red roast duck curry with her roti even as she nodded. “Yes. Exactly. He never had to work for much in his life. Everyone was either too scared to tell him no or gave in because they wanted him as a rich friend.”

They nodded in understanding.

“He’d pretty much convinced me to give up finishing my third doctorate. I was going to pull from the program the following Monday.” Disgust with herself reared its ugly head and it took her a moment to swallow it down. “I had plans to tell him that night. Figured it would be my show of commitment to the relationship.”

Neither woman said anything, simply watched her.

When Hope finished off her drink, Dawson topped it up without saying a word or waiting for her to ask for another.

“I got there early and let myself in. He’d given me a key but I’m pretty sure he hadn’t expected me to use it. I hadn’t before that night. I walked in to hear him telling another woman that if she wished to keep the baby, he would move them out of the country because he couldn’t have that tied to him. He had to marry me to continue looking like he was all for equality and supporting minorities. What better way to do that than by marrying a woman of color? Especially when I had not one but multiple doctorates. The fact I had those made it a bit easier to overlook my weight.”

“Bastard!” Emma snarled.

“Rich or not, I say we find him and take his nutsack.” Dawson pushed up from the table.

Despite her reluctance to speak about the man who'd nearly made her give up on her life's work, Hope smiled. "I have money, but not enough to bail us out."

They both snorted and said, "The guys will pay."

"I don't want his nutsack. And I don't want your men having to bail you out of jail."

Emma pointed at her. "Our men. You're Mitchell's woman. Apparently he looks at you like Tully watches Dawson."

"And how Linc watches Emma." Dawson settled in the chair.

"He knows nothing of what I do. I'm private." She wiped her hands along her thighs. "I could have shared more with him while we've been together but, honestly, I didn't see the point. What we have is fleeting. I'm focused on my career, not getting a guy."

"We get that. Honestly, we do." Emma rose and opened the fridge before carrying a pie to the table. "We all have our demons to outrun or drown. Whatever you want to call it."

Emma sat as Dawson took over and cut large pieces and plated them. She slid a slice in front of each of them.

"It's hard. For all of us, like Emma said. We're not skinny women and these men are ones who normally have models on their arms."

She nodded. "I know this. And, honestly, I wasn't even thinking of that. Sure, I can't lie and say I wasn't hesitant to strip off my clothing before him—not because of who he is but because of how fucking hot he is. I'm comfortable with myself as a person. I love my size. I'm healthy and I live my life how I want. I'm scared to let him get any deeper in me."

Both women lifted their eyebrows and she snorted before busting out laughing.

"Not what I meant!" she cried.

"Cause she likes him *deep*," Dawson chortled.

While they laughed and teased her, she ate a bite of the

chocolate tart, only to moan in raw pleasure. “Oh damn, this is so good.”

“Chocolate and chili tart with lime zest.”

It wasn't until she was on her second piece with a cup of coffee that they'd moved to the living room and were seated around the low rectangular table there.

“Tell us more about being a science journalist.”

“I love it. I write about animal behavior and sometimes I take the photos. I'm also a wildlife reporter. My main focus is on wildlife conservation and ecology. I did study human behavior for a while—one of my degrees is in psychology—but I prefer animals of the non-*Homo sapiens* variety.”

“Fucking impressive.” Dawson picked up her mug and drank. “Mitchell picked a great woman in you, *Doctor Hope Roman*.”

“Hope is fine.”

“Fuck that. I'm friends with a doctor. I'm going to be yelling that shit everywhere.”

Emma tucked her feet under her, nodding with an amused grin on her lips. Once she settled, she wrapped her hands around the mug and tapped one shiny, sparkling blue nail against the ceramic burgundy mug with a symbol of a roaring lion in dark gray. A Pennsylvania Dutchmen mug. “She will, that's true.”

I love how these women use their men's team memorabilia in everyday life. Somehow, Hope figured it was better not to argue with these women. Besides, what was the point? She *was* a doctor and they were feeding her the most delicious tart. Also, for a brief moment, it was nice to imagine she could be the one using things from the Monterey Leviathans.

Why rock the boat?

Chapter Sixteen

Mitchell opened the door two days later and frowned, recognizing the State Patrol uniform of the man before him. The man was tall, fit, and held a box in one hand, and at his leg sat a battered, well-worn terracotta duffel.

“Good afternoon, I’m Deputy Lucan.” A flash of recognition in his blue eyes. “Mitchell Anderson, nice to meet you—I’ve followed your career. Anyway, sorry it took so long to get this to you. It’s from a rental car that went over the side, belonging to one Hope Roman.”

A mixture of emotions hit him. On the one hand, he knew she wanted her items and he was happy she would get them. On the other, it was a tick on the clock of their time coming to an end.

Something I most definitely don’t want.

He’d shown her all over town, made love with her in every single room in his home. A place that he thought of as *theirs* not his, because in the brief time she’d been here, she had turned it into a home, as opposed to a house. She got along famously with Emma and Dawson. Mrs. Faulkner and Mr. Conner both loved her as well. But he couldn’t deny there was something she was keeping from him.

The times when he woke at night and his bed was empty from her curves and heat, he would find her standing by the window, one hand pressed against the chilled glass and the other over her mouth as if trying to keep her pain inside.

He wanted to protect her. Defend her from anything. Fight all her battles for her.

But he didn’t press her on whatever it was bothering her. Mitchell just did what he could to coax joy into her big brown eyes.

“Thank you, I know she’s been hoping to get her things.” He took the box and stepped inside to set it on the bench by the door. Then he went for the bag. The officer handed it over with

a smile. After tipping his green campaign hat, the man strode to his car and drove away as the first snowflakes started to fall.

He glanced up and the darkening sky told him they were in for another storm. Heading in, he booted the door closed behind him and called out for her.

“Coming,” she hollered.

Sure enough, soon she strode into view and he sucked in a sharp breath. He wouldn’t ever tire of looking at her.

“State Patrol found your rental and brought you your stuff.”

Her eyes lit from within and she hurried the rest of the way, socked feet not making any noise on his hardwood floors.

“Thank you, Jesus!” She hit her knees as she slid right up to the bench the box had been placed on.

Mitchell watched, fascinated, because he thought she would have gone for the bag first, to check clothing, etcetera. But no, she was digging into the box that, quite honestly, looked like it was filled with junk.

Her gasp ripped from her throat and snagged his attention. Mitchell watched as she gently brushed her thumb over the pocket watch in her hand. He wasn’t able to make out the design but something pulled him closer to her.

“Are you okay?”

“I am now.” She tipped her head back, the move allowing him to see the tears which lingered on her thick, curvy eyelashes. Closing her fist completely around the object, she exhaled and pushed up from the floor.

Unable to keep his hands to himself, he tugged her to him, settling her against his chest. “It’s snowing again. You may have to wait another day or so before you can leave.”

“I have my things now, Mitchell. I’m okay staying at a hotel. I never meant to cramp your style. You’ve done so much for me already.”

“Stop talking, Flykra. I want you here with me. I’m not taking you to a hotel, unless you can look me in the eye and

tell me that's what you want.”

Mitchell expected a bit of hemming and hawing. But again, he should have known better with this woman. Without hesitation, she looked at him.

“I most definitely don't want to sleep away from you if I don't have to. You're very warm and comfortable to sleep on, despite having all these muscles.” She walked her fingers up some of those very muscles, even as she remained tucked to his chest.

Chin resting on the top of her head, he chuckled. “Glad I can be of service.”

Hope wrapped her arms around him and squeezed. “You're passable.”

He nipped the top of her ear and smiled at her squeak. “Not what you were screaming this morning. Or earlier this afternoon.”

“A gentleman doesn't kiss and tell.”

Sliding his hands down her body until he cupped her ass, he nudged her face up to capture her lips. “We both know I'm no gentleman when it comes to you, Flykra.”

She dragged her fingers through his hair and skimmed her nails along the nape of his neck. “I know and yet I keep coming back for more.” One more kiss before he let her step away. “I need to make a call. Do you mind if I charge my phone? You can have the other phone back. Maybe they will refund it. Thank you, though, for getting me one.”

“Anything for you, Hope.”

She blew him a kiss as she swiped the duffel by its dual handles and slung it over one shoulder with ease. He watched her as she took it to the far end of the bench and sat it there before unzipping it and digging into an interior pocket. A sleek graphite case was in her hand when she pulled it free.

“Thank God,” she muttered before a charging cord followed.

Why she hadn't had it in the front of the car with her, he

wasn't sure. He had work of his own to do, yet he couldn't drag himself away. Hope hummed to herself as she plugged in the phone and punched in a code.

She remained like that, on her knees by his bench, not overly concerned with comfort or anything other than what was on the phone screen before her.

"Are you going to stand there and watch me all day? I thought you had work to do."

Hope never lifted her head as she spoke to him and Mitchell simply crossed his arms, hooked his ankles, and leaned against the nearest doorframe as he continued to stare.

"You're much more interesting to watch." God's honest truth.

Her chuckle was light and his heart fluttered when she lifted her gaze to his. When she crooked her finger at him, he didn't even think about refusing her, instantly padding over to her and bending down to take the kiss she offered.

"Get some work done. Aren't your friends coming over for dinner?"

"I can tell them to fuck off. I don't want to share you." He took possession of her mouth again, sinking down so he could gather her into his arms.

"Your friends love you. You'll do no such thing." She scraped her nails down his jawline, shooting sparks through him. "Go away."

Mitchell slipped his hand up under her top, which was really one of his, and flattened his palm against her back. Forehead to forehead, he heaved an exaggerated sigh. "Fine, but just for you. And I'm taking your bag to the bedroom where it belongs." Another fast kiss and he was striding away with said bag in hand.

Lord, he wanted to snoop through and see if he couldn't glean more about the woman who had flipped into his life and turned it on its head but he didn't. He wanted *her* to tell him everything.

He retreated to his office, which wasn't finished yet. But he definitely had some ideas on what he wanted to complete this room—a large couch and chair so he could indulge in his woman when he wanted.

Right now, his desk was a temporary one, L-shaped and dark gray in color. He wanted a natural wood hue and was having the same Amish company that had done his dining room table make one. That way he knew it would be to his specifications and would hold up to a lot of vigorous use.

He smirked and sank into his chair, pressing a button on his keyboard to wake the system. Settling, he watched while it powered up, typing in the unlock code when the box popped up, then he steepled his fingers and waited.

His wallpaper was pictures of him with his best friends, two of them side by side. One when they were boys and one when they were all in their professional careers. Mitchell knew he was a lucky son of a bitch to have friends like them. A lot of men were not secure enough in themselves to have close relationships with men, but he thrived with them at his side.

Soon he'd have to add another image, one of them with their women. And yes, in his mind, that included Hope Roman.

Cracking his neck, he pulled up the account for Inicio and got to work. He looked up at one point to find a sandwich, some chips, and a cold drink by his side and he smiled. He hadn't even heard her come in.

He ate while he continued to work, finalizing the last bit of information necessary before he could take back his company. Mitchell refused to give his ex-wife any more of anything and double checked everything, ensuring all the *t*'s were crossed and the *i*'s were dotted.

Losing himself in it once more, he only stopped and lifted his head when he heard music filtering and then... Holy shit, something in his house smelled delicious. It pulled him and he wasn't about to resist.

After shutting down his computer, he realized the dishes from his lunch were no longer there. He walked up the wood

hallway and smiled as he heard laughter. Including the innocent sound of Emma's daughter, Greer.

"Creamy potato soup as well, Mama?"

"Yes, sweetie. These men can put away the food, so we're having a big meal."

"Like we did at Christmas, only now we get Hope with us."

Mitchell wanted to give her a kiss. She was such a great child. He stepped into the kitchen and smiled at the organized chaos. Emma was talking to Greer as she stirred the soup on the stovetop. He noticed that Tully and Hope were talking while he rolled out some dough and she worked on lining biscuits up on a tray. Linc and Dawson were making a dessert—what, he wasn't sure, but damn if it all didn't look delicious and smell even better.

"You have to help with dinner, Uncle Mitchell. Mama said."

"I'm not going to argue with your mother, sweetie. Where do you want me?"

Emma sent him a smile and he walked to her side, stopping on his way to brush his hand along Hope's hip and kiss her. "Thank you for lunch," he whispered. Beside Emma, he looked down at the top of her head. "What can I do for you?"

"Can you check the ham?"

"Happily." After moving Greer away from the oven door, he did just that. It was a huge ham and the platter wasn't light.

"You *cannot* make a biscuit like that, Tully," Hope admonished. Full-on amusement tinged her tone.

"Don't worry, I'll make Mitchell one, too. A lot smaller, mind you. But at least he'll have one."

"Can I have one, Uncle Tully?"

Everyone whipped around and looked at Tully. He simply smirked. "You get shapes in your pancakes, sweetie. Trust me when I say you're not getting this for a few years."

"Or ever," Linc growled.

Mitchell put the ham back in the oven and ruffled Greer's hair. "Don't mind Uncle Tully, sweetie. He has to play with his food. Sometimes it's the only way he gets things the size he wants."

"Dawson, defend my honor."

"You are on your own, Tully. I'm not getting in the middle of your squabbles with the boys."

"They're about to make a mess, aren't they, Mama?"

Emma covered the soup and lowered the heat. "Yes, baby. I think they are. Let's leave them to it."

The first bit of dough flew through the air as the women exited the kitchen.

• • •

Hope bit back her yawn. She would have no problem falling asleep right here. She and Mitchell sat before the burning fire pit as fat snowflakes fell down upon them, sharing a section of the outdoor seating where they were wrapped in a warm blanket. The footrest was up and they lay in it as if it was a recliner. The deck area was stunning, a large flat section with couchlike seating around the large pit in the center.

"I made this pit with Tully and Linc," he murmured against her temple. "One of the first things I did with this house after I bought it. I took them with me to go shopping for the stone. And the couches." His chest moved with his chuckle. "It was hard, making a decision like that. So many options and they, well, they weren't any help. More like a hindrance."

"But they're *your* problem children."

"I know, I know." His statement was overdramatic. "I keep trying to take them over the river, like you do mice so they don't come back, but somehow they always find their way home."

She laughed. "You love them."

"God, please don't tell them that."

She snuggled against him, loving how secure his arms felt around her. Like he had zero intention of letting her go. For the first time in her life, she didn't want to be released. She longed to keep this, whatever it was she had right now. What would it be like to have him to come home to after a work trip?

Her ex had made her want this before but with him, she'd been hesitant. And for good reason, it turned out. He'd only wanted her in order to boost his career. A black woman with not one but three doctorates. When she'd overheard him telling his sidepiece that he would send them away if she wanted to keep the baby but he had to be with Hope because it would be a boost for him in the eyes of certain people and that he was willing to overlook her size because of that, she'd walked away from him and the future they were supposed to have.

She needed to change her train of thought, cut the rope to the anchor pulling her down into the darkness.

“Why this house?”

He was silent for a moment. “After I divorced my ex-wife, I wanted to start over. Needed something to fix up for myself that didn't have her taint on it. Something to cleanse me, if that makes sense.”

It did. Purging the negativity.

“And do you want to be a carpenter in your next life? Is that why you're doing the work or is that part of the cleansing you spoke about? Because I'm guessing you could have had some company come in and do it all for you.”

“I wanted to do it. To be able to look at it and say, mistakes or not, imperfections or not, I did this.”

“No imperfections from what I can see.”

“I've done three rooms. Still a long way to go.” He tipped her chin up to press a tender kiss there.

Her insides melted. How was this man so fucking perfect?

Determined not to fall further for this man who was undoing

her with one word and one action after another, she tried for levity. “Fine then, these *three* are fantastic. I hope and pray you don’t fuck it up with the rest.”

His chuckle moved through her, and she smiled while she settled against his chest. Even the flakes which hit her skin didn’t make her want to run inside and get away from it all. It was beautiful out here. The flames offered the only light. Nothing came from the inside. If they wanted, there was a switch somewhere to turn on the solar lights that were placed strategically around the patio area.

“Tell me about you, Hope. You don’t talk about yourself.”

She didn’t. And she didn’t want to. Right now, the pain of losing her mentor was still too fresh in her mind.

“Not much to tell about me. Only child. I grew up in foster care. A few homes tried me out but it wasn’t a good fit. I spent most of my years in a state home. They kicked me out at eighteen.”

Hope didn’t have bitterness in her voice. Her life was her life and the state had done their best by her. It wasn’t their fault for her circumstances.

He hummed. “You told me you had no friends who would be worried about you. That’s not really the case, is it?”

It was. “I have one but he’s out of touch for long periods of time. You know about the one I lost a few years ago. I love talking and getting to know people but I don’t have friends. Not really.” A deep breath. “Except now I have Wendy and Sonya, I guess.”

“So secretive.”

Yeah, she was, and she wasn’t used to sharing. That was one of the negatives she had from growing up in the system: keeping her secrets and dreams to herself. People would use them to hurt her or try to destroy them. If she didn’t share them, no one could use them against her or tell her she couldn’t do them.

But still, she wasn’t a negative person as a whole. She loved with her whole heart. It was merely hard to get access to her

love.

Hope ground her jaw as she thought about the one man she'd made the mistake of sharing her dreams with. The one who'd nearly destroyed her.

"You could tell me more stories of your childhood with the two troublemakers that you love so much."

"They get me into so much trouble."

"They get *you* into trouble? I'm pretty sure you threw the first piece of dough tonight."

He laughed without reservation. "Bastard deserved it. Did you see the size he made my dick?"

She patted his chest and allowed her hand to linger. "I did, but we both know you're far bigger than that."

"Thank you," he said, one hand coming out from the blanket. "It was insulting and he needed to be taught a lesson."

"I think it's great the three of you are so close." No denying the wistfulness in her tone. She would have loved to have someone like that in her life.

"I wouldn't have survived without them, that's for sure." He replaced his hand below the blanket, gripping her hip. "Wouldn't have met you and brought you home with me so you can have your wicked way with my deprived body."

The snort escaped before she could even contemplate stopping it. "Is that what's happening here?" She pulled back enough to look at him.

He nodded, the snowflakes in his blond hair giving off a shimmer when the flames flickered over them seconds before they melted, leaving it so he appeared to have diamond dust on the strands.

She recognized the expression. They'd gotten the same one from all three of the men after they'd proceeded to make a mess of themselves and the kitchen earlier tonight. The whole yeah-I'm-full-of-it-but-dammit-I'm-adorably-sexy-so-you-should-forgive-me-anything look.

Flicking her tongue over her lower lip, she rose up enough to straddle him in the seat. He was hard beneath her and he gripped her hips with both hands, keeping her aligned with his cock. Eyes darkening in the low, intimate light, he stared at her.

The blanket remained at her shoulders, giving them an almost tent-like situation. “How wicked of a way am I allowed to have?”

His groan was the match to her kerosene. “Whatever you want, Flykra. Whatever the fuck you want.”

A second passed when she thought about teasing him and playing coy but she couldn't do it. Her time here with him was coming to an end. She knew it, even if she didn't want to acknowledge that fact.

And that truth had her admitting what she wanted. “Take me inside, Mitchell. I want there to be nothing but skin between us.” His growl reverberated between them. She put her lips on his. “I want *you*.”

His response was to surge up from the cushion, keeping her in his arms. Hope locked her ankles around his waist as he carried her into the house, not turning on a light or stopping for the blanket that fell off her shoulders when he rose. Their lips were locked and she simply gave in to him, wanting anything and everything he had to offer.

Chapter Seventeen

Mitchell placed her on the bed and followed her down. He didn't want space between them. Now or ever. His bedroom—theirs—had one lamp glowing, allowing him to see her. Her big brown eyes watched him, full of desire.

For him.

He had every intention of fulfilling her desire. Nothing but skin on skin for the two of them. She lay where he'd placed her, not moving. But, even so, the sharp rise and fall of her full breasts as she breathed made him realize something.

"You're staring." Her comment was soft.

"You're beautiful, Flykra. How could I not?" He dragged his finger down the middle of her breasts until he reached the hem. "You know something?"

She rolled her lower lip in her teeth and he bit off a groan. God, she killed him with that motion every fucking time.

"This shirt is great. Adorable. And you look hot in anything, but I prefer you in my clothing." He bunched up the bottom and lifted, exposing her skin, inch by inch. "I like seeing my name on your back as you walk around the house. I love seeing you fresh from the shower in nothing but my shirt."

Her breathing grew erratic. He paused, shirt bunched right below her breasts. Bending, he brushed his lips over her skin, flicking his tongue and sucking hard to ensure he left his mark. All over her stomach he did this and moved his way down until he snapped the waistband of her pants with his teeth. She whimpered and he rose up so he could stare at her.

The warmup pants she had on fit her like a dream, but he'd not lied. He liked her in his sweats. Out of them too. And while she was in the clothing he'd gotten for her, he could do something about it. And get her naked.

"I like seeing you in nothing."

Bunching his fist in the shirt material, he yanked her up to

meet his lips. Her mouth parted beneath his touch and he took full advantage, thrusting his tongue deep. Licking everywhere he could, he ate her moans like they were candy.

When she locked her arms around his neck, he placed both hands at the collar of her shirt and ripped. Shock stiffened Hope for a moment but she melted into him, releasing her arms one at a time so the shirt could be removed.

Sliding his fingers into her hair at the nape of her neck, he held her to him as he devoured her. That was the only word he could come up with. Everything about her made him crave more. There was no explanation he could give.

“Mitchell,” she panted against his lips.

“Flykra.”

He needed more. Pushing her until she lay on the bed, he covered her as he claimed her mouth once more. She didn't hold anything from him. Her hunger, desire, want—all of it she laid bare for him.

She arched beneath his touch, rising to a supple curve. Skimming one hand down her body, dipping below the pants he regretted her putting on, he cupped her core and swore, yanking his mouth from hers.

Heat.

Scalding damp heat slammed his palm. He fought against the ravenous need to rip off the panties to thrust his fingers into liquid-velvet flesh.

Hope yanked at his shirt. “Take it off.”

He longed for skin on skin, definitely. But to do so, he'd have to move his hand. *I don't want to.*

Instead, he dragged her pants off her, inhaling her heady scent. “Fuck, Flykra. I can smell you. You're fucking ready for me.”

She shifted and tugged again. “Off.”

Damn he didn't want to but he obeyed her command. One-handed, he dragged the shirt off over his head and dropped it.

Didn't give a fuck where it landed. Then he came over her once more, gripping her thigh.

"I'm going to rip these off you."

She lifted enough to nip at his lower lip. "You paid for them. And it's not like you didn't already do that to the shirt."

Could his cock get any harder?

Leaning closer, he nipped at where her neck met her shoulder in the delicate curve, inhaling her scent. She'd said no to him buying her bodywash, stating she was fine using his. And he wasn't against her smelling like him. The woodsy scent was much more tantalizing on her body than his.

In my opinion.

A low growl slid free seconds before he tore away the offensive scrap of satin covering her core.

A whimper escaped the woman beneath him and he took her mouth once more. Addicted. He couldn't separate the tastes of her other than unique and completely Hope. Mitchell slid his finger through her slickness as his tongue dipped in her mouth.

She moaned, hips arching, seeking to draw him in deeper. He refused. Circling her clit only to drag his touch down, he pulled back to watch her expression.

"Mitchell." His name fell from her lips in a rasp, no hiding her passion.

He pushed his middle finger inside her heat and she jerked, mouth opening on a wordless cry.

"So fucking beautiful, Flykra." He withdrew his finger and circled her nub again. This time, he pushed in two fingers, loving how she accepted him. God, his cock ached with the need she created in him.

Not yet.

Pumping his wrist, he closed his mouth over her nipple, sucking hard. A low moan reverberated through his bedroom as he stroked her to a powerful release. Hope dug her nails into his shoulders and back as she rode out her pleasure. He didn't

stop until she came down.

Mitchell moved himself so he could look in her eyes as he drew his fingers along her lips and then kissed her.

So fucking responsive.

The woman was a live wire and he never wanted to be without her spark. Thrusting one hand deep into her hair, he tugged and their kiss became almost savage.

Mitchell settled between her thighs after nudging them wider to accommodate him. “Wrap.” He growled the word then nipped her lower lip.

She did, sliding her wetness along the hard ridge in his jeans. Mitchell reached between them enough to undo the buttons on his jeans, freeing his length. Fisting himself, he squeezed the base and dragged the swollen head through her slickness.

Hope raked her nails along the nape of his neck and he thrust inside her with a single stroke. Her heat, scorching. Releasing his grip on her hair, he slapped a hand beside her head, digging into the pillow.

“How do you want me, Flykra?”

His skin tingled like he’d just grabbed onto an electrified fence.

“Hard?” He pulled back and drove in with a punctual push. “Slow?” He dragged out until only the head of his cock remained inside her. Then he filled her again, a gradual slide of hard along silken.

“Mitchell!” Hope shifted beneath him, her motions rolling with a slow—he would swear calculated—movement solely to drive him out of his mind.

“Answer me.” God, he had a hard enough time getting those two words out, much less asking her again.

Something slid out of her mouth he didn’t understand. But he did comprehend the way her body arched into him and how her legs tightened around his waist. The bite of her nails into his flesh only amped up his hunger for her. Hope knew what

she wanted and wasn't shy about asking for it or taking it.

“Hard, then...” A gentle kiss. “Slow after.” A feral grin. “Then more.”

• • •

Hope bucked but the man holding her hips didn't let her move at all. Mitchell held her prisoner for the assault of his lips and tongue on her skin. He licked, nipped, sucked, laved and more until she was nothing but a wriggling mess.

She begged, pleaded, hell, even threatened and promised him whatever he wanted, but he didn't relent.

For it hadn't mattered.

“I'm not moving until I've satisfied my need for this pussy, Flykra. It's wet and I'm a thirsty man.”

She'd lost track of how many orgasms he'd given her. She was hypersensitive and he still held her how he wanted her. His large hands pinned her down and splayed her wide for him to feast. And he had.

Feasted.

Gorged.

In the bedroom at the inn, he'd been tender.

This wasn't. The softness had gone or was yet to arrive. Mitchell demanded, he was greedy and untamed.

She was fairly certain she'd lost her voice. His tongue dove through her folds, wrapped around her clit and the man sucked with determination. If it was to get her to shatter, he'd done all that and more.

“Mitchell, please,” Hope panted, pushing her fingers deep into his hair and tugging.

“Tell me what you need.”

Something. Everything. Words didn't work and all she could do was whimper his name once more as she thrust her hips up, praying he got the hint.

His thrust was strong and she opened her eyes to find him over her, his cock driven to the hilt inside her. He palmed her thighs and lifted them high on his waist.

“Just so you know, I’m not done with this pussy.”

Scraping her nails up his chiseled abs, she smoothed them over his nipples and he shuddered. That motion went through her and she responded in kind. His jaw clenched but she watched as he shook his head and took a deep breath.

When he removed her legs from around his waist and pulled out, she focused on his dick, slick with her. Dragging her eyes up over the intricate tattoos on his hard body, she met his stare.

Without dropping her gaze, he grasped the base of his shaft, pumped himself once, and fell to his back, cock erect, a devilish temptation.

Or was that an invitation?

Perhaps both.

“You’re going to have your wicked way with me, Flykra. Come take it.”

Body still hypersensitive from earlier, she licked her lips and took a long, slow perusal of his physique. He might no longer be an active player in the league but damn the man was nothing but hard muscles and sexy tendons which were probably etched by a master sculptor. Despite living here in the northeast, his skin boasted a lovely tan.

Fingertips burning to touch him again, she pushed to a seated position. His gaze tracked her movement.

He crooked a finger at her and pointed to his cock. She obeyed. Straddling his thighs made hers stretch further. She’d never forget what she was looking at for as long as she lived.

He waited for her, naked. His longer blond hair was in a tangled mess around his face, the tattoos on his skin popping with a life of their own. Hope exhaled and leaned forward. Skimming her hands up along his hard torso, she purred. The man was hot. Figuratively and literally.

“Flykra.”

One word that she understood. He wasn't going to wait any longer. A quick flick of her tongue on her lips and she rose up on her knees, reached between her legs, and grasped the base of his cock.

Hard.

Long.

Hot.

Thick.

His jaw tightened.

Hope sank down, allowing him to pierce her. Each time was like the first. So big he made her breath hitch, filling her to the brink, but she wanted more. Always.

She closed her eyes and...took a moment. Scrunching her fingers into his chest, she gave a small roll of her hips.

Mitchell's hands gripped her as he held her tight. Not enough to restrict her movement, but enough that his hold would mark her skin. "Fuck!" His word sounded rough and pulled from his gut.

Yeah, she agreed. Untamed and scorching desire pulsed through her.

Her head tipped forward, her unbound hair cascading around them, brushing over the same skin she dug her nails into.

"Yes," she hissed.

Once more, allowing her clit to get in on the rub. She shuddered. Holy fuck this was good. So fucking good.

Losing herself in the feeling, nothing mattered but her own desire. Once she figured out exactly how to twist her hips to give herself maximum pleasure, she grabbed it and held on.

Fast. Slow.

It didn't matter, she was finding her release.

Warm breath fanned along the front of her neck seconds prior to lips latching onto her sweaty skin, and she cried out.

Mitchell's thumb located her clit and pressed into the bundle of nerves. She shuddered, wrapping her arms around his neck.

“Take it, Flykra. Take what you need from me.”

His words kicked her up that last final ledge and she ran flat out for the edge she sought. Hope unwound her arms from his neck and pushed him to the bed. He didn't argue, nor did he take his hand from her clit. Until she pulled it away and pressed both his wrists to the mattress beneath them.

She didn't kiss him, she held his gaze and pounded herself on his cock. Their skin slapped against each other, her moans mingled with his, her pussy slicked along his shaft.

With each rise and fall, his gaze darkened until his brown eyes appeared black in the low lighting. The tendons in his neck stood out and she loved how he was doing his best to hold himself in check and not take over, allowing her to take control.

The edge she hovered on crumpled and she didn't even attempt to stop her drop into its waiting arms. The freefall conquered and demolished her before she could hit bottom. Mitchell moved like lightning and held her hips in a punishing grip, his strength making it so easy to drag her up and down his cock as he buried himself in her again and again.

Hope held on. Frankly, there wasn't anything more she could do. The storm surrounding them was chaotic and she wanted to live here forever.

A deep guttural “Fuck” exploded from his throat. Seconds later, he stiffened and his cock pulsed in her. The man grunted with each harsh gyration of his hips as his own release flooded her body.

More. She longed for more. This was different than their first time at The Thrush & the Clover. This was more raw. More, well, everything. Even of the times they'd been intimate here, this was far more primal.

He sagged into the mattress, hands releasing her hips to smooth up her spine and tug her close to him. Hope didn't mind. He kept her on him, sprawled over his chest as their

erratic pants eventually ebbed into softer breaths.

• • •

The next morning, she inched her way out of bed, body blissfully sore. Mitchell still slept. On his back, one arm tossed over his eyes. *Delicious*. The sheet down by his waist allowed her to ogle the tattoos he had on his skin, not to mention the muscles. The sharp cut of his abdominals, biceps, and triceps that flexed and flowed with each motion he made.

Damn, she'd gone and fallen for the man.

She showered and dressed, wanting to make him breakfast. She loved everything about this house, even the unfinished rooms. All of it was so Mitchell and it fit him. Blatantly masculine, strong, and sturdy.

A light chime from the other room reached her and it took her a moment to recognize it was her phone. It had been a while since she'd even thought about it, what with it having been down a mountain.

Hurrying between the rooms, she stopped at the phone and answered it. "Hello?"

"Hope? Holy crap I've been trying to get in touch with you. Are you okay?"

"I'm fine, Jo." It was one of the women she worked with who helped her publish articles. "Had a bit of an accident, but I'm okay."

The door opened and she didn't turn to look because she figured it was either Tully or Linc, who apparently had carte blanche to come and go here as they pleased.

"Flykra? Where are you?"

That voice made her knees weak. Locking them, she turned and found herself looking at an older woman she didn't know. At all. Tall, elegant, and dripping with disdain as she looked at Hope.

Mitchell walked into view. His gaze moved from one to the

other but lasered on her, the warmth fading as he saw the other woman there. He'd dressed in a Henley and jeans, looking delicious.

"Jo, I have to go. Can I call you back?"

"Of course. Do it quick, I have a story for you. It's the one you were hoping for. They looked at your questions and want to bring you in."

Excitement shot through her. "I can't wait to hear about it. I know I can do the story to perfection."

"Who is this *person* in your home, Mitchell? Shawnee won't like another woman here, not that this one would be much of a threat to her."

"Call you later, Jo." Hope ended the call and lifted her chin.

"Quiet, Mother." Mitchell stepped closer to Hope, eyes narrowing. "Who were you on the phone with? What story are you doing?"

"Probably a story on your company that you're trying to keep from me and your wife."

"Mother, shut it," he growled, eyes never leaving Hope. "Is this true? You've been trying to get a story about my company this whole time? Knowing I've been refusing interviews with everyone?"

She furrowed her brow. *Wait a minute, what is going on here?* "You can't think I would—"

"I know my son doesn't associate with your kind and I saw your card. You're a reporter."

Betrayal sliced over Mitchell's face and he stepped away when Hope reached for him.

"I'm not a reporter," she insisted. She also had no idea what card the woman spoke about. She had one business card in the box but it didn't mention anything other than her name and office contact information.

"God, I'm such a fucking idiot," he rasped, pain and disgust in every word. "That's what this has been? The entire time? A

ploy?”

Although she'd known their time together had to end, she'd not expected it to be this brutal. That he would think so poorly of her. Accuse her. “You can't honestly think that, Mitchell.”

“Get out,” he growled. “Get your shit and get out of my house.” His nostrils flared as he shot daggers in her direction.

His mother stepped up to his side and curved her hand over his forearm, her pointed bloodred nails vibrant against his gray and white shirt. “You know her kind is only after your money, son.”

It killed Hope to see how he listened to this woman without question. But when he jabbed a finger in her direction, she hardened her heart and stopped trying to get him to see her side of this misunderstanding.

“I'm going out and I want you to leave.” His mother smirked at her but it fell away with his added comment. “You, too, Mother.” He pulled free of her hold.

God, she didn't want things to end this way but the raw pain and anger on his face told her he wouldn't listen to her. One final try.

“Mitchell, please. Let me explain the call. Jo does publish things for me but—”

His mother interrupted, “He isn't going to fall for your lines. You're not at all his type, so whatever your plan was, it failed. Leave, like he said.”

She tried to ignore the hateful woman and get his attention but he shook her off with a snarl, grabbing her phone and dropping it to the floor and smashing it with the heel of his boot. “Get out of my house. If I never see you again, Hope Roman, it will be too soon. Be gone when I get back.”

Hope ground her jaw, trying to remain calm and convince herself he was overreacting because of his past. But it was too late. He'd made up his mind. In one way, she got it. His mother had been a constant in his life. His *entire* life. Good, bad, or otherwise. She hadn't been.

Not that it hurts less because of that.

And she responded, her own hurt coming out. “I don’t know what you’re thinking, Mitchell, but what kind of fool do you think I am to get in an accident as a ploy to trap you when I didn’t even fucking know who you were? Or that you would stop and help me? Remember, *you* found *me* upside down in my car. It’s not like I sauntered up to you at a bar.”

His face held an ugly sneer. “Because you knew that wouldn’t work?”

A self-deprecating laugh. “Right, because like we’ve established, I’m not your type.”

His gaze met hers once more. “Like my mother said, not even close.” Then he was gone and her heart shattered into a million pieces.

The smile on the woman’s face curdled her stomach but she refused to let it show. Without a word to her, she walked to Mitchell’s bedroom and packed her bag, taking what she could from the box and leaving what she couldn’t fit. Then, putting it on her shoulder, she walked out of the house into the snowy day.

There was no looking back as she trudged through the snow in the driveway to the sidewalk and began following it, heading away from the house and the man who’d captured her heart but then squashed it like a bug.

Not like I didn’t know I was going to end up with a broken heart.

Chapter Eighteen

Hope was gone.

Both figuratively and physically. All traces of her calming presence had been wiped from his home. Mitchell hated it. Every part of it.

Did it matter she was gone because he'd tossed her out? Told her not to be here when he got back? Of course it didn't.

"Goddamn it!" He hadn't been able to stop the vile words from slipping free when he'd been sideswiped by his mother and heard about that story. "Godfuckingdammit!" It was like he'd watched himself do what he could to hurt her, and the devil on his shoulder had just prodded him on, encouraging him because of his past.

"Why the hell did I listen to that woman?"

He picked up the tray his mother had brought over, swore, and heaved it toward the wall.

The crash barely dug a dent in his rage. Picking up a glass pitcher she'd also dropped off, he sent that into the wall, watching as the glass shards shattered and fell to the floor.

"Fuck!"

He reached for something else.

"You're going to regret it if you break that." Linc's calm voice pushed into his bubble of anger.

Looking at what he'd picked up, he realized his best friend was right. It was his championship mug with his teammates' signatures on it.

"Go away, Linc."

The man laughed but it held no humor. "Why the hell would I do that? You're hurting and this is what we do. Come when our friends need us, even if they're assholes and think they can deal with it on their own."

"I'm not in the mood."

The mug was plucked from his hand and he glared at his friend. Linc wore a black Henley and dark indigo jeans. His hair hung around his face.

“Don’t give a fuck. Tully’s coming once his class is finished.”

Right, the hockey rink had been completed at the community center and they were now holding classes.

“Leave.”

“Umm, no.” Linc walked to his pantry and pulled out a broom and dustpan. “Now get a fucking bag to put all this in.”

“Can’t you let me wallow?”

“Could. Won’t.” Linc swept up the glass and tossed the dustpan in his direction.

Nearly dropping it, Mitchell ignored the smirk as he walked to where his friend was and crouched down to hold the pan.

“While you’re down there...”

“Fuck you, Linc.”

“Kinda what I was asking for. At least a blow job.” He swept the shards into the pan and Mitchell dumped them in the bag.

“My tastes have changed.” Mitchell’s lips twitched.

“So damn fickle.”

They repeated that until the floor was clean, not speaking further. And he was okay with that. He didn’t want to talk. He wanted to see Hope in his house. Hold her. Kiss her. Take her back to his bed that had become *their* bed in his mind.

Pushing up from the floor, he said nothing as Linc took the pan from him and returned both items to the pantry. Moments later, the man was dragging food out and placing it on the counter.

“What are you doing?”

“Cooking. Tully is going to be hungry and I already am and I’m sure you’ve not eaten since you opened your mouth and

acted the fool.”

“If you’re not going to be on my side, get the fuck out.”

Linc opened a bag of chips and popped one in his mouth. “That shit’s funny. You can’t throw me out and I *am* on your side. Like you were on mine when you both gave me my come-to-Jesus moment about Emma and how we did the same for Tully about Dawson.” He ate two more. “It’s inevitable. You’re going to hear us out.”

“I don’t want to hear you out. I want you to leave me alone to flounder in my fucking misery.”

“That’s original,” Tully commented, hair still damp from class.

“Suck my dick.” Mitchell glared at his other best friend who’d strolled in like he had every right to do so. And, okay, he did.

“I thought your tastes had changed,” Linc said from where he chopped up vegetables.

“What are we eating?” Tully dropped his bag and walked to the fridge where he yanked out a water, uncapped it, and downed half. “And when?” His gaze to Mitchell verbalized everything his friend didn’t say. How much of a fucking idiot he’d been.

“Tacos. As soon as you finish browning the meat. Mitchell’s useless.”

Tully nodded with understanding and washed his hands before moving to the skillet and attending the buffalo that was there. Seconds later, Pitbull blared from one of their phones and Mitchell groaned.

“Set the table, bitch.” Linc pointed at him as he scraped the diced tomatoes into a small bowl then moved on to the lettuce.

After pulling down the plates, Mitchell carried them to the table. The pedestal dining table where he’d feasted on Hope like she was his last meal. Christ, if only he’d known it was the last time, he would have taken longer. Would have never let her up from his bed the following morning.

“Make sure you wipe that table off,” Tully said. “I see the way you’re looking at it. That means you had her on that table and I’m going to need it to be clean.”

“I fucked up.” He walked to the orange-scented spray he used to clean with and wiped down the table, even though it had already been cleaned.

“Yes, we know, and you’ll not get any arguments from us on the magnitude of your fuckup.” Tully grunted and shimmied to the music. “What we have to do is figure out how you’re going to get her back.”

If only.

“Get her back? Why would she want me back?”

“Because she’s in love with you.”

Mitchell whipped around to see Emma and Dawson walk in, each carrying casserole dishes.

The women placed them on the counter and walked to him. Despite glaring at him, they each gave him a kiss on the cheek before smacking him on the chest.

“That woman is in love with you,” Dawson said. “Don’t worry, we’re not staying. We have better things to do than help you out of this hole. The food is for the next few days because you’re feeling sorry for yourself but you’ll still need to eat while you figure this out.”

“When you’re ready, we know where she’ll be.” Emma narrowed her gaze at him. “We like her and think you two are perfect for each other.”

He looked to Tully and Linc. Both men shrugged.

“Our women are fucking brilliant,” Linc said.

“We are,” Dawson said. “We’re going to leave so you can return to the grunting, grabbing, and farting portion of your day.”

The women blew out as fast as they’d come in and he blinked as he tried to make sense of what they’d said.

Talk halted while they devoured the tacos. When he

finished, he sat and belched. The others followed suit.

“So what’s the plan?” Tully reached for his beer and drank.

“How do I fix this? I called her a liar and said she’d only been close to me to get a story.” Shame washed over him. “I didn’t want to hear her explanation and worse, I sided with my *mother*.” God, if he could do it again, surely there would be a different outcome.

“Yeah,” Linc said, no hint of any amusement. “Not your smartest moment.”

He thumped his head on the table. “How was I supposed to know she was a *science* journalist? I didn’t even know that was a thing.” Mitchell had only found out after she’d left. When he’d looked up her name and realized exactly how much of an asshole he’d been to her. Honestly, he’d not thought about doing it while she was with him because...it was Hope. The bubble from their time together moved with him and it hadn’t occurred to him to look into her. It was easy in his mind. She was Hope. His Flykra. A woman who’d not known who he was when he rescued her—who’d never asked for anything. The one who’d stolen his heart.

Except, when push came to shove, he’d lumped that incredible woman into the same pot as his ex and his mother. Untrustworthy. Devious. Wanting something from him.

He banged his head once more, not even caring about the pain it caused. He deserved that and so much more for what he’d done to Hope.

“Letting her explain and not taking your mother’s side would have been my suggestion, but since that option is *off* the table, we move forward and figure out how we get her to listen to you and allow you to explain you were being an ass.”

He didn’t even lift up his head. “Thanks, Tully.”

“That’s why I’m here. To give you my great advice.”

“Everything reminds me of her,” he moaned. “What if I buy her a car?” He flinched when something hit him. Lifting his head, he saw a partial taco shell by him. “What the fuck was that for?”

“You think that’s going to matter to her? A woman who wasn’t impressed with your name or your wealth? Your answer is to buy her a car?” Linc shook his head.

“I don’t know. That’s how I solved things with Shawnee.”

Linc glared at him, tempting him to drop a hand and cover his junk. “What exactly is it about Hope that reminds you of Shawnee?”

“Nothing but—”

“But nothing,” his friend continued, eyes glowing like black fire. “Something from your heart, Mitchell. The woman you treated like shit is a goddamn doctor in her field and has other degrees. Christ, were we ever this dense, Tully?”

“If we were, we got past it and got our women.”

“Fuck both of you. This isn’t helping me.” Hope Roman. God, she didn’t need him and she had no reason to give him another shot.

“Because you’re still thinking that material items are the way to get her back. Nothing about that woman screams materialistic. I’ve not met anyone more down to earth than Hope. And that’s saying a lot. Dawson is pretty much like that but the woman loves her clothes and shoes.”

“And Emma always thinks about Greer first.”

He got what they were trying to say, even if he didn’t *want* to understand.

“It’s clicking, Tully. I see the wheels struggling,” Linc said.

“Sod off, Linc.” He raked a hand through his hair. “What the fuck is a science journalist?”

Tully reached for another taco shell and filled it up. Sucking something off his thumb, he said, “A person who covers stories in ecology, conservation, wildlife biology, and animal behavior. And your woman is a fucking expert in her field.”

Reaching for another shell himself, Mitchell glared at his friend. “How the fuck do you know that?”

“I read,” he snapped.

“Dawson told him,” Linc added with a snort as he finished a beer then reached for another, the pile of them in the center of the table dwindling.

“Like you knew,” Tully retorted. “Tell me that Emma didn’t tell you?”

Linc shrugged and Mitchell laughed. Sure, it was pathetic and sad sounding, but it wasn’t tears. He was grateful for his friends. They always had his back.

“Okay, okay,” he interrupted. “Focus on me.”

“See, he got famous and now he’s used to having the attention on him.” Tully ate half of the taco. He wiped off his mouth and beard before jabbing the remaining part in Mitchell’s direction. “Needy fucker.”

He grabbed himself even though the table covered the action. Tully rolled his eyes.

“You bitches were just as famous.”

“What do you mean *were*? I still am.” Tully stroked his beard and adopted a smug expression.

Linc threw tomatoes at him. “We have to help this man because I don’t want to deal with him in a world where he had Hope then lost her.”

Tully sobered as well. “Shit, you’re right. Let’s get this figured out.”

• • •

Hope adjusted the strap of her tank top and tipped her head to view the rushing water streaming down the falls. God, it was refreshing and she wanted to stand there forever and let it wash over her. The fact it took her tears with it didn’t hurt matters.

Normally a scene like this, a view she was privileged to have, would be uplifting and exciting. Right now, she simply wanted to cry like a baby.

Suck it up, Roman. It’s not like he was even yours to begin

with.

Damn subconscious. Always interjecting when it wasn't requested or appreciated. Closing her eyes, she stood there in the cold liquid of the Gato waterfall. She was standing beneath one of the small streams. Ilha de São Sebastião was one of her favorite places to visit in Brazil.

"You sure you're okay, Hope?"

Goose bumps popped up along her skin as she stepped out of the water and turned to face the man who'd hollered at her. Wiping the lingering water off her face, she gave him the best grin she could manage. João Carvalho was probably the last friend she had in the world.

Liar. Images of Emma Henricksen and Dawson Shay popped into her brain. Not to mention the women from the mixer, Wendy and Sonya. They were friends and would no doubt be supportive of her.

Nope. She wasn't going there. Pushing those images away, she shook the water off her arms and hands.

"Be right there." She spoke in his native language of Portuguese, as he'd done when he'd asked her the question.

He shrugged and held up his camera. "Take your time, I'm getting some fantastic photos."

She knew he meant it. The man was an incredible photographer. He worked for *National Geographic* and traveled the world to bring people his incredible shots. Making her way over to where he was zoomed in on a small bug on a leaf, she peered over his shoulder, dripping on it and not worrying about ruining his shot. She knew this man well. If it was something he hadn't wanted her to muck up, he never would have said anything.

"That's an ant."

"It is. An *Ectatomma* species, if you'd like to be more specific," he returned, seconds before he spun and pointed the lens directly in her face. Sputtering at him, she smacked at him.

“Hey, hey. Watch the goods.” He backed up, his dark eyes sparkling as he held his hands away from his sides.

She glared. “You think I don’t know you’re still pressing the damn shutter?”

His smirk turned downright evil as he continued to jog backward. With a shriek, she lunged after him and gave chase. Five minutes later they were both back in the water, gear safely on the bank, laughing as they played like they were five-year-olds instead of the respectable adults they pretended to be.

Hope climbed out of the water again, this time João keeping pace with her. At least she wasn’t the only one soaked.

“You bring out the child in me,” he said, shaking his head and spraying her with water from his hair.

She rolled her eyes as she shoved him right into the water and kept walking toward where their cameras were.

As he stomped toward her, she sidled closer to his camera and he shook his head. “Hope. You wouldn’t.”

“Of course not,” she said. “Just like *you* wouldn’t.” There was a bit of warning in her tone.

He scoffed. “Why do my sisters think you’re so nice?”

She grinned. “Because I am.”

Her phone rang—her new phone—and she sighed. Sometimes calls came through and other times they didn’t. Duty called.

A duty she’d been extremely focused on since the explosion in Rock Falls. She’d taken any jobs she could out of the country, hadn’t rushed, and had come to Brazil for downtime. It was too hard to ignore the pull of Rock Falls, Vermont, and the reclusive ex-basketball player who had come out swinging with his new company, Inicio.

The amount of pride she felt at his success couldn’t be quantified. No matter how hurt she was by his actions toward her.

She understood his concern but the fact he'd not given her a chance to explain had been the nail in the coffin. Now he deserved no chance to do so.

With a wry expression to João, she bent to pick up her phone from the pile of things on the ground. Behind João she noticed more people coming into the area around the waterfall.

"This is Hope."

"Dr. Roman, my name is Hank Garfield. You're a hard woman to get ahold of."

João picked up his things and shouldered her camera bag before tipping his head to the side in silent communication. She fell into step with him.

"What is it I can do for you, Mr. Garfield?"

"I've been trying to reach you about Mr. Jones's will."

Despite the heat of Brazil, Hope was suddenly encased in ice. "What for?"

"I know you were at the funeral but you vanished before we could talk. Then all of my calls to your cell went unanswered."

She gulped and struggled not to choke on the air she'd taken in. "I was in an accident and all my things went down the side of a mountain. Then the storm stalled over us." And when she'd finally gotten it into her possession once more, a pissed-off alpha male had stomped on it like he'd had every right.

Right, moving on from that. And him.

"I know, I'd been told you were in an accident. I'm glad to know you're okay."

Am I, though? Really? Some sort of sound escaped her throat. She didn't know what to call it, but whatever it was, João turned toward her with his eyebrows raised. She gave him a small headshake.

"Thank you. What did you need from me? I don't know how I can help with the will."

"You're mentioned in the will. I need to meet with you so we can go over what Mr. Jones left for you."

“I don’t need anything from him.” And she didn’t. He had been an incredible friend and mentor. She’d not lied to Naomi. He was the father she’d never had.

“He was very insistent that you get this, Dr. Roman. Are you able to come meet me?”

“I’m in Brazil right now, Mr. Garfield. Where do you want to meet?”

“Rock Falls.”

No way to miss the mental image of Mitchell Anderson that hit her. She closed her eyes, as if that helped, and groaned.

“Of course you want to meet there.”

“It’s where my office is, Dr. Roman.” There was a hint of censure and confusion in his comment.

“I won’t be in the country for nine days, Mr. Garfield. I’ll give you a call when I’m in town.”

“I look forward to seeing you.” Then he was gone.

João halted and placed a hand on her arm. “Who’s Mitchell?”

Brows furrowed, she shook her head. “What? I was on the phone with Mr. Garfield.”

Her friend grinned and she swore.

“I know most of your tones, Hope. That low moan of hate-lust isn’t one I’ve ever heard from you. Like two seconds after you ended the call, the moaning started. Mitchell fell from your mouth. Why do you make me repeat myself?” He removed her camera bag from his shoulder and slipped it on her own. “Who is he?”

“Mitchell Anderson.”

He huffed as they began walking again. “See, I’m a huge NBA fan and when I hear that name I think of the multiple championship winner Mitchell Anderson who played for—”

“The Monterey Leviathans. Same guy.” She flattened her lips in annoyance.

João froze, slapped a hand on her arm to pull her to a stop. “Are you fucking kidding me? You’ve been holding out on me. You *know* him?”

In a biblical sense.

“I do. He’s the one who saved my ass after the accident.” *Then made me fall for him so he could shatter me into a million pieces, much like when a star explodes and particles go all over the universe, never to be put back again.*

He stood there for a moment. A single, blissful, *silent* moment. Before he shook his head like he was concerned he’d misheard her.

“Rock Falls? As in, the one who you shared a room with? Got up close and personal with? All of that? Staying at his house?”

He yanked out his phone and messed with it until he’d pulled up a photo. João turned the screen toward her.

“This guy? This is the guy you’re talking about?”

She licked her lips and glanced at the photo before her. God, her heart hurt merely looking at him. It was a photo from when he was still active in the league, but it was the same man who’d not only rocked her world but had turned it on its head.

His shaggy blond hair came off as stylishly rakish. The brown eyes that had burned her sparkled with trouble in the image. Bad boy of the league.

João shook the phone, demanding a verbal response from her.

One she gave with reluctance. “Yes. That’s him.”

He drew it back and seconds later had another photo in front of her. This time it was a shot from the local paper of Rock Falls showing him with his best friends. Tully Faulkner and Linc Conner.

“Yes,” she said before he could even speak. “I met them as well.”

He huffed and yanked his phone back once more. She

waited for it to be thrust back in her face. He didn't disappoint.

This was a photo she'd not seen of him before. This was Mitchell Anderson in a tuxedo. A thin woman stood at his left, her hand on his arm. Hope narrowed her eyes slightly as she focused on the way the woman's nails curled into the sleeve of his tuxedo jacket. She was a beauty, but Hope didn't want to think about him having moved on. Even though she'd left.

He told me to get the fuck out.

"Did you know he had a computer company?"

"Yeah, I did." She pushed the phone out of her face and started down the path.

"I'm coming with you."

"João." Hope didn't slow down to look at him. Right now, she had to get that image of Mitchell with another woman on his arm out of her mind. "I'm going to meet this Mr. Garfield, not to introduce you to a couple of sports stars."

"I'm going as your moral support."

She snorted. "Right."

"Besides, I could just go to the community center. Seems like they hang out there." He hurried to catch up to her. "I can play your boyfriend."

Absolutely not. "No. I am *not* having a fake boyfriend."

"Fine. I'll be moral support, like I said initially. It's been a while since I've been in the US. Perhaps I'll find something nice to photograph." He waggled his eyebrows. "I do have all of those of you in the water in your tank top, you know."

"I know where you live, João. Don't make me kill you in your sleep."

"You love me," he chortled with assuredness.

Damn it, he was right. She did.

As they walked up the trail, she ignored the tingle which grew from her gut and spread throughout her body. Rock Falls wasn't that large of a town. Chances were she was going to

run into him. Or the malicious cow who posed as his mother.

She wasn't ready. There weren't many things in the world that could make her so anxious. But at the top of that list was a lone name.

Mitchell Anderson.

Chapter Nineteen

The persistent ring of his phone wouldn't stop. And it was *fucking* annoying. Mitchell kicked his blanket off and lurched to a seated position, squinting through his blurry eyes to find the offender.

Nope, it wasn't on his bedside table. Only his watch that he knocked to the floor. Angling his head toward the other side of the bed, he swore when he saw it lying there.

Why was it all the fucking way over there? He glanced down and realized the answer.

He had made his way over to the side of the bed that Hope had slept on while she was in his home.

And life.

Releasing a string of curses as he lunged over the mattress, he slapped his hand over the phone and swiped accept.

“What?” He was short and rude. Did he care?

Not in the least.

By his estimation, there was about another two days left in his personal circle of hell to work off this hangover he had bestowed on himself.

“Uncle Mitchell?”

Look at that. He hadn't needed two days. It had only taken two words from a little girl. Greer Henricksen, daughter of Linc's woman. He loved her like she was his own.

He swung his feet to the floor and pinched his nose, forcing focus, because if she needed him, this little girl came before everything. “Greer. Everything okay, sweetie?”

“Are you coming to the center to watch my game today?”

Shit. He'd forgotten about that. Why? Because being fall-down, black-out drunk wasn't good for anyone's skill at remembering promises or appointments. And that's how he spent his time when he wasn't dealing with publicly taking

over Inicio. People were calling for interviews, women wanted to be on his arm. More often than not there were reporters outside his house in the morning and his ex-wife was working hard to try and weasel her way back into his life.

“Of course. I never miss a game.”

“He’s coming, Daddy!” she screamed, and he winced as her voice pierced his skull like an ice pick. He fought the urge to curl up in a little ball and whimper. If he listened hard enough, he could hear his friend’s laughter at his agony.

Leave it to Linc to use a child to get him out in the world. They weren’t giving up on him, despite his attempts to drive them away. When he got too bad for them, they went and called in the women. If that didn’t work? Greer.

The one female in his life he refused to disappoint, and his friends knew this, shamelessly using it to their advantage.

“I have to get ready, Greer. I’ll see you soon.”

“Daddy says to shower or you’ll be late *and* stinky.”

Despite his own personal agony, those words made his lips twitch with humor. “Tell him he and I will talk when I get there.”

She laughed. “Uncle Mitchell is gonna get you, Daddy.” She hung up and Mitchell flopped on the bed with a groan.

Summer was almost upon them in Rock Falls. The nights were still lovely and cool but the days were getting hot. Mitchell stumbled to his feet and turned in the direction of his bathroom. He didn’t even bother turning on the light. No need to see how shitty he looked. He felt worse than dirt.

Water running, he stepped beneath the waterfall shower and leaned forward, bracing his hands on the smooth tile. Memories battered him. He grunted and slapped at the touchscreen to get some music going.

Didn’t help.

Low and slow, it pumped through the speakers, reminding him of how it had been...with her. Shit, since Hope had left, he’d been crashing in the living room and using the other

bathroom. Last night, he'd come into his bedroom and crawled into bed, deep in his cups. In his state, he'd been under the impression he could still smell her on his bedding.

Now he was in the bathroom where he'd fucked her. Wrapped his hand around her curls and tugged her head back, exposing her smooth neck for his teeth. He'd *not* been gentle but she'd only asked for more. Begged. Mitchell had put his mark on her as the music, *this* music, had threaded around them. The low bass had vibrated through them both.

He gripped himself and stroked his cock. Hard. Thick. And desperate for something he no longer had in his life. Horny or not, he didn't deserve to find the satisfaction his body sought. Releasing himself, he punched a few more control buttons and hissed when the water became icy and sliced into him.

He washed quickly and reached for his towel as he stepped out, the water no longer falling. It took him a moment to remember to turn off the music as well. Drying off, he wrapped the towel around his waist and walked out to his kitchen, tucking the edge in to keep it from sliding to the floor.

"Hello, Mitchell."

Nearly crossing his eyes in frustration, he continued to the fridge and opened it to pull out some orange juice. Only once he was drinking out of the container did he turn to face his mother.

Her expression was pinched as she stared at him. Slapping the juice bottle on the countertop—one he'd also enjoyed Hope on—he wiped the back of his hand over his mouth. Okay, there wasn't a surface in this house where he hadn't enjoyed every inch of Hope.

"Why are you here?"

"I called. You didn't answer."

"Make it brief, Mother. I have a game to get to." He took another drink. Partially because he knew he needed something in him other than alcohol but mostly because she abhorred him drinking directly from the bottle.

"Are we going to speak about this company you have?"

“Nope.” Had he wanted her to know about Inicio, he would have told her.

“I was on the phone with Shawnee this morning and—”

He walked away.

“Where are you going? Mitchell, I’m talking to you.”

In his bedroom, he drew on a pair of boxer briefs then dropped the towel. After locating a pair of black board shorts, he pulled them on and went in search of an old Monterey Leviathans shirt. A wry smile tugged up his lips as he recalled how Hope had looked wearing his old shirts.

“Mitchell, your lack of manners is disappointing, especially since I raised you better than that.”

In the past, her tone would have frozen him in his tracks. He had wanted so desperately to have her be proud of him the way Mrs. Faulkner and Mr. Conner had been. But no matter what he’d accomplished, that pride had never materialized.

“I have nothing to say to you about my ex. You may want to keep in touch with her and buy into her I’m-so-innocent-and-it-was-an-accident act, but do it away from me.”

“If you would give her a chance to explain, you made such a great—”

“For the love of God, Mother. Stop!”

His mother stared at him, her Botoxed face showing an incredible amount of shock for how *fake* it was.

“I’m still your mother.”

“Mrs. Faulkner is more of a mother to me than you have ever been. Tell me something. What did my ex tell you?” He’d never told his mother, because in his mind, she should have been on his side. “Why are you so determined to be on *her* side rather than your own son’s?”

His mother tightened her lips. Vera Anderson was capable of vindictiveness and being hurtful. “The son who just told me another woman was more of a mother to him than I was? That son?”

He knew he shouldn't be an ass but dammit, he wasn't going to be guilted into shit.

"Yeah," he snapped, not slowing down at the surprise on her face. "*That* one."

"She said you saw her in a compromising position but wouldn't give her a chance to explain."

His eyebrows shot up. "*A* compromising position?"

"Yes. And *had* you let her explain, this ridiculous divorce could have been avoided."

He blinked rapidly a few times. "Oh, I want to hear this. Explain the situation to me that I misunderstood." He yanked his shirt on over his head and backed up to swipe his watch off the floor next to his bedside table. "I'm waiting."

His mother didn't appear as sure as he was used to seeing her look. "She was being held up by one of your teammates. Said she'd fallen and he stopped her. You took it wrong."

He licked his lips and put the watch on. "*I* took it wrong. Where was this? And with who?"

Did she really believe this shit?

"Donaldson. She's not a woman to go after men of different races. She loves you. He's who you should be mad at. They can't control their urges around a beautiful woman."

While he ducked in his closet for a pair of slip-on kicks, he took a moment to push down his rage. He was going to need to meditate before he got to the game. Shoes in hand, he stepped out.

"And by 'they' you mean..."

"Non-white men. Honey, I know you're friends with one of them but you have to—"

"Enough." He wasn't yelling at her but his tone held no room for disobedience, even from his mother. "I'm not going to stand here and listen to you disparage two of the best men in the world because they're not white enough for you. I *divorced* her because *she* cheated on *me*. More than once. With men of

every color and nationality. The more money they had, the better. She didn't lie about Donaldson. He did help her up—off his dick, after she'd propositioned him at a party. If you want the photographic evidence of her perfidy, I can have that sent to you from the private investigator I hired. Have to warn you, though, it's a lot. Like, a *lot*. So get off your high horse about that woman. She is never going to be a part of my life again and if you want to be in hers, then you're no longer in mine, either."

"You're lying."

He tipped his head to the left and gave it a small shake, exhausted by the entire thing. "I wish I was. I'm not."

"What about Mallory? You know this is hard on her. I have to send her away again. She's eating too much."

"You'll do no such thing. She's moving in with me." He took a step toward the woman he should have loved and affection for but honestly, he was dead inside. "Stop trying to make her half her size. My sister is a fucking beautiful woman and when the confidence she has in herself returns after years of being beaten down by you, she's going to be a goddamn rock star."

"All she has to do is show some restraint about eating. Is this because of that large woman who was here at your house?"

Anger surged up. "You should really shut your mouth now, Vera." He got in her space, towering over her. "If by *woman* you mean Hope Roman, then yes. I'm in love with her and when I track her down, I'm going to do what it takes to be in her life."

"She only wants your money. That's why she was here, remember, for the article about your company. The one you didn't tell your own mother about!"

"She doesn't give two shits about my money. Your former daughter-in-law—*she* wants money. And you'll see how expensive she is when she drains *your* account."

His mother opened her mouth and he shook his head.

“I don’t want to hear it. I love Hope. I’m going to marry her and have babies with her.” A quick determined smile. “Lots of them. And before I forget, let me mention one other thing: you’ll be out of our lives if you choose to continue siding with my ex. Get out of my house and don’t ever come back uninvited.”

Vera was still moving her mouth but no words came out. Mitchell herded her to the door and the moment she was on the porch, he slammed it behind her.

“Did you mean what you said?”

He jumped and whipped his head toward the living room. “Holy shit!” His sister Mallory sat there, her fingers tangled in the hem of her oversize shirt.

He hadn’t seen her since they’d had their photo taken for the newspaper. She’d barely been able to stand on her own feet, given how undernourished she was. Most of the evening, her hand had been on his arm, her fingers digging into him.

Now she looked better, her face fuller and her skin not so pasty. However, she had a long way to go before she was healthy. And he’d not lied—he would be here for her, helping her.

“What are you doing here, Mallory? When did you get here?”

“Snuck in while you were talking to Mom.”

She tucked some black hair behind her ear. Her eyes, like his, were a rich brown but hers held such sadness.

“I thought you were gone for another month.”

She shrugged. “I left.”

He drew her up and hugged his baby sister. “Good for you. And yes, I meant every word of it.”

Mallory leaned against him. “She’s going to send me back.”

He swallowed and wrangled his emotions under control. His sister didn’t deserve his anger. “No, she won’t. You’ll stay here with me.”

She wound her arms around him. “What about your woman?”

A rough bark of laughter. “I don’t know where she is.” God, it killed him to admit such a thing. He should know where the woman who owned his heart was. Did she need him? Fuck. Was she missing him like he was her?

“Will I have to leave when you find her?”

The thread of vulnerability from his baby sister cut him at the knees, taking him to the floor. How hellish had her life been because he’d been so wrapped up in himself?

“No.” He kissed her temple. “You can stay as long as you want, Mallory. Whatever you need from me. How do you know I’m going to find her?”

A slow shoulder bounce. “You’re my big brother. I’ve never seen you fail at anything.”

Chin on her head, he held her. *I failed you, Mallory, and I failed Hope. Something I swear I’ll never do again.* “Come on, we’re going to a baseball game.”

...

Hope nibbled on her lower lip as she waited in the hallway of the building where Mr. Garfield had his office. João had offered to come in with her, but she’d decided she needed to do this alone, so he’d ambled off to be a tourist in Rock Falls, Vermont.

The drive in had tied her in knots. This close to Mitchell. Most of her wanted to see him but self-preservation wanted to bolt or hide. João had stopped at quite a few of the covered bridges in the area and had fallen in love with the one she knew well. Palisade Glen.

While he lost himself in his photos, she’d rested and kept an eye on the time. The last thing she wanted to do was be late for her meeting. Not that she wished to be here, but she’d given her word.

“Ms. Roman, Mr. Garfield will see you now.”

She glanced up to the older woman who had opened the office door. One more deep breath and Hope got up off the bench.

“Sorry we don’t have a waiting room in here.”

“It’s fine, ma’am. Thank you.” She glanced around the room. There was barely enough space for the woman’s desk. As she skirted by Hope to sit once more, Hope watched the door she had to go through.

Rethinking her decision to let João leave her here alone, she swallowed her nerves. She had no reason to be afraid. Facing death hadn’t panicked her like this did and she hated how uncertain she was right now.

Reaching out for the knob, she pulled it open. Mr. Garfield sat behind his desk. His space wasn’t that much bigger. His smile went from cheek to cheek, his ruddy skin agleam in the sunlight coming through the small windows along the ceiling.

He rose and reached out a hand to her. Taking it, she gave him a firm shake then let him settle his considerable bulk behind his desk.

“Thank you for coming, Dr. Roman. Sorry, I should have met you outside the office.”

“Here’s fine.” She barely used her title and it seemed this man was determined to do so.

He nodded and bent to open a drawer. The screech of metal had her wincing as the sound carried on for a full ten seconds.

“These old desks. She and I have been through a lot, can’t bear to get rid of her.”

It took a lot to keep the comments inside. Surely this man could have gotten a bit bigger space for his office.

“Anyway. Let’s get to it. I’m sure you have other places to be.” He grinned. “To be young again.”

Her number one priority was to get out of Rock Falls without seeing Mitchell Anderson. Right? That was still the main objective.

Gah, I don't know anymore.

Mr. Garfield cleared his throat and flipped open the folder he'd dragged from the drawer. "Mr. Jones has bequeathed to you, Hope Roman, one million dollars."

Her legs wobbled and she reached for the chair she'd been determined to ignore previously. "I'm sorry, could you say that again?"

Surely I misheard. I'm a millionaire? That can't be right.

"Mr. Jones had acquired quite a nice nest egg when he passed. As he thought of you as his daughter, he wanted you to be taken care of. He had no other children." He took a breath. "You've already met the one stipulation provided in his will."

"Which was?"

"Go to his funeral."

Tears burned her eyes. She wouldn't have missed it for the world.

"There is something else."

Hope took a few more breaths. "What?"

"He wants you to follow your heart. To stop letting the past and your fears keep you from doing so." A few pages flipped. "Here, he wrote you a letter."

Staring at the sealed envelope Mr. Garfield held out to her, she couldn't bring herself to take it.

"Dr. Roman?" He gestured with the letter once more.

She swallowed and reached out her hand—her shaking hand—to brush her fingers over the cream envelope. Then she took it and, without opening it, slipped it into her bag, which rested on her lap.

He cleared his throat and clasped his hands before him. "I know the funeral was a hard time for those of us who knew him, but please read the letter. There are instructions in there as far as your inheritance. So, while I did open it to put in the additional instructions, please rest assured I didn't read the letter he wrote you."

“Never crossed my mind you’d be less than professional, Mr. Garfield.”

His smile reminded her a bit of Mr. Karl Jones’s smile.

“I worry.” He gestured about the small space with his hand. “My space doesn’t exactly give off a vibe which boasts of how competent I am at my job.”

“You have an office. My guess is you typically go to your clients or meet in a larger space if there are multiple people. Karl wouldn’t have stayed with you, Mr. Garfield, had he not trusted you.”

He rose, his belly brushing over some of the items stacked on his desk. Hope took her cue from him. Time for her to head out.

“He spoke so highly of you, Hope, and I’m honored to have been able to meet you. I wish it was under better circumstances.”

Struggling to not give her tears freedom, she shook his hand again and slipped out the door, barely pausing to say goodbye to the woman at the desk. Outside, the warm sun shone down and she took several fortifying breaths before she managed to heave away from the building wall and walk down the sidewalk.

Standing before a business that was called TC’s Sandwiches, she walked in and headed to the counter, all the while pulling out her phone to text João, seeing if he wanted to eat before they left.

She ordered a turkey and avocado club with a large Coke. When it arrived, she carried it along with her chips out to a circular wrought-iron table. The scrollwork was beautiful and the chairs matched the table. Even the feet had intricate swirls on them.

Hope hated that she gazed around, part of her wishing that Mitchell would stride into view, allowing her to see him once more. Roughly shoving that desire into the trash, she began a mantra of *He wasn’t ever permanent in my life*.

All well and good in theory. However, it didn’t stop the

wishing.

She picked up her sandwich and took a healthy bite, her moan low and appreciative. This was delicious—the avocado was sliced at the perfect thickness and the hearty bread had been toasted lightly, giving her a slight crunch. Halfway through the sandwich, she'd popped in some chips when João waved at her and jogged inside.

Wiping off the corners of her mouth and her fingers, she waited for him to join her. It didn't take him long to walk out with his own sandwich and chips.

He waggled his eyebrows at her as he sat, picked up his sandwich, and took a healthy bite.

“Hungry?” She curved her lips around the straw and took a drink.

“When have you known me *not* to be hungry?”

The man had a good point, though he *could* go a few days without eating when waiting for the perfect shot. But she knew when he did eat, he made sure to pack it in. She finished the second half of her sandwich. He made short work of his, as well as his chips.

He glanced to her chips and without a word, she nudged the open bag toward him. João flashed a thankful grin and dug in. Her neck prickled and she turned to see what could have caused it. No one she recognized but she couldn't shake the feeling.

“Hope?”

“I need to get moving, João.”

“You see someone you want to avoid?”

“Feels like someone is watching me, which doesn't make sense.” She shook her head. “Could be us. We're sitting outside in Vermont, speaking Portuguese. I'm guessing not a lot of people speak that in this area.” There was more to it than that, but she wasn't about to discuss the sudden windfall with him out in the middle of Rock Falls, whether they did it in Portuguese or not.

“Let’s get going then.” He pushed his chair back and picked up their baskets. “I’ll take these inside and meet you right there.” The head nod directed her to where they would meet.

“Thanks.” She touched her bag like she needed to reassure herself that the letter was still there. Moving to the sidewalk, she chewed on her thumbnail as she waited for João to meet her so they could be on their way.

He came out with a smile and two bottled drinks. Tossing her one, he rolled his eyes when she nearly dropped it.

“Still? After all these years? You can’t catch a drink that I *lob* in your direction?” He shook his head. “It’s not like I chucked it at your head. We’re not even playing baseball.”

She snorted and punched him in the shoulder as they began walking. “Seriously,” she mocked him in return. “After all these years? What the hell would make you think I’d learned to *catch* anything? And there’s a very good reason I don’t *play* baseball. Fairly certain you witnessed it.” He laughed. “We both know I’m more of a ping-pong girl. Or shuffleboard. Oh, let’s not forget, I like curling.”

“Stop, please. You could always move to Brazil and live with me. I’ll teach you to catch.” He winked at her.

Barely resisting the urge to roll her eyes, she settled for nudging him with her shoulder, smirking when she caught him off balance and he stumbled. “João, you’re barely home twice a year. I see more of you now than I would if I was living in Brazil. Besides, my job has me traveling as much as yours does. And I’m scared to know what exactly you’re wanting me to catch. Pretty sure some of that requires shots and antibiotics or antivirals to clear up.”

“I am clean, thank you very much.” He uncapped his drink and took a long sip. “But as for the traveling, it’s what makes us perfect. We share a place, split the bills, but have a spot to rest our head in between travels.”

It’s like he was actually trying to make a case for her to move to Brazil. And while she loved the country, she didn’t want to move there.

Rock Falls, however...

Gah! She had to stop with those thoughts. He wasn't part of her life anymore, regardless that she was in his town.

As they stepped up to the rental vehicle, her breathing came a bit easier. Looked like she was going to survive this trip. After today, she never had to come here again. Digging for the keys, she unlocked the Jeep and slid her bag off her shoulder before leaning in the vehicle to deposit it between the front seats.

"I think both of us are much happier this way."

He lifted his head at her once he'd climbed up and grinned. "Perhaps, but we could give it a whirl." His final word hadn't faded from the air when his eyes grew wide.

That alone should have given her an inkling of who was behind her but then her body's physical reaction to the nearness of one man exploded into overdrive. She had no doubt who she would see if she turned her head.

"How are we doing this?"

Bless João, always on her side.

"I'm not. We're leaving." They continued to speak in Portuguese and she climbed up in the Jeep, slipping the keys in the ignition. She wasn't looking at him.

"Flykra."

Damn him!

That word. That voice. This man!

She swallowed down any feelings toward him. Better to be reticent with him. Wasn't easy, that was for sure.

"Mr. Anderson."

"Let me explain." He shifted closer and filled her periphery.

A sharp headshake. "You were perfectly clear. I have no need for more of your words."

She turned on the engine and swore when he reached across her body and shut it off. His smooth, intoxicating scent

surrounded her and she closed her eyes to bite back her moan. The move skimmed his powerful arm over her chest and damn her nipples for responding. She opened her eyes to see he had not only killed the engine but taken out the keys.

“What do you think you’re doing?” she snapped at him, desperate for the anger to linger so she didn’t cave to her body’s demands—that she uncurl her toes, lean into his hard chest, and kiss him, let him pick her up and spread her out on the hood of this very vehicle and have his way with her. Or her way with him. “Give those to me.”

“What am I doing?” He angled his head and speared her with his brown gaze. “I’m doing what I have to, in order to get you to listen to me.”

Chapter Twenty

Mitchell held her gaze, the anger swirling in the depths of her brown eyes. A gaze he'd missed more and more with each breath he'd taken since she'd left. He wondered if he pushed her hair from where it fell over a portion of her forehead, would there still be a scar from the accident that had brought their lives together?

He knew this wasn't the best way to get her to listen to him, but he also knew that *if* he let her drive off, there wouldn't be another chance.

The burning sensation in his chest and stomach hadn't faded. It had only grown in size and frustration as he watched her talking and laughing with another man. And in another language. He thought it was Portuguese but he wasn't positive. The man had dark good looks with that inherent Latin swarthy that seemed to be such a beacon to many women. Including *his* woman.

He wanted to yank her away from him and kick the man's ass. But he couldn't do that. Mitchell knew and accepted this was on him. He had been the one who had pushed her out of his life. Her being with another man was *his* fault.

All of it.

His.

Motherfucking.

Fault.

"My sister told me she'd seen you at TC's with," he lifted his eyebrows, desperate to keep the scowl off his face, "a friend." His muscles were tight and he struggled to keep still.

Her full mouth firmed in a mutinous line.

I want to kiss it away.

The man in the passenger seat watched the interaction with amusement in his gaze. If they were a couple, he didn't seem all that put out by his woman interacting with Mitchell.

Personally, he would have been jealous as fuck.

Then again, he *was* and Hope wasn't his any longer. Dammit.

They exchanged a flurry of words in Portuguese and when Hope snapped something at the man, who then jumped out of the Jeep and strode around to where he stood, he figured he had earned a few moments with her.

The man got between Mitchell and Hope. "You hurt this woman again and I will kill you, take photos of it, and smile as the money I earn from those photos rolls in." His accented words were cold and crystal clear.

Not a couple then. "Understood." His response was delivered in a monotone way but inside, yeah, there were fist pumps. Many, *many* fist pumps.

The man smiled and shifted his shoulders. With another flurry of words for Hope, the guy walked off down the street, pulling his camera from his shoulder. He didn't look back.

"Flykra, please let me explain."

"I don't *care* to hear your explanation, Mr. Anderson. But as you stole my keys and are holding them until you get this off your chest, I don't have a choice. Say what you need to, I have a plane to catch."

"Slide over."

She lifted her eyebrows.

"We're not having this discussion in the middle of Rock Falls, Flykra. We're going home and shutting out the nosy folks of this town. So slide over or I'll move you. And honestly, I'm not sure I'll be able to stop touching you once I start."

He wasn't taking no for an answer. If that made him mulish and bullheaded, then so be it. Mitchell would be as unyielding as he needed to be in order to keep this woman from leaving his life before he had a chance to beg her for forgiveness.

She spat something at him in a different language but climbed over to the passenger seat. He knew there were plenty

of people watching and he ignored them best he could, slipping into the seat and starting the engine.

Hope barely moved as he drove to his home. *Their* home. At least that's how he thought of it. Regardless of the short time she'd been there, she'd embedded the house with her personality and he missed it. Missed her.

There had been snow on the ground the last time she'd been there. But now all was gone and the beautiful Vermont summer weather was upon them.

One of his favorite memories was sitting on the back porch with her, wrapped up in thick quilts as they watched the snow fall, a fire burning in the pit. Of course, that was before he'd carried her inside for activities that were a lot less in the clothing department and a lot more up close and personal.

For the seven hundredth time, he wished he'd never let her get up out of bed that morning. Just kept her there.

He parked her rental in his drive. His sister's car remained as she'd grabbed a ride in with him before they'd split off on their own.

Mitchell hoped like hell it wasn't his wishful imagination that had her eyeing the vehicle with a hint of jealousy. She hopped out and paused at the front of the Jeep, face completely impassive.

Placing himself at her elbow, he grabbed her and moved her to the door. While he took it as a win she didn't yank away from his touch, he was far from declaring victory. The woman didn't bend in the slightest. There wasn't a hint of give.

He sighed and bit the inside of his bottom lip as uncertainty rushed over him. His breaths were a struggle for him to catch in his chest and he hated this. Fuck, even sweat had begun to bead and roll down his spine. Flustered didn't even begin to cover it.

Mitchell reached around her and opened the door, using his larger form to nudge her inside. The moment he closed the door, she initiated space between them. Space he didn't want or approve of, but he wasn't an asshole.

Well, yes I am. But damn it, I'm her asshole.

He dropped her keys in the small, slate-blue, slightly lopsided glazed clay dish that Greer had made for him at the center and moved to where he could look Hope in the eyes.

She was a wall. Blank.

“I’m sorry.”

Hope blinked. “Is that it? Because I have things to do.” Her voice was a sexy southern accent.

“No, that’s not it. Christ, Hope. I’m trying here. I don’t know what you want me to say.”

She took a deep breath and gave him a small, sad tilt of her lips. “I don’t *want* you to say anything, Mr. Anderson.”

“Fucking call me Mitchell. I’m Mitchell to you.” He yanked at his hair, breath short, and he swore he wasn’t getting enough oxygen. “I’m *your* Mitchell.”

Hope simply watched him.

He shook his head and pounded a hand against his thigh. “Fuck me, Flykra. I’m lost without you in my life. You were the only thing in my life that was real.”

She narrowed her gaze at him. “Are you seriously quoting a movie to me right now?”

He paused as he ran over the words he’d said. “They have the lines that make sense.” They’d not even talked about *Blue Is the Warmest Color* and until she’d mentioned it, he hadn’t recalled the line had even been in that movie. “I’m shit at relationships, Hope. Shit at them.”

And here he was going to blab it all out, hoping to God she gave him another fucking chance because if she didn’t, well, he wasn’t sure what he would do.

“Congratulations.” She stepped away from him and picked up the keys he’d dropped, palming them.

His heart broke when she turned to the door and reached for the handle. Actual fucking tears burned his eyes at the thought of losing this woman, *again*, forever. He rushed up behind her,

slapping one hand against the door, holding it closed as he crowded her from behind.

Even now, the memory of her curves against him pumped fire through his veins. He lowered his head and nuzzled her hair away until he reached her ear.

“Don’t leave me, Flykra. I love you.”

A shudder ripped through her entire body. “Are you kidding me?” She turned so they faced one another. “You’re telling me you love me? You. Love me? A woman who, according to you, lied about who I was and put myself through hell just to try and get an exclusive story from you about this computer company I had no fucking clue about? Let’s not even forget I’m not a goddamn reporter.”

He nodded. “I know.”

“I’m a science journalist. I’m goddamn *Dr. Hope Roman*.”

Mitchell mouthed the words as she said them.

“I know you are, and short of saying I was, *am*, a fool for letting my mother get back into my head, I have no excuse.” He clenched his hand to keep from settling it upon her hip.

“No, you don’t.” She thinned her lips. “You accused me of terrible things. Took what I thought we had and reduced it to a ploy for getting a fucking story. Because how else would a woman who looks like me have a shot at being with someone like you.”

Jesus, daggers shot directly into his heart and he flinched, but he refused to let her gaze go. She had every right to feel this way and he would take all she dished out. He deserved every single cut she wanted to inflict.

“I’ve wanted you since I met you, Hope Roman. The second in that car when you were hanging upside down, no doubt scared out of your mind, and you took the time to *reach* for me. Not because you had to but to *thank* me.”

Mitchell had to touch her again. He slid an arm around her waist and drew her closer to him, still keeping his other hand on the door. Ignoring the hair which fell over one eye, he

stared at this incredible woman.

“You went out of your way to give me the space I so unwisely thought I wanted at The Thrush & the Clover.” He dipped his fingers below the hem of her shirt, seeking out her skin, desperate for the contact. For her silken skin to once again brush along his.

Without her, his life was empty. He didn’t want to go back to that. He took a deep breath and forged ahead. Now wasn’t the time for caution. He had to do this one hundred percent.

“You never took more than I was willing to give and never asked me for more. Yet you watched me with this look that warmed me like no heater ever could. Or fire. I don’t know when I fell in love with you at that bed and breakfast, Hope, but I did. Nothing you can say will make that less than a fact.” He spread his fingers along the small of her back, bringing her closer to him millimeter by millimeter.

Her lip trembled. “I don’t think you know what being in love is.”

“Fair assessment.” He lowered his head and breathed her in. God, she still smelled delicious. “But I do know that I’m fucking miserable without you in my life. I’m a moody bastard and my friends are pretty close to kicking me to the curb.”

“I’m not your cure-all.” She tried to move and put space between them and while he let her take the step she’d sought, he followed, keeping them touching.

But he didn’t stop there, he kept her moving until the door was behind her and there could be no more retreat. He ran his gaze over her features, memorizing them all over again. “I spent hours watching you sleep, committing every inch of you to memory. I know you’re not my cure-all, Flykra. But you are my five spot. My center.”

“Why are you doing this to me?” There was more than a hint of vulnerability in her tone.

“I need you to know the truth. I can never take back the callous words I foolishly uttered that day.” He repositioned his hands so they cupped the sides of her face. “If you give me

another chance, I will spend every fucking day doing my best to make up for them. To show you I was wrong and prove to you how much I love you.”

“You’re a persistent man, Mr. Anderson.”

“Only when it’s something worth having in my life.” God, he longed to kiss her. Mitchell settled for skimming his thumbs along her cheeks. “And never doubt this, Flykra, *you* are worth having in my life.”

• • •

Hope stared into his eyes, searching for something. She wasn’t sure what, but she continued to seek. Mitchell Anderson didn’t move. He waited for her to make her decision. His large, strong hands continued to cradle her face.

“I have to go,” she murmured.

Pain filled his gaze but he let her go and stepped back, allowing her room to maneuver. Damn it, she hated the feeling of loss which accompanied his move back. Even as she appreciated that he released her.

But did she really?

Would it be so bad if he didn’t and held her to him, confessing his love for her?

“I have to wrap up this story and take care of the inheritance letter I was in town to pick up. Maybe we can talk after?” If it made her weak, so be it. She wasn’t able to not talk to him. They had a bond, a tie that she couldn’t sever. Even if she wanted to pretend that she’d done so already.

“Time and place?”

“I don’t know,” she admitted. “I’m leaving the country.”

There wasn’t any way to miss the clench of his shadowed jaw. “And the *one* with you? Where does he fit in all this?”

“You have no right to ask that.” God, she couldn’t get her heart to stop thundering in her chest. How pathetic did it make her that she wanted him to be jealous?

Anger flashed in his brown gaze before he managed to get it under control. “I know I don’t. But I want the right.” He closed his eyes and took a deep breath. Her heart stuttered in her chest when he opened them once more. “I *crave* that right, Dr. Hope Roman.”

Lord help her, she wanted to give it to him. Right now, right here, he seemed so damn earnest about his words, but hell, he’d also sounded that way at the inn.

She needed space. “Is your number the same?”

If she hadn’t seen them she wouldn’t believe that this man had the capability to form tears, but damn it, his eyes glistened. “Yes.”

“I’ll give you a call when I’m finished and see if you’re available.”

“No matter the day, time, or location, Flykra. I’m available and I will come to you.” A one-shouldered shrug. “Or I’ll fly you to me.”

Her lips twitched. “I feel like you actually mean that.”

“As sure as we’re standing here.” He reached around her and opened the door before walking her outside, his hand a warm comfort on the small of her back. Mitchell slowed at the driver’s side of her rental. “Be safe, Hope Roman.”

She bit her lower lip before glancing at him over her shoulder. “It’s not winter, I should be fine.” Hope tried for a small smile to lighten the mood, but all he did was nod.

He reached out and cupped her face, his thumb brushing her cheek while his long, strong fingers skimmed against her neck. Need unfurled in her gut. No, that wasn’t true. What she had for this man far surpassed something so prosaic as need.

The look in his gaze nearly gutted her, so passionate, hopeful, wistful, with more emotions than she could name.

“Come home to me, Flykra.”

He stepped away and watched as she got up behind the wheel and backed out of the driveway. As she turned the corner at the end of the street, she could see he’d not moved

and she watched in the rearview as he faded from sight.

Come home. Two words that held so much meaning. Far more than she wanted to think about. However, she could no longer ignore her own needs and desires.

Doesn't mean I won't think about the other two words he said. To me. Mitchell wants me to come home to him.

João must have been watching for her because the moment she drove into the parking lot near where he'd hopped out, the man climbed in.

"How was the make-up sex?" He waggled his eyebrows as he grinned.

"There was no make-up sex."

"Really? I was there when he showed up. You two have an awful lot of tension between you. Perhaps it's because you're not doing the make-up sex thing."

"Oh for the love of...stop talking about *make-up sex!*" She ended on a screech which, of course, attracted the attention of some townspeople who grinned and waved at her like she'd never been gone a day.

"Wouldn't be so grouchy if you got some," he muttered in Portuguese as he pouted, arms crossed over his chest.

She drove away, hating how blasted difficult it was to push the vehicle beyond the town line. Her hands shook so hard she had to pull over. For a few minutes, she sat there, hands tight around the wheel.

The crack of a bottle lid preceded the appearance of an open water by her mouth.

"Drink," João commanded in Portuguese.

Her trembling didn't stop, not even after she took some huge gulps of water. Luckily for her, her friend took the bottle away from her before she could spill it all over herself. She waited for his commentary but he didn't say a word. He would let her find her own way out of the forest she'd gotten lost in.

Finally, in silence, she pulled onto the road, heading to the

airport. Once they were on board, strapped in and waiting for clearance from the tower, João turned his head and frowned at her.

“What?”

“You’re being childish.”

“Am not.”

He lifted an eyebrow at her and she rolled her eyes, very aware that yes, in that moment, she was very childish.

“That man loves you and you left him there.”

“You don’t know what is going on between us, João.”

“Everyone knows. The whole town gossips about it. I *love* small towns. There are never any secrets.”

She glared at him. “You went to find out what happened between us?”

“Of course. How else can I figure out how to fix this and get one of my idols as a friend?”

Hope snorted with amusement. She couldn’t be mad at him. João had made no attempt to hide how in love he was with her player. No, not her player. He wasn’t hers nor was he a player any longer.

Right? He wasn’t hers.

Damn if she didn’t want him to be.

“And what did you hear?” She crossed her arms and waited as the plane taxied.

“I heard that he had a moment of foolishness and allowed his mother—a woman who has been in his head for his entire life—to sneak past the walls he’d built. One moment to make a mistake and he listened to the woman who should want to protect him, not use him.”

Hope grunted and didn’t say anything until they were in the air. Then she looked at the man next to her. “It’s not that simple.”

He scoffed. “Of course it is. And no,” he said, continuing to

speak Portuguese, “I’m not discounting your feelings and how much pain he inflicted on you. I am saying this is simple. You two love one another.”

“You don’t treat people like that if you love them, João.”

“Listen to me, Hope Roman. Despite my putting him up on a pedestal because of how he played ball—and let me tell you, he was a fucking god when he played—he is human. And that means he is going to fuck up and make mistakes.”

“And when those mistakes mean ripping me down to my soul and exposing my fears, my own insecurities? I’m supposed to let them go and give him a pass because he was a *god* on the court?”

“Fuck no. But *you* held yourself from him as well, Hope. Don’t bother trying to tell me otherwise. If he’d known what you did for a living, nothing his mother had said would have shaken his faith in you.”

“He told me to get the fuck out and if he never saw me again it would be too soon. And he stomped on my cell phone.”

João shrugged, reclining his seat. “He’s a man.”

“Of all the misogynistic shit to spout.”

“He’s a man. He’s human and he made mistakes. Yes, a lot of them, Hope, but look me in the eye, right now, and tell me you don’t still love him. Aren’t still head over heels for him, and you want nothing more than to demand they turn this plane around so you can run back to him.”

“I hate you,” she grumbled.

“Think of how much easier your life would be if you had agreed to be with me in Brazil.” He winked as he teased her.

“Right, the life of the antivirals.”

He waved his hand in her direction. “Hush now, I’m planning on how I’m going to ask my new best friend to show his appreciation for helping him get his woman back.”

“You still think he’s going to be your friend?”

“You’re my friend. He wants you. Logically, he will make

sure I'm on his side of this relationship. Especially since I'm such a threat to his happiness.”

“Oh God, stop before your big head brings down this plane. I need a nap.”

She closed her eyes as he laughed. She didn't join him. All she could envision was Mitchell standing there, telling her to come home to him.

Lord help her, she missed him something fierce.

Chapter Twenty-One

“Do you know where she is?” Mitchell demanded as he stood in front of Dawson at her shop. Behind him, he knew Tully watched their interaction and was getting ready to intervene.

Dawson Shay didn't need any protection, that was for sure. She slowly turned off the flame of the torch she'd been using and lifted the welding helmet from her face. Sweat moved down her dark skin and he could see the irritation brewing in her whiskey-hued eyes.

“I do.”

She flicked her gaze over his shoulder and although she didn't say anything to Tully, Mitchell could hear it. *Get your boy.*

Mitchell was going crazy. More than four days had passed and he'd heard nothing from Hope. “And?”

Dawson sucked on her teeth, picked up a sparker, and activated it. Seconds later the flame on the blowtorch roared to life and he took an involuntary step back. His friend's fiancée cocked an eyebrow at him and lowered her helmet. He watched the solid mask cover her features. And like that, she dismissed him, returning to work.

He avoided getting sparks showered on his clothing only because Tully yanked him away from Dawson and her work.

“Christ, man. This is a shop. You can't linger when she's welding.”

“I want answers, Tully.”

“I'm sure you do but you're going to have to wait until *my* Legs is done looking fucking hot as she rocks her torch.”

Turning sideways to avoid the bright light of what she was working on, Mitchell looked at his friend. Tully didn't hide how in love with Dawson he was and it fit him.

“What?” Tully managed to pull his gaze from Dawson. His expression sobered at whatever he saw on Mitchell's face.

“Come with me.”

Following his friend out the front of the shop, he crossed his arms as he leaned against the side of the barn. The scent of melting metal combined with the rich, pure scent of the mountains.

His friend wiped his hand over his forehead, removing the sweat, and stood in front of him, facing the interior of the barn. Mitchell knew it was to keep an eye on Dawson, even though the woman was more than capable.

“Talk to me, man.” Tully crossed his arms and set his feet.

Mitchell raked a hand through his hair. “I want what you have. What Linc has. I see it, I’m fucking jealous of it. I want it.”

“You’re thinking since four days have passed that she’s not coming back to you.”

“What the fuck am I supposed to think?” Off to his left, Faust let out a bleat in response to his yell and rammed his head into the gate. “Exactly, goat. You get it.”

“That goat is a goddamn psycho, don’t agree with *anything* he does. Other than adore my Legs. He’s right on that one.” Tully stroked a hand down his beard before crossing his arms once more. “You’re going to have to let her come to you at her own pace, Mitchell.”

“Can’t she come to terms with her own pace while she’s here. With me? And not off in some other country with that man who wants more than friendship with her?”

“You’re talking about João and he is a friend. He’s a photographer for *National Geographic*. They are nothing more than friends.” A shrug of massive shoulders. “You don’t think that we don’t have your back in this? Of *course* we researched the fuck out of that guy.”

“The longer she’s away from me, the more walls she can build. I can’t fight them if I can’t see her, talk to her, *touch* her.”

“I thought I fucked up with Dawson, Mitchell.”

“You did,” Dawson announced as she walked out of the barn, hair up in a ponytail. “But you fought for me. For us.” She patted him on the chest, bringing a contented smile to Tully’s face.

Tully wrapped a hand in her ponytail and tugged Dawson’s head back until he was kissing her. Mitchell cleared his throat. “Missing my woman, so not a fan of the in-my-face display of public affection.”

Dawson remained pressed against the large ex-hockey player who loved her more than anything, her hand on his chest, showing off the ring he’d made for her. “The point we’re making here, Mitchell, is that you attacked her on her insecurities and that’s not easy to bounce back from. She was still in mourning from losing her mentor. And you made her feel inadequate and like she wasn’t worthy of you. Not strange really given her own ex. Don’t forget, you’re not the only one with a past.” Hand on Tully’s cheek, she kissed him. Dawson moved to his side and brushed those same lips on his cheek. “But she loves you, and she’ll be back when she can.”

Both men watched the proud, sassy woman strut to her Dark Horse and straddle it. With a wave over her shoulder, she started the powerful engine and rode off. Tully adjusted himself beside him and Mitchell didn’t say a word. What was there to say? Watching her do that shit *was* hot.

“Look,” Tully said after Dawson was out of sight. “I know Linc is typically the more insightful one, you’re the prankster, and I’m the entitled asshole, but Dawson is right. You know how Legs was with her mother, all the comments about her weight. Strong yes, but it wore at her. The negative is insidious and you have to see this from her side.”

“I don’t give a fuck what size she is, Tully. I want her. Start, finish, and everything in between.”

“And the company and your accusations?”

“Fucking Christ. I made a mistake. I’ll sell the damn thing if that’s what it takes to get her to come home.” A deep breath. “To me.”

“She had the ex who was using her to get ahead, not because he cared or liked her. Similar situations but different at the same time. That can’t have felt good to her. But about your company, let’s hope it doesn’t come to that. Come on, let’s go get a drink.” A smile. “I’m buying.”

Mitchell pushed away from the barn door. “So we’re going to your place then?”

“Yep.”

He shook his head. “We’re going to my place. I’ll make you clean while we drink.”

“That’s fine. I don’t have any beer there anyway.” Tully grinned and sauntered to his bike. “I’ll meet you there.”

When Mitchell pulled up to his house, he noticed more reporters waiting. Parking in the driveway beside Tully’s Harley, he climbed out of his Grigio Ferrari 812 with the hardtop already retracted and glared at those around his home.

“What are you doing here? I told you, I have nothing to say to you.”

“Mr. Anderson, we have a few questions for you about Inicio.”

“I have no answers for you. I provided all the information I cared to at the press conference.”

“What about the rumors that you are reconciling with your ex-wife?”

He was frozen to the spot and Tully stopped as well.

“What did you say?” he demanded of the man standing at the edge of his property, like that was going to save him.

“Um, we have heard from your ex-wife that you are working on reconciling and hope to be reunited soon.” He flipped through his notebook. “It was corroborated by your mother.”

Tully rolled his eyes, not even attempting to stop him from speaking.

“You wanted a quote. All of you, listen carefully and

closely. I'm going to respond to that and I want to know you are getting this correct." Mitchell pushed the anger down and took a deep breath. "Ready?" When they all nodded, he unclenched his fists and stepped toward the man who'd posed the question.

"Whatever Shawnee Deveraux and my mother have planned is between them. I have nothing to do with it. I divorced Shawnee because she was unfaithful, and before she thinks to come after me for slander, I have photographic proof I'm willing to provide, if that is the route she wants to take. I am not now, nor will I ever be, reconciling with that woman. My mother has picked her side and she is not in my life any longer."

Questions started coming and he held up a hand. "Let me finish."

They settled down.

"I am in love with a woman I met this past winter. She is the most giving, loving person I've met in my entire life. When we met, I was suspicious of her motives, but I quickly realized she didn't give a damn that I had played professional ball. In fact, she seemed to not even know who I was."

"She knew me," Tully piped up.

Mitchell shot his friend a glare that was partially grateful as those gathered chuckled.

"My point is, this woman allowed me to be me. Not the me the media expects, not the me my mother wanted, but the true me. The one who loves his little sister and his friends. The one who played ball because of his love for the game and got into computer games for the same reason. The one who is more than willing to humble himself on camera to get the love of his life to come home to him."

"Who is she? This woman who has won the heart of billionaire Mitchell Anderson?"

"Dr. Hope Roman, world-renowned science journalist. The most unique woman I have ever had the pleasure of meeting. My snowflake. My Flykra." He pushed his hands into his

pockets and rocked on his heels. “More than that, she’s my world. I love her beyond everything I have and I will protect her with everything I have.”

Tully stepped up beside him, resting a hand on his shoulder. “As will myself and Mr. Conner.”

The reporter who’d first asked about the reconciliation nodded. “We’ll make sure to get it right.”

“See that you do.”

Tully paced him inside the house. “You have a set on you, my friend. I hope she was okay with being outed to the world as the object of your affection.”

He crossed his arms and huffed. “She has a problem with it, then she can *fucking come home* and yell at me!”

• • •

“Is he fucking crazy?”

João laughed and touched a button on his cell phone, replaying the interview at the part where Mitchell had announced to everyone that he was in love with her.

“Do you see it, Hope? Right there.” He tapped the screen. “Look at the determination in his gaze.”

“I don’t care, João.” She adjusted her headset, wishing she could remove it and talk to him, or punch him, without all the additional noise.

“Of course not, that’s why you growled like a jaguar when the man mentioned him getting reunited with his ex.”

“Will you survive if I push you out of this helicopter?”

The pilot and co-pilot laughed and she rolled her eyes because they were all on the same channel. This was their ride to the airport which was, in fact, where a waiting flight was taking her to the U.S. The return had been delayed because João had had an accident and she couldn’t have left him all alone. Not after how she had felt hanging upside down in her car, wondering, hoping, and praying someone would come

help her.

“After all your nursing me back to health, now you want to push me out?”

“Kick,” she amended. “Plant the sole of my size-nine hiking boot in your ass and send you on your way. Don’t worry, I’ll toss out a parachute later.”

“How much later?”

“Next week.” Her deadpanned answer was met with more laughter from the crew.

The joking continued until they landed. The plane was waiting for them and powered up as they were hopping from the belly of their most recent transport. Bags in hand, she and João dashed up the stairs and stowed their gear. It didn’t take long until the door was secured and they were taxiing down another runway.

Once they were airborne, she stretched out, grateful it was far less noisy than in the helicopter.

“You could call him, you know.”

“I’m not calling him from the airplane, João.” God, did she want to.

He gave her an overexaggerated sigh combined with an eyeroll. “You better not ruin my chance to have an NBA star as a best friend.”

Rolling her head on the rest so she could see him better, she stuck her tongue out at him. “That’s why you’re pushing this so hard? Because you want the *ex*-NBA player as a friend?”

“What did you think I was in this for? Because I didn’t know you were going to be knocking boots with one of my favorite players in the league? And because you won’t be my woman? Yes, this is why I’m in it. Not for our friendship. I will sell you on the black market if it means I can get closer to him.”

Hope didn’t speak until he looked at her. “Oh, I’m sorry, I forgot Portuguese for a moment because you were spouting some shit I didn’t want to hear.”

He pinched her cheek like she'd seen him do numerous times to his sisters. "You need me to tell you again how much we are in love and how you want to move to Brazil with me?"

She burst into laughter and kissed the tip of his fingers. "Do I need to get the oxygen mask for you? There is a definite lack going to your brain."

He wrinkled his nose and pinched hers. "You, my dear, I love, and I too would protect you from anything."

"I want to believe that, João, but you didn't even try to stop him when he kidnapped me."

His eyebrows went up. "Kidnap? Is that what you're calling it?"

"He drove off with me." She scowled at him. "What do you call it?"

"A man who wants to get his woman back."

"Of course you'd admire him," she bit off.

"And you are in love with him. Please call him."

"I'm not going to do that." She wanted to speak to him but wasn't about to do that on an airplane where there were a lot of ears.

"Fine. Take away my enjoyment."

"Take a nap, you seem a bit cranky."

"So do you. You need sex."

She smacked a hand over his mouth. "You need to stop announcing things like that."

João waggled his eyebrows and muttered, "Move your hand or I will lick it."

She yanked her hand away. "I hate you."

He grinned. "No, you don't." He shifted so he faced her. "Tell me you're going to talk to him when we land."

"I'm going to. I merely need to figure out what I'm going to say."

“Practice.” He propped his hand beneath his chin. “Pretend I’m him. I mean I look like him. Tall, sexy, handsome, tattoos, blond hair, hopelessly in love with you.”

She shook her head. “Whatever I’m coming up with to say, he will hear it first.”

João shrugged. “I’m here if you change your mind. I’m always here for you.”

Hope knew that and she appreciated it. Right now, though, she simply wanted to be lost in her own thoughts. When they touched down in California, she was fighting to stay awake. She’d not been able to sleep for the racing thoughts in her mind and on the helicopter, well, that wasn’t going to happen.

“I have to meet Mulligan about our trip to Cambodia. You going to be okay heading to the hotel?”

She accepted her terracotta bag from the pilot with a smile. “Thank you. Yes, João, I’ll be fine. I’ll order a car and head over.”

“We’ll meet for dinner?”

“Sounds great,” she said around a yawn. “Want me to take your bags?”

“Do you mind?”

“Of course not. Say hi to Mulligan for me.”

“He may want to join us for dinner.”

“The more the merrier.” She waved him toward the waiting vehicle. “Off you go. I’ll see you later.”

He climbed in with a wave and a hollered, “Call him!” as she waited for the ride she’d called to arrive. Rubbing the nape of her neck, she shifted her weight as she kept an eye on their luggage.

A low rumble pulled her eyelids up. She spotted a dark blue SUV driving across the tarmac of the smaller airport.

Thank God because I’m pretty much dead on my feet.

It didn’t help to have the hot sun beating down on her. She

longed for a cool shower and a bed in a dark room. Hell, it didn't even have to be a dark room. The blacked-out windows made her snort.

Like I'm a star.

The vehicle stopped before her and the wind picked up, whipping the uncomfortable dry air over her skin. Bending at the waist, she grasped the handle of João's suitcase and swung her bag strap over her shoulder.

Dark gray Timberlands appeared and her heart thudded. The echo in her mind was louder than even the planes moving around overhead.

It couldn't be. Her palms grew sweaty and her mouth became drier than the desert. Long, muscular legs covered in medium indigo jeans followed. She didn't even have to finish looking up the hard physique of the man standing in front of her to know who it was. Her body wasn't lying.

It was Mitchell.

A small *eep* escaped and she covered her mouth with her left hand.

"Hello, Flykra."

The wind blew through his hair and she longed to have permission to do it herself. God, he looked so good. An ache in her belly grew the longer she looked at him.

"Mitchell? What are you doing here?"

The hatch opened and he took the luggage from her hand, and the pile by her feet, and loaded it for her. Then he was in front of her. God, he was so close, it was all she could do to keep her hands to herself.

He held his hand out close to her chest and her heart stuttered. Eyes locked on her, he pushed his fingers between her shirt and the strap of her bag before lifting it over her head and setting it in the back.

"I'm taking you to your hotel." He closed the hatch and opened the rear door.

“And you think I’m going to let you chauffeur me around? Stuffing me in the back like you can’t be bothered to be seen with me? Afraid I will ruin your reputation?” She fisted her hands. “What happened to the blather that you spewed to the press?”

His jaw clenched as he gripped the doorframe. “Get your ass in the car, Dr. Roman.”

Ooohh, he was pissed.

She moved to stand in front of him and tipped her head to hold his gaze. “Are you going to put me in there if I don’t? Spank me if I refuse?”

Every single one of her synapses fired simply being so close to this man.

He dipped his head and whispered against her ear, “Don’t tempt me, Flykra. I would *love* to get my hands on you again.”

Chapter Twenty-Two

Mitchell Anderson wasn't a praying man, not by any stretch, but right now, right here in this SUV as he drove the woman who owned him heart, body, and soul, he prayed.

Prayed that he could keep his hands on the wheel and not pull them over on the side of the road to haul her into his lap. He should have had her up beside him, then she wouldn't be directly in his line of sight as he checked the rearview mirror.

An act he did more than necessary, but damn it, he couldn't stop looking at her. The amount he'd missed this woman couldn't be quantified. She sat there, ramrod straight, lips drawn in a flat line as she kept her gaze out the window and not on him.

Exhaustion lined her full features and he bit back his question, which he had no doubt would come out as a snarl. She wasn't taking care of herself.

Flicking on the blinker, he smoothly maneuvered them through the lanes, heading for an exit. As they went up the ramp, he stole another gaze.

She was on her phone, brows drawn together in concentration.

“Did you have a good trip?”

“Of course.” That was it. No elaboration. She didn't even look up from the device she held in her hand, her cold tone doing a spectacular job of erecting a wall of ice between them.

Tough shit. He'd brought a flamethrower and he was going to melt it so there wasn't a thing to keep them separated.

“What were you doing?”

“We were making a report on sea grass meadows, this time in the Philippines for the BBC. Discussing how with photosynthesis the grass absorbs about ten percent of the ocean's carbon, not to mention how it's providing a much-needed habitat for a multitude of fish and other marine

creatures.”

He flexed his hands on the wheel and slowed for the light at the top of the ramp. The Hope he recalled from the bed and breakfast rang through when she spoke about her work. Checking his mirrors, he edged over another lane and licked his lips.

“Who’s we?”

Damn it. I don’t mean to sound like a domineering asshole, even if I am one.

Her gaze flicked up to his.

Finally!

“Others in my field.” That was it and she ducked her head once more. Not because she was being shy, no, this was pure dismissal.

City traffic took his attention but there remained a part of him that would forever be in tune with the woman in the vehicle with him.

“Did you run into trouble there?”

“No.” A brief pause. “Why?”

“You said you had to wrap up a story. I didn’t think it would take almost a month.”

This time her gaze was turbulent with anger. “You know how it is with us gold diggers. We have to figure out our next moves before we go in, make sure all of our plans are in place.”

Yeah, he couldn’t even snap at her for that.

She muttered something under her breath and he wanted to demand she say it again, but he restrained himself. The goal here was to get her to talk to him, not piss her off more. He pulled into the hotel and parked. The valet walked up as he got out and without hesitation he passed over the keys, then he opened the rear door and reached out his hand for her.

Mitchell witnessed the war raging in her, intermingled with her indecision on how best to make her next move. She spun,

sliding her legs out of the vehicle, and pushed her phone into the pocket of her olive cargo pants which hung low on her full hips. She ignored his hand but he wasn't letting it go. Or her.

Grasping her elbow as she hit the ground, he cocked an eyebrow at her. The smile she pasted on her face told him everything he needed to know. She wasn't going to make a scene.

"I'll bring your bags," the bellhop said with a smile.

"Thank you," Mitchell said, cutting off what he knew would be her refusal and guiding her inside.

He ignored the looks he got from people as they moved through the lobby. All he could see was the woman beside him. Hope's curls tumbled around her clip and he saw it was stars. His fingers itched to sink into their softness and tug her head back so he could kiss her.

"Good afternoon," the concierge said to her even as the woman glanced up at him. "Mr. Anderson, good to see you again. It's been a while." A flicker between him and Hope. "Your usual room?"

"I want a room on the same floor my friend is checking in on, if possible." He braced his hip against the counter and looked down at Hope.

"And you are, ma'am?"

"Checking in for two rooms. João Carvalho and Dr. Hope Roman."

The woman was efficient and she got Hope checked in on both. Mitchell hid his grin as Hope said *doctor*. God, she was sexy.

"And you, Mr. Anderson, are in the room across the hall." Their keycards were passed over.

"Thank you," Hope said, turning and walking to the elevator, even as she pulled her phone out of her pocket once more.

Mitchell fell into step with her, frowning as he saw she was texting her room number to João. They entered the elevator

together and he crossed over to her when she took the opposite side of the car from him.

No words passed between them as they rode up to the sixteenth floor. After marking his room, he stepped over near Hope, not at her side but to her back as she used the keycard to open her door. He gripped the frame but didn't go in the room, simply used his foot to block the door from closing all the way.

“Come on in, Mr. Anderson.”

Not exactly a welcome with open arms, but she hadn't slammed the door in his face, so he'd take it. Stepping in, he closed the door behind him, waiting for the click before engaging the security chain.

Hope stood across the room in front of the window and damn it if she didn't look defeated and exhausted. Mitchell was moving before he could even comprehend what he was doing.

Gathering her in his arms, he held her tight to him. “Tell me what you need, Flykra.”

She turned in his embrace and angled her head to look at him. “What are you doing? I saw your statement to the press.”

“I know you did.” He stroked his hand along her cheek. “I meant everything I said, Hope. I love you.”

“I can't live with this, Mitchell. I'm not a gold digger and I didn't know about your computer company. I knew you were spending time on your computer but I thought that was because you were simply a grouch and didn't want to interact at the mixer. I had no idea about your company or that you were a player worth millions.”

Billions actually. “I know, baby. I know you didn't and you don't care. You've only seen me as Mitchell and that's who I want to be to you. Yours. Your Mitchell. The man who loves you more than his next breath.”

“Words are easy to say. Actions hold more value. And to hear the local gossip from João, you haven't been divorced for long, so why should I believe that you want to be with me?”

Isn't this fast?"

He guided her to sit on the edge of the king-sized mattress and cupped her face in his hands. "Did you hear everything I said?"

She shrugged. "Sort of."

Mitchell cocked an eyebrow. "Sort of? What does that mean?"

"Means we were in a helicopter as João showed me your press conference. I didn't hear everything, I don't think."

"Helicopter," he muttered. God, this woman was amazing. "There's a term in the computer world called a cooldown. It's the minimum time limit that a player has to wait to use a specific ability again within the game."

She shrugged. "I told you I don't play computer games."

"After what I went through with the ex, I figured my cooldown time was going to be a *long* time but then I met you and I realized something."

"What's that?"

He brushed his lips over hers. "When it comes to you, Flykra, there is no cooldown on love. I'm all in. Head over fucking heels in love with you. I can quote movies for you, yell it from the top of every skyscraper, but if you don't believe me, it doesn't matter. I know I fucked up and I didn't back you up when you needed me to. Especially having just lost your mentor, and for that, I'm going to be sorry forever."

Someone knocked on the door and he went to answer it after dragging his lips over hers once more. The bellhop stood there with her bags and he took the two of them from the young man and closed the door.

Carrying them to the bed, he sucked in a breath as he stared at the woman before him. Hope had gotten off the bed and taken off her button-down shirt, leaving her in a white tank top that hugged her curves. But on her left shoulder, he saw a tattoo that hadn't been there before. And he knew because he'd kissed every inch of her body.

Behind her, he gathered her hair in his hand and brushed it aside, allowing him to see the full tattoo. “When did you get this done and where?”

“February and in Brazil.”

He traced his fingers along the triangle shape. “What is it? Who did it?”

“It’s the Octans constellation. Representing the reflecting octant.”

Mitchell kissed the top star. “Meaning?”

“The octant is a predecessor of our modern sextant that we use in navigation and exploration. My mentor gave me his watch in his will when he passed and this is on it. I can’t carry that with me because I don’t want to lose it, so I put it on my skin.”

“So he’s always with you when you’re out exploring the world.”

“Yes.”

Spreading his fingers wide so he could span her rounded belly, he burrowed his nose into her neck, inhaling her scent.

“Will you gift me a second chance with you, Flykra? Let me prove myself to you?”

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Hope closed her eyes and stood in his warm embrace. This was what she’d been missing. Craving. Needing.

“What about your mother?”

Mitchell stiffened behind her for a second before he pressed her up to the window and gripped the hair on the back of her head, while his teeth grazed her carotid. “That woman does not have a say in our life. I’ve already told her since she chose my ex, that was her way of stepping out of any relationship with us and our children.”

“Children?”

He tugged and she gasped as she met his gaze, hungry and raw, in the window.

“Children. Do you not want any?”

“Hadn’t thought about it,” she admitted, closing her eyes.

He tugged again, bringing her eyes back to him. “I have.” Brown fire burned her. “Ever since I met you, I’ve imagined you carrying our child within you. Protecting him or her.” He flicked his tongue along her neck. “Children. I want to knock you up, Flykra. I want to see you swell with my seed. I want to create so many strings connecting us, we won’t ever be able to unravel them. You’re my snowflake. My Flykra. Unique.” Kiss. “Special.” Kiss. “Unforgettable.” Kiss. “*Mine.*”

The raw honesty in his tone should have scared her. Should have done something other than make her want to turn and kiss him with everything pent up inside.

“We’re not fixed, Mitchell.”

“Baby, I know. But I need a chance to fix what I fucked up.”

This time she did pivot in his arms, settling her hands on his chest. “I have to tell you something.”

He flashed her a grin, the one he’d given her when he was saving her life. The one that made her feel safe and protected.

“Yes,” he said. “Yes, I’ll marry you.”

She snorted. “I didn’t ask.”

His brow furrowed. “Ask what?”

“If you’d marry me.”

“Yes, Dr. Hope Roman, I’ll marry you.”

“Incorrigible.”

“Yours,” he whispered. “Always and only yours, Flykra.”

She could tell him about the inheritance later. Much, *much* later.

• • •

Later that night, after indulging in Mitchell, a nap, a much-needed hot shower, as well as dinner with João and Mulligan, Hope lay in the king-sized bed, curled against the man who had captured her heart. She wore his shirt and a pair of panties while he lay in a pair of shorts, keeping her partially lying on his body. His fingers stroked up and down her arm as his other hand rested possessively on her hip.

“I have to tell you something, Mitchell.”

He nuzzled her. “You want a basketball team of kids?”

“No, about why I was back in Rock Falls.”

His fingers flexed on her hip. “You said the inheritance. From Mr. Jones. I’m guessing that’s the watch you mentioned he left you.”

“Not just the watch. He left me some money as well.”

His lips feathered over her skin. “We have more than enough money, you do with it what you will.”

“You don’t want to know how much?”

“Don’t care.” He trailed his lips along the shell of her ear. “All I want is you, if that’s broke or rich, it doesn’t matter.”

“It’s a sizable amount,” she continued. “At least in my mind.”

He tipped her chin up to meet her gaze in the low lighting. “If you want to invest it or just spend it, that’s fine. Linc and his father can help you with investing if you have questions. Tully can help you spend it. That man does love to shop.”

She smiled at the warmth pulsing through her. “I have some ideas.” It was nice to know there were people she could go to about this, if she wanted.

“You know you don’t only get me, right, baby?” His tone was not as carefree as before.

Her lips twitched, even as she settled closer to his warmth. Sure, it was summer in California, but she wanted to be near him.

“I get Tully and Linc as well.”

“And Dawson, Emma, and Greer.” He cleared his throat.

“What about your sister?”

He stilled.

“I know you have one, Mitchell. I saw her photos and you’ve mentioned her a few times. Is she part of your life still?”

“I want her to be. Are you okay with that?”

“I don’t have siblings, so yes, I would love the chance to have a sister.” She pursed her lips. “Aside from Dawson and Emma of course.”

“When we announce the engagement, we’re going to have to invite Wendy, Alistair, Sonya and Erick.”

She lifted her eyebrows. “Engagement? Who said anything about that?”

He growled in her ear before he nipped the lobe. “Sorry, not sorry to break it to you. You’re stuck with me now, Flykra. It’s a no-return policy.”

“Even if I kept the receipt?” she teased.

He rumbled a warning as he rolled them over so his larger body covered hers. “Especially then. You’re stuck with me.”

She reached up to kiss him. “I don’t think that will be such a hardship.”

“One day at a time, baby. I will earn your trust again. I promise.” He skimmed his hands over her body, bringing her to a fevered pitch with the slightest touch.

Welcoming him into her body, Hope didn’t respond, for what was there to say? She loved him. Had for a while, and yes, there were some things to work through—but they could do that *together*.

“If you have to flip a coin, baby, I’ll take those odds too. Heads I’m yours, tails you’re mine.”

She arched into his touch. Either outcome would work for her.

Epilogue

Hope laughed as she looked in the mirror. Behind her the bedroom was a disaster. To say a tornado whipped through would have been kind. Clothing was strung all over the place and it wasn't hers.

Mitchell narrowed his eyes at her and the panic in his expression broke the humor she was finding in the situation. Smoothing her hand down her V-neck knee-length dress, she turned and walked to the man she loved more each day.

Between him and his friends they were helping her figure out the best way to set up a grant with the inheritance her mentor had left. The Karl Jones Grant. To help those who needed a bit more assistance to follow their own stars and seek out their dreams.

"What is going on with you, Mitchell?" She smoothed a hand down his bare chest, reminding herself they had a wedding to attend.

"I can't find my tux. I'm going to fuck up my best friend's day because I'm losing my shit."

Cupping his jaw, she waited for him to look at her. "I moved your tux to the back of your SUV along with everything else you need for today. Shoes, cufflinks, all of it."

"I want to ask why you didn't tell me this but I think you did, didn't you?" He shunted a hand through his hair. "I'm a wreck. And it's not even *our* wedding day."

"You, my love, need to pull on some jeans and a shirt. You've got responsibilities and need to get to Tully's side."

He exhaled slowly and kissed the tip of her nose before he turned and walked to his closet and yanked on some old attire. Then he was out the door and Hope sighed.

"Not exactly how I thought today would go, but he's a bit distracted." She turned to the bed that sat littered with his tossed clothing and rubbed her belly with a soft smile.

“Flykra.” His deep rasp brushed her ear as his arms circled her, his hands covering hers as they sat upon her belly. “Were you going to tell me something? Or is there something you *should* be telling me?”

“I was but I don’t want to take from this day for you and Tully.”

He lifted her and the second she faced him, Hope wrapped her legs around his waist, no longer concerned he couldn’t hold her. He’d proven again and again he could toss her around with ease if he wanted. Head to head, breaths mingling, he held her gaze.

“Say the words, Flykra. I need to hear them.”

She licked her lips, swallowed, and did it again. He never moved, even his fingers which cupped her ass were still.

“I’m pregnant.” A pause. “*We’re* pregnant.”

“I. Love. You. Dr. Hope Roman.” A shuddering breath. “Thank you for making me whole. Thank you for giving me *you*.”

Spearing her fingers deep into his thick hair, she tugged him close for a kiss. Tongues twining together, she closed her eyes and loved him best she could without words. When he pulled away, his eyes sparkled.

“Tonight, you and me, we have a date.”

“Date? Aren’t we already engaged? And let’s face it, you’ve already knocked me up.”

A smug grin lifted his lips and he moved his left hand, sliding it over her belly, petting her. “I did. But I want to take you out and celebrate.”

“We’re going to be at a wedding party for the majority of the day. I’m going to be exhausted.”

“We can have the date in bed.” He nuzzled her. “Let me borrow a kiss and I promise I’ll give it back to you tonight. Here. In our bed.”

“You have a wedding to get to. I’ll be along shortly.”

“You’re coming with me now. I’m not letting you out of my sight.” Another hard, fast kiss and he had her feet on the floor.

Hope didn’t say a word, just let him pull her along and tuck her into his vehicle and drive to where the groomsmen were meeting to change. The space looked stunning, and her lips curved up as she took in the decorations around the building that housed Rock Falls Custom Restorations.

The bride-to-be and her bridesmaids were tucked away in the old barn which had been converted. But the groomsmen and the groom were walking down toward the front. Before they took their places, Tully and Linc walked up to her and enveloped her in a hug.

“Congratulations, sweetheart,” Linc murmured.

“I’m the better choice for a godfather,” Tully said, before kissing her cheek.

Blinking back her tears, she kissed them both and blew one in the direction of Mitchell, who watched the three of them with nothing but love in his eyes.

The bridesmaids walked up and took their positions across from the groomsmen and she smiled as she looked at the scene. She’d settled in her chair when Greer skipped up to her and grasped her arm.

“Everything okay, sweetie?”

“Aunt Dawson said I was supposed to come get you. You’re in the wedding with us.”

“I don’t think so, Greer. I’m only a guest.”

“Nope,” she said confidently. “You’re in the wedding. Come on. Aunt Dawson is anxious to marry Uncle Tully.”

Snapping her head up, she saw Tully nodding at her, beckoning her up to the front. Panic hit her but Mitchell crooked his finger in her direction as well.

She made her way up, Greer holding her hand, and found herself wedged in across from where Mitchell stood. Emma smiled at her.

“I’ll be back, Mama. I have to spread the petals for Aunt Dawson.” With that, Greer ran up to the barn, laughter trailing after her.

Emma reached out and took her hand, squeezing it. “Welcome to the family,” she said.

Tears burned her eyes as she returned the squeeze and found Mitchell’s warm gaze upon her face.

“I love you,” he mouthed.

And God, did she feel loved.



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Sláinte

Happy Reading,

~Aliyah

About the Author

[Aliyah Burke](#) is a *USA Today* bestselling author who's an avid reader and never far from pen and paper (or the computer). She is happily married to a career military man. They are owned by three Borzoi. She spends her days at the day job, writing, and working with her dogs. She loves to hear from her readers and can be reached [here](#).

If you would like to be kept abreast of what's going on in the world of Aliyah, please join her newsletter: <http://aliyah-burke.com/newsletter.htm> and/or cozy newsletter: <http://aliyah-burke.com/abnewsm.htm>

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