

A romantic close-up of a man and a woman about to kiss. The man is on the right, leaning towards the woman on the left. The background is a soft, out-of-focus blue sky. The overall mood is intimate and tender.

A
WINDSWAN LAKE
NOVEL

summer
ever
after

A. J. WYNTER

SUMMER EVER AFTER

A.J. WYNTER

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ABOUT SUMMER EVER AFTER

Happily Ever After doesn't happen to people like me.

My step-mother is a wannabe gold digger and we've been criss-crossing the country trying to find her next husband.

Windswan Lake is beautiful, and full of opportunities, aka rich men. It's her newest hunting grounds.

My evil step-sister is poised to follow in her mother's footsteps. She spends her days working out and getting her hair done, while I work two jobs as a maid to keep the lights on.

They find the perfect job for me - a billionaire with a beautiful cottage, but that's not the reason I had to take the job.

The billionaire has a son - and my evil step-sister wants him.

If motorcycle riding billionaires, evil step-mothers, and a masquerade ball are your jam; you will love the modern day Cinderella retelling in "Summer Ever After."

ONE

DAISY

SHIMMERING heat waves rose from the pavement around me. The handles from the grocery bags cut into my fingers, but each sweaty step took me closer to home. “Just keep walking. Just keep walking,” I whispered to myself as the cicadas buzzed in response.

Home was a nice way of putting it. Our rental – a single-wide trailer made at a time when orange and brown shag carpets were all the rage, was supposed to be a temporary roof over our heads. We were only going live there on Sunflower Lane until my stepmother Christina, was able to sink her claws into a man with some money. Only this time, it was taking her longer than usual to secure something luxurious.

My father died ten years earlier when I was thirteen years old. The marriage with Christina was short-lived, and I was convinced that she had something to do with his death – although I couldn’t prove it. Since then, Christina, my stepsister Chloe, and I have lived in all kinds of houses all across the country. My favorite was a historic cottage on the shores of Windswan Lake, but its owner, a man named Mike, died before Christina had the chance to insert herself into his will.

Windswan Lake was up and coming and home to many millionaires and a few rumored billionaires – a prime hunting ground for my stepmom. According to her, suffering through a winter in a leaky trailer was the price we had to pay. Christina took the main bedroom, and Chloe claimed the second. That left me with the sagging plaid sofa in the living room, but Christina liked to stay up late watching TV. The solution, which I liked, was setting up a cot in the insulated garden shed. It was my own space, and I had a stack of books to read. They'd been considerate enough to string an extension cord through the window. It ran next to the dripping air conditioner, snaked across the yard and into the shed through a hole in the window screen, so I could have a light to read them by. I kept a jar of peanuts next to my bed to feed the family of chipmunks living in the tree whose branches shaded my 'home'.

I wiped the sweat from my brow with the bottom of my t-shirt. Sunflower Lane was at least two more miles down the road. Chloe needed the car we all shared to go to her nail appointment in the city, and had been *kind* enough to drop me on the curb with a grocery list clutched in my hand.

My socks were soaked with sweat, burning up in my running shoes. I wanted to stop, but the milk had already been in the heat a little too long.

A man's voice made me stop in my sweaty tracks.

“Shit. Fuck. Dammit.”

I rose onto my tiptoes in an attempt to see over the sunflowers, but it was futile. They were a couple of feet taller than my five-foot-seven self. My options were to either bushwack through the field or walk right past him. Hefting the bag onto my shoulder I slipped into the field of sunflowers,

hoping their dinner plate-sized blooms above me didn't give away my presence.

Whoever it was, they sure were angry at something.

"Come on you piece of crap." The voice shouted and there was a clatter of metal meeting metal.

Driven by curiosity, I inched to the edge of the field and crouched behind a small knoll. A black and red motorcycle, leaned on its kickstand. A black helmet sat on the handlebars and the swearing man was seated on the ground, his head in his hands. A leather jacket was spread on the ground next to him and at first glance, it looked like his light blue shirt had a dark blue stripe down the back, but then I realized it was sweat.

It felt a little wrong, watching the man, but I couldn't stop. He stood and turned, holding his cell phone up to the sky.

His voice was growly. "Of course, there's no service. You think you're so great, technology?" He spoke directly at his phone as if it could answer him back. "Without a signal, you're as useless as a motorcycle that won't start. You goddamn cocksucking, motherfucking state-of-the-art piece of shit."

I had to clamp my hand over my mouth to stifle the giggle. I had been around rage and fury, and if this was that, I would've backed away as silent as a mouse – but this man was frustrated and exasperated. And, kind of funny.

The strap of the bag slipped off my shoulder and the heavy bag dropped onto some dried leaves. Swear McSwear Pants looked over his shoulder. "Is somebody there?"

He was wearing boots and jeans. I was in running shoes. Odds were in my favor if a chase ensued, but I felt like I could

read people, and the man in front of me didn't seem to pose a threat. I rose and stepped out from between the stalks.

“Hi.” I waved, feeling a little more confident.

He made a yelping sound and whirled around, his hand on his chest. “Oh, thank god. I thought it was a wolf or something.” Immediately his face turned the same color as the tomatoes in my grocery bag. “How long have you been there?”

“Long enough to learn that a motorcycle is no good if it doesn't start.”

He stood and opened one of the leather bags slung over the bike and pulled out a baseball hat, smoothing it over his sweaty hair. “I'm sorry about that. I didn't know that there was...a lady nearby.”

“A lady?” I looked over my shoulder. “Where? We should find her. She probably fainted when you screamed out cocksucker.”

His lips turned up into a smile, but the red in his face intensified, matching the hue of the stripe on the motorcycle. “I'm really sorry about that. I'm usually pretty chill, but this bike has been nothing but problems since I bought it.” He patted the seat. “And I think that she finally beat me today.”

I set the bag on the gravel shoulder of the road. “My dad had one of these bikes.”

“Are you sure?” Swear man's brow knitted. “They're pretty rare.”

Biting my lip, I blinked back surprise tears. “He was a collector, this is a BMW Airhead. The battery was always dying in his too. Yours is in pretty good shape.” I eyed up the motorcycle. “It looks original.”

“Wow.” Max shook his head. “What are the chances? Of all the people in the world who could’ve... stepped out of a cornfield in the middle of nowhere...” His voice trailed off as though he had just realized how strange it must have been to see me.

I cleared my throat. “It’s a sunflower field. Not a cornfield.”

“That makes it weirder, I think.” His laugh wasn’t nervous, but there was a hint of a question in the low tenor. I wondered if he thought that I was homeless. There was duct tape on the toes of my shoes, I was wearing an oversized t-shirt over some vintage 1990s bicycle shorts complete with a green neon stripe down the side. The baseball hat that I’d had for ten years, had a huge sweat stain below the logo for the Brankmere Private School. “I’m Max.” He took a bandana from the pocket of his pants and wiped his hands before extending one toward me.

“Daisy,” I replied. It wasn’t my real name, but it might as well have been. Christina refused to call me by my real name, Rose, and after years of cruelty, I had conceded. Christina thought that Daisy was plain and ordinary, more like me, but the joke was on her, I thought that daisies were beautiful and whimsical.

He shook my hand. “Did you just look around and pick the name of a flower?”

I laughed. “If I’d done that, I’d have picked a cuter name - Sunny. Some people call daisies weeds, but my mom always said that a weed is something you don’t want in your garden. I’d love to have a garden filled with them.” He shoved his hands in his pockets. “I don’t know, I think that Daisies are prettier than sunflowers. I would want them in my garden.””

Was he flirting with me? There was no way. He was probably getting my information in case there were reports of any prison breakouts or serial killers in bike shorts on the loose. The compliment fell heavily, like a weighted balloon, it had been so long since anyone had said something positive to me, that I didn't know how to take it. So, I did what felt right – and avoided it.

“What's your name?”

“It's Max. Way less interesting than Daisy.”

“I'll be the judge of that. Is Max short for something?”

His cheeks reddened. “Maximillion.”

I raised my eyebrows. “I was going to guess Maxwell, but that's ten million times cooler.”

He shrugged. “I guess. I never really liked it.”

There was a pause in the conversation. I cleared my throat and pointed to his bike. “I can help you start it. I think that you just need an extra set of hands.” “And you need someone light. My dad always made me do this part.” Before he could refuse, I set my bags down on the ground and stepped on the peg, slinging my leg over the top of the bike.

“Wow,” his voice croaked.

I pretended that I didn't hear him. “Better get pushing.” I hadn't been on a motorcycle in years, but my hands settled onto the throttle and brake lever, in the hot afternoon sun, as though I'd driven one that morning. The vintage motorcycle could be jump-started if the battery was dead.

“Are you holding on?”

“Of course, I'm holding on.” I looked over my shoulder as Max leaned his shoulder into the back of the bike like a

linebacker running into one of those padded things in the movies. “Eeeeeee,” I squealed. It wasn’t a gentle rolling start and my head jerked back with the momentum. Max was strong, and he was fast. The bike engine groaned beneath me and my hair started to blow in the breeze as we really got moving.

Max shouted, “Now.”

I popped the clutch and the motorcycle growled to life. Revving the engine a couple of times, I clicked up/down a few gears and left Max behind in a cloud of dust. “Don’t steal it!” he shouted as I left him in a cloud of dust. There was both laughter and a hint of nervousness in his voice. I could’ve easily driven that bike away and left him in the middle of the field of sunflowers. He wouldn’t have starved to death, there was some bologna in the grocery bag.

I went a little farther down the road than necessary, telling myself that I needed to ensure that the bike wouldn’t stall, but the feeling of the wind in my hair, and the powerful engine between my legs, felt like freedom. When I returned to Max, he had my grocery bags slung over his shoulder – helmet in hand. “I should’ve made you wear this - he held up the helmet. I didn’t know that you were the girl version of Evel Knievel.”

Revving the engine twice, I interrupted his speech about the helmet, set the bike onto the kickstand, and got off. It idled next to us, radiating intense heat into the space between our bodies.

“Don’t turn it off until you can charge that battery.” I took the bag of groceries from his hand and started to walk away.

“Wait. Where are you going?” he asked.

“Home.” I hoped that the sigh was hidden in my words.

“No, you’re not.” He took the grocery bags and put them into one of the metal boxes on the side of the bike and then put the helmet on my head. “No one is walking home in this heat. Not on my watch.”

I wanted to resist, but the idea of another ride on the bike, my arms wrapped around Max’s solid waist, well I couldn’t say no. My feet throbbed as though to remind me that it would be crazy to turn down his offer. “Well...” I kicked at the gravel but was reminded that there was duct tape on the toe of my shoe. I wished that I could hide it behind the other, but that one was also covered in tape. “I suppose you’ll need me if it stalls again.”

“Exactly.”

He had the best smile I’d ever seen - teeth so perfect I wondered if they were veneers – but the best part wasn’t his teeth, or his lips, it was his dimples – deep commas in the side of his cheeks emphasizing the emotion between them. He also had one of those chin dimples, which I usually hated, but on him, just like on Superman, it just worked.

He put the spare helmet on his head and patted the seat. “You want to drive?” His voice was muffled.

I was tempted but shook my head. “I want to see if you can handle this thing.”

“Oh, I can handle anything I put between my legs.”

It felt like it jumped ten billion degrees outside, but that heat was laser-focused on my face – and then Max winked and my cheeks burned hotter than the surface of the sun. Under my bike shorts, my body throbbed against the seat of his motorcycle. Max was hot, cocky, rode a motorcycle, and I was

about to find out if he was hiding a six or an eight-pack under his t-shirt.

DUST BILLOWED behind us as Max tore down the dirt road. He wasn't taking it easy, but he also wasn't being an idiot. He'd managed to find the exhilarating space between total snore-fest and holy shit don't crap your pants speed.

He tapped my leg and slowed the bike, pointing ahead on the road. "There's a corner coming up."

I knew that it was coming. That corner meant the end of my ride. "That's my turn. Take a right." I had to shout so he could hear me over the bike and through the full-face helmet.

Slowing the bike to a complete stop, he looked over his shoulder. "I'm not sure that I can let you get off just yet. The bike is giving me breakdown vibes. He patted the handlebar. What if I'm stranded again and there isn't a pretty girl hiding in the sunflowers ready to pop out and save me?"

"That's a good point." I put my hand on my neck, my thumb brushing the helmet strap as though I was actually pondering his comment.

"Have you been to Keystone Point?"

"I have heard of it, but I've never been there." My stepsister Chloe went to Keystone Point all the time, but I was never invited.

"Seriously?" His eyes studied mine. "It's got a beach with a big sandbar. There are huge parties out there and that's where they hold the regatta. You've never been there?"

It was as though I'd told him that I'd never seen a refrigerator, or been in a car.

"Nope." I shook my head.

He revved the engine. "We're going to fix that right now."

"How far is it?"

"Just around the corner." He pointed to the road, which disappeared into the woods ahead. "Are you in?"

I glanced at the saddlebag beside me. "There's milk in here." I patted it with my hand.

"Is spoiled milk the only reason you'd say no?"

There were a million reasons why I should say no. A billion reasons why I should never have gotten on the back of that bike in the first place. The Breitling watch on Max's wrist and the vintage motorcycle; were dead giveaways - Max was rich. I'd come from that world, and I could spot the heir of a rich family a mile away. I used to be one - and I knew that like oil and water, the two of us wouldn't mix.

The other reason, the vain one, was that the high-end helmet had flattened down my sweaty hair, and I was pretty sure that the natural deodorant I'd been wearing had worn off after I left the grocery store. "I should get the groceries home before they go bad. That's the only reason."

"Awesome." He patted my leg again, but this time he let his hand rest on my thigh. "I'll buy you new fucking milk."

The acceleration caught me off guard and I instinctively tightened my embrace around his waist, my chest pressing into his muscular back, my grip confirming the ab count - yes, it was definitely an eight-pack. And I was riding off into the sunset with its owner.

TWO

MAX

I'D HAD women on the back of my motorcycle before, but none of them knew how to ride like Daisy. Her thighs gripped onto me like a vice – only when needed. She leaned just the perfect amount as I rounded the corners.

It was still hot as balls outside, but as we zipped along the back roads of Windswan the breeze helped to cool me down.

Keystone Point was at the north end of Windswan Lake next to the entrance to the Serpent River. By the time we got there, I knew that the bike's battery would be just fine, although part of me wanted to try starting it with Daisy again. I still couldn't believe my luck, that this beautiful girl had just emerged from the field and knew exactly how to bump start a vintage R9.

For a warm summer evening, Keystone point was surprisingly empty. A bored-looking mom stared at her phone while two kids splashed in the shallow water, bouncing off of a unicorn floatie.

I shut off the bike, then Daisy and I walked to the shore of the lake.

"It's pretty." She put her hands on her hips and surveyed the beach.

“Come on, let’s go in.” I jerked my head toward the lake.

Daisy crossed her arms. “I don’t travel with a bikini.”

I slipped off the Blundstone boots that I used for riding my bike and rolled up the bottom of my pants. “That’s the beauty of Keystone. It’s shallow for miles. You’d get tired, or bored, or turn ninety before you get in up to your knees.” I jogged into the lake about twenty steps and turned. “See,” I shouted. The water barely lapped above my ankles.

Daisy sat on the shoreline as she took off her shoes and rolled up her pants before stepping in to join me. “It’s so warm.” The water glistened in the rays of the late afternoon light. She swept her long braid over her shoulder and adjusted her well-worn baseball cap. She was the most interesting woman I’d met in years. She was wearing a hat from one of the most exclusive private schools in the state, Brankmere, yet her shoes were covered in tape and she was walking with heavy bags of groceries.

“Where did you get that hat?” I asked as she reached me, our legs ankle-deep in Windswan Lake.

She furrowed her brow and touched her fingertips to the brim, and I saw that her nails were unpainted and very short.

“This?” she hesitated. “I’m not sure where it came from. Maybe my stepmom got it from the thrift store or something. I don’t even know what Brankmere Hall is.”

We kept walking. “It’s a private school.” I felt like a jerk for some reason. “Upstate. I went to its brother school across the lake.” Then I realized that the hat didn’t say Brankmere Hall on it, it was just the school crest. It was strange that she didn’t know anything about the hat, yet knew the meaning of its crest. “Where did you go to school?”

Daisy sighed. “Here and there. My stepmom doesn’t like to stay in one place for a long time. It took me a little longer to graduate because of it. I kept missing out on credits and stuff. I’m saving up to go to college. That’s my plan.”

She was younger than I realized. I had graduated college years earlier and had been working at my dad’s corporation ever since.

“Are you in college?” she asked. We strode toward the setting sun side by side, the ease of our motorcycle moment slipping as we attempted to engage in small talk.

Wondering if she was a mind reader, I took two steps, trying to figure out how to tell her I was in my thirties. “I finished college a couple of years ago...” It wasn’t exactly a lie, or was it? Was a couple specifically two? I didn’t know, I wasn’t an English major. “I work in the city. I’m in marketing.”

“Do you like it?”

We stopped, the water swirling around our calves, inching closer to our kneecaps as the waves from the wake of a boat rolled past us before hitting the rocky shoreline.

If I was on a date with a socialite, or any other random chick, I would’ve gone into great detail about the importance of my job, and how I wasn’t just in marketing, I was the goddamn president of the marketing department for one of the biggest companies in the oil industry. “I hate it.” The words came out of my mouth before my brain registered that they had been let loose. I followed up with a self-deprecating laugh. “I mean, it’s a great job, and the company is top-notch, it’s just...”

“Not for you?”

“It’s not for me,” I agreed.

“What would you rather be doing?” Daisy bent to tug the thick roll of her pants up higher on her thigh.

“I’d rather be racing cars or motorcycles. Or even just working in the pit on the circuit. I love being around the action, the adrenaline....”

“The smell,” Daisy added. “I know exactly what you’re talking about. So why don’t you do that? I’m sure you could get a job with one of the teams, even if you had to start at the bottom.”

“I’ve never told anyone that.” I shoved my hands into my pockets. “I don’t think that my dad would go for it.”

She raised her eyebrows above her thick sunglasses, the mirrored surface reflecting the sparkles from the water. “Your father? Why wouldn’t he be supportive, if that’s your dream?”

I didn’t want to get into family politics, or how I was slated to take over the North American operations in the next five years when my father, Laird Starling retired. “He’s just a typical dad.” He wasn’t. “They worry about my future and want me to make smart choices.” He wasn’t concerned about my future – so long as I followed in the family dynasty.

A sailboat bobbed in the distance, its sail fluttering and snapping as it caught a puff of wind. “What about you? I asked before she could interrogate me any further. There was something special about Daisy, but I had this weird feeling that once she found out who I was, she wouldn’t want anything to do with me.

“I’d like to study environmental engineering.”

Yep. She definitely wouldn’t want to have anything to do with me. “Wow. That’s pretty impressive.” The only

environmental engineers I'd ever met had been complete assholes, but then again, we were the bad guys in the whole thing. They definitely weren't pretty young girls with a Rapunzel-like braid, skilled with motorcycles.

"I guess. I have a partial scholarship, and they've agreed to honor it for five years until I can come up with the funds for the rest of the tuition."

I could probably pay for her tuition with the money that was sitting in my spending account. My chest constricted with guilt. "Here I am complaining about wanting to ride motorcycles. I feel like an asshole."

She laughed. "You are an asshole. But only because you're not following your dream."

I inhaled. "You're right." My cock twitched in my jeans. This headstrong girl with the long braid got it. "Are you close to having your tuition money?"

"I've been working on it for three years, so I have two years left before the scholarship elapses."

I did a bit of quick math in my head. She graduated high school late, what did that mean – nineteen or twenty? She has spent three years saving up money for tuition, did that make her twenty-two or twenty-three? "Do you work in town?" I continued my roundabout investigation.

We had reached our knees. At the shoreline we'd been about three feet apart, that distance had closed and the heat from her arm radiated against mine. "I..." her voice cracked. "I do. I've got a couple of jobs truthfully."

A gust of wind sent ripples racing across the bay. Daisy shivered and I slipped my arm over her shoulders and pulled her close to me. Goosebumps pricked on my arms too and I

rubbed hers vigorously. “That breeze is coming from the north. It means that the weather is changing.”

She turned to face me and I wrapped both of my arms around her. “I’m only doing this to keep you warm.” I could explain away the hug, but what I couldn’t explain was the raging hard-on pressing into the buttons on her shirt.

Her lips drew into a smile, dimples denting her cheeks below a scattering of freckles. How had I not noticed them? I wanted to pull off her sunglasses, not to see what she looked like, but to see who she was. I was a firm believer that the eyes always told the truth and from behind the mirrored lenses, I couldn’t be sure what she was thinking. Until she reached to wrap her arms around me, threading her fingers behind my neck. “Well, Max. I should probably tell you that I’m freezing.” She pressed her body into mine and a surge of heat ripped through my body. My cock went from a semi to a rager as she pressed her chest into mine. Her nipples pricked through the cotton of her tank top. I released one of my hands to cup her perfectly sized breast. “You seem to be on the verge of hypothermia, according to this thermometer.”

She took my other hand from her waist and pressed it to her free breast. “What about this one? Does this thermometer match the findings of the first one?”

“Your science background is showing.” I brushed my thumb across her puckered nipple. HmMMM. Let me see.”

She inhaled sharply. “I think that I might need to get a more accurate reading. My voice had dropped low and growly. Daisy had lit something inside of me, and now that it was burning, I wasn’t sure it could be extinguished. I slipped my hand underneath her tank top. This time my breath was taken

away as my fingertips met her bare skin. She wasn't wearing a bra.

"I can confirm that it is indeed, chilly outside."

Daisy laughed. It was quiet and soft, and fucking beautiful. She stood on her toes and then her mouth was on mine. I squeezed her breast and wrapped my arms around her back, rubbing it in slow circles as we kissed. I had never had a set of sweeter, softer lips on mine than hers. I drew one hand to cup her jaw, pausing to look into her eyes, but I was met with my own – staring back at me from the surface of her sunglasses. I hadn't imagined the tension that had been simmering between us since she swung her leg over the top of my motorcycle.

"Let me see your eyes," I whispered, touching the arm of her aviators.

A woman's voice screeched before I could take them off. "Help!"

Daisy and I jumped apart and whipped to face the shore. The mom was gesturing wildly, pointing to the far end of the bay. The unicorn floaty was bobbing in the choppy water where the sheltered bay met open water. She was running and screaming, but we were closer. "Oh, my God," Daisy gasped.

We both sprinted down the bay. The splashing from our strides became muted as we made it into the deeper water. The kids were jumping up and down on the float and didn't seem worried that another gust of wind could send them across the lake.

"Stay here," I ordered. "I'll get them and bring them in."

I didn't wait for her to object and I didn't stop to take off my shirt. I dove into the water and took two full strokes before emerging. "Wait there," I yelled and started an aggressive

front crawl. I didn't want Daisy swimming in her clothes and knew that I could be at the unicorn in seconds. Growing up I had won the regatta swim every single year. My pace was aggressive. My jeans slowed me down, but not much.

When I reached the unicorn, I turned to ensure that Daisy hadn't followed me. She hadn't, but she had waded deeper and was standing with her hands on her hips.

"Hi, kiddos." I hooked my arm around the neck of the unicorn. "Is there room for one more?" I tried to play it cool, I didn't want them to freak out. They were smiling and seemed to be enjoying their unaccompanied cruise.

"No way." The older one jumped up and down. Both were wearing those foamy water-wing things.

I turned and waved to Daisy and the mom, who was standing with her hands clutched in front of her. "I've got them."

"Are you two ready for this unicorn to get a motor?" I said in a goofy voice, hoping that they couldn't hear the tremble. They had been in a bad situation, and I didn't want to imagine what would've happened if they'd made it out into the open water. They probably would've been fine, someone in a boat would've rescued them, but that would've been traumatic. I still had the chance to rescue them, without scaring the crap out of them.

"What kind of motor?" The younger one's teeth were chattering.

"The fast kind." I made a roaring sound and hauled myself up onto the rear end of the unicorn, kicking my feet wildly, creating a bigger splash than was necessary. We were heading for shore and the kids squealed and laughed. "This is fun." The

older one stood and held onto the unicorn's mane. I stopped kicking. "The motor only works when everyone is seated." Both boys nodded and sat, crossing their legs.

When we reached the shore, the mother rushed to the unicorn, her arms extended, but the kids bypassed her and ran to the blanket, pushing each other and arguing over what bag of potato chips they were going to open.

"Thank you." The mom shook her head as the two boys squabbled in the background. "I should've been more careful, I should've been..." There was a tremble in her voice. I wrapped my arm over her shoulder and squeezed her tightly.

"They're fine. As far as they know, they just went for an awesome ride. Things happen quickly though, maybe next time tie that unicorn to shore."

She nodded, her eyes welling with tears.

"Mom. Stevie won't share the Doritos." One of the kids screamed, he was standing and crying while pointing at his brother.

The mom's shoulder relaxed beneath my arm. "I should go. Thank you again."

"No problem." I laughed. "It looks like you're about to have to step in to stop a Dorito battle."

"It never ends." She jogged away.

Daisy stepped to my side. "Those two are fighting like cats and dogs – over chips."

"It's obvious you don't have a brother or sister." I laughed. "I fought with my sister Jessica over anything and everything. We still scrap to this day. My sister was a wild child and got away with everything."

The screams of the two kids escalated and the mom packed up the blanket and beach bag and the three of them headed to the parking lot. “Jessica would’ve dumped that entire bag of Cool Ranch on my head.”

Daisy’s smile seemed sad. “It must have been nice growing up with a sibling.”

“So, you are an only child.” My observations about her were proving to be accurate. Anyone who grew up with a sibling knows that fighting over snacks is pretty much a requirement.

“Kind of. Growing up I was an only child, but now I have a stepsister.” Her tone told me that her relationship with her stepsister was not necessarily a loving one.

“Is she evil?” I was trying to lift the heaviness in her voice, but she glanced to the ground, digging her feet into the sand. “Yeah. I mean, she’s not a psychopath, at least not officially...” she pressed her lips together, “I mean she’s never liked me, and I’ve never liked her. That’s all there is to it.”

“I’m sorry to hear that.” I reached to her hand and rubbed her fingertip.

“Don’t be sorry.” She withdrew her hand from mine and tucked a loose strand into her braid. “It is what it is, and I only have to put up with her until I go to college.”

Something told me that there was a lot more to that story, and that same gut feeling told me to stop asking questions about it.

“That was great, what you did out there.” She pointed to the lake. “Those kids could’ve ended up at the Stone Oven.” The pizza place was at the other end of the lake.

“Then they could’ve fought over pizza toppings.” I clapped my hands together.

“No, I’m serious.” Daisy put her hands on her hips and I realized that her shirt was soaked. “You saved them.”

It was my turn to kick at the sand. “Anyone would’ve done the same thing.”

She sighed. “I don’t think so. Most people would’ve pulled out their cell phones and filmed, rather than jumping into action like that.”

The mom gave a friendly double honk of her horn as she left the parking lot. “I’d like to think more of humanity than that.”

Daisy shrugged. “Maybe I’m jaded.”

“You stopped to help me. I stopped to help them. I think that for our sample size, we’re doing just fine.”

She smiled. “You’re going to have to ride home in wet jeans now.” She hooked her finger into the belt loop and let it rest there.

“You’re soaked too.” I put my hand on her waist.

We were alone and my horny dude mind went to all the things that Daisy and I could do in and out of the water, or on the beach, or the rocky outcropping, or against my motorcycle. The pressure from the button fly on my jeans intensified, and I was horny as hell, but I also wanted to sit down and watch the sunset with her, my arm over her shoulder, with her head on mine. I wanted to hear more about her bitchy stepsister, and why she wanted to be an environmental engineer. I wanted both Daisy’s body and her mind, something that hadn’t happened to me in years.

She was smart, beautiful, and while a touch jaded, had an optimistic and dreamy way of looking at life. They say that you should surround yourself with positive people who can lift you up in life, and while Daisy might have had holes in her shoes, and a thrift-store hat on her head, something told me that she'd make my life better.

I bent my head to kiss her and the world disappeared. The boat engine droning in the distance became muted, and the blood pumping through my veins whooshed in my ears. My dick, which was already rock hard, throbbed even more. "We should get you out of these pants," I whispered.

"I was thinking the same thing."

THREE

DAISY

I DIDN'T FEEL shy undressing in front of Max, but I was embarrassed. My underwear, red boy shorts with a white elastic band were faded to pink in spots and the band had detached at the side.

Max, on the other hand, was wearing frigging silk boxer shorts. He kissed me like I was a delicacy that he wanted to devour and savor at the same time. The savoring was driving me crazy. All I wanted was to feel him inside of me. I'd never had a one-night stand, let alone fantasized about taking the cock of the man I'd just met inside my mouth.

He was...effortless, that was the only way I could describe him. Confident, yet caring, Confident, yet cocky, confident, confident, confident. And it was hot as hell.

Our clothes were arranged next to each other, as though the two of us had been suntanning on the rock and our clothes dried from the sun. A rope swing swung lazily in the breeze above us as we lay stretched out there. Max bent to straighten out my tank top. "They look good together." He put his hand on his chin and nodded.

My well-worn knock-off Lululemon's and grocery store tank top somehow didn't look out of place next to Max's jeans and designer t-shirt.

“Max.” I rested my hand on his lower back. “I want you to know that I’ve never done this before.”

He turned to look at me. “Done what?”

“What I think we’re about to do.”

He grabbed my hand. “Swing into the lake?”

“What?” I squawked. He dragged me to the rope. “Hold on.”

I gripped the rope above my head and Max’s hands held on to the space above mine. “Are you ready?”

“How deep is it there?” I was stalling. The drop from the top of the rock had to be at least fifteen feet.

Max wrapped one arm around my waist, lifting me off the ground. “Deep enough.”

I held on tightly as he ran to the edge, where the rock was replaced with nothing but air. We spun down to the water and then arced up into the sky. “Let go,” he whispered in my ear.

“Don’t let go of me.” It was scarier than I’d expected.

“I won’t let go,” he whispered, “But you have to.”

I obeyed and the two of us plummeted to the surface of the water. Darkness and bubbles surrounded us as we sank into the water. It was cold and deep and at least ten degrees cooler than the shallow part of the bay. But, true to his word, Max didn’t let go. His strong legs kicked, propelling us to the surface. Once I gulped in a breath of air, I couldn’t stop giggling. “That was...incredible.” I managed to get the words out.

Our feet kicked in unison, keeping our heads above water. “I told you I wouldn’t let go.” He squeezed me as though to

amplify his point. “Daisy, I’ve had the most incredible and unexpected afternoon with you.”

His body was warm against mine and I felt completely buoyant in his arms. Mine were wrapped around his neck and he was doing most of the work keeping us from slipping beneath the surface of Windswan Lake.

“Me too, Max.” I realized that Christina was going to be home and probably freaking out that the groceries weren’t there. “I wish that it could last forever.”

His dimples were back. “Who says that it has to end?”

The idea that I could see Max again, or maybe even regularly was more ridiculous than he could have imagined. I worked eighty hours a week, and over half of the money went to paying for the shitty trailer, and last month Christina made me pay for Chloe’s first Botox. When things were good, I was allowed to keep my own money, but when they were bad, and they were pretty much the worst they’d ever been, I had to support the family. There was no way that I could go off dating when I needed to be making money for us to survive.

He didn’t know my situation, and he couldn’t possibly understand it. This day was perfect. I already knew that it was going to be cemented in my mind as one of the best days of my life, and I was going to make the most of it. “It doesn’t have to end yet.”

I slipped my hand from around his neck and slid it down his chest, the heel of my hand bumping down his abs until my fingertips met with the top of his boxers. His breath hitched, hot on my ear as I pushed my hand between the silk and his skin. His cock was bigger than I expected, and my fingertips brushed against the tip almost immediately. Wrapping my

fingers around his girth, my pulse throbbed in between my legs. My body ached for his.

My chin met the surface of the water. “Max, we’re sinking,” I whispered, not releasing him from my grip.

“I can’t concentrate on anything with your hand on my cock.” His laugh was strained. “You better let go before we drown.”

I wrapped my legs around his waist and released his manhood, replacing my hand with the part of me that wanted him most.

He let out a groan. “That’s worse.” Wrapping his arms around me he pulled me under the water. I instinctively released my legs. A sunbeam penetrated through the water and I could see Max’s face as clearly as though we were still on the rock. Air bubbles clung to his eyelashes as he blinked under the water. We stayed suspended below the surface, blinking at each other, and then Max pressed his lips to mine and kicked us to the surface.

My last boyfriend had given up when I couldn’t take time off work to spend it with him. Before him, it was the same story. In the experience department, I might as well have been a virgin. Max’s desire was palpable, and that day I learned that there was a wild woman inside of me, one that could be brought to the brink of orgasm by the warmth of a dick pressed against the cotton of her panties. If he could do that to me through clothes, what would happen when we took them off?

We swam to shore and draped our bodies on the rock like we were seals. Our chests rose and fell from the exertion of the swim and we laced our fingers together as we baked on the rock. “What are your plans this week?” he asked.

The question was innocent, but it reminded me that there was life outside Keystone Point. “I have a job interview.”

“For another job? I thought that you already had a couple.” He squeezed my hand. “You shouldn’t have to work so hard. You should spend more time enjoying...this.” He gestured to the lake with his foot.

I had to work hard to free myself from Christina. I tamped down the anger that I felt at his comment – he had no idea. It must be nice to be able to spend your free time frolicking in the lake and catapulting off rope swings, but that wasn’t my life.

“I like to work.” It wasn’t exactly a lie. It got me away from the house, and each dollar I stuffed into the sticky top drawer of my dresser was one dollar closer to freedom. Christina was in charge of my money until I turned twenty-five, which was two years away, and I knew that she was doing everything she could to stop me from getting any of it – ever.

He turned on his side and cupped my face. “You have no idea how sexy you are. do you?”

I had no idea how to answer that. Spending every waking second working didn’t leave much time for dating, haircuts, or buying cute clothes. Sexy was the farthest thing away from what I felt most days. Before I could answer he kissed me. When he drew back, he brushed my hair behind my ear. “That was a stupid thing to say, wasn’t it?” he whispered.

Laying back on the rock I slung my arm over my eyes. “If it wasn’t true, then yes – it sounds like a pickup line from a cheesy movie. There are a lot of words I would have used to describe myself, but sexy definitely isn’t one of them. Until today...” My forearm, which was draped over my eyes sopped

up the surprised tears that had sprung up. I hoped that the tremble in my voice hadn't betrayed me.

There was a rustling beside me and then I felt the warmth of Max's thighs – he was straddling me. “Keep your eyes covered.” His breath was hot on my ear.

“What?” I drew my arm away, but he gently returned it, the light of day disappearing behind my skin.

“Keep it there.” He spoke into my jawbone as he kissed along it, pausing at my lips before continuing to the opposite ear. A tingle followed, a rush of warmth surging from my chin down my torso, my body arcing like a bow beneath his thighs.

My voice was breathy. “That feels incredible.”

“Oh, Daisy. You just wait,” he growled in my ear. His lips traveled down my throat and he traced their path with his fingertips. Even though it was still likely ninety degrees outside, goosebumps followed his fingers.

Each of my nipples had a turn in the warmth between his lips before he continued down, his breath heating the space between my ribcage. My nipples, wet from his mouth, puckered as they were exposed to the breeze that whipped across the lake. My body had gone into a hypersensitive mode, without the sense of sight, my sense of touch seemed to be amplified – by like a billion. My entire body was coiled tightly, a bunch of nerves being teased with two lips and a fingertip. “Oh, Max.” I couldn't help but writhe beneath him. I was more turned on than I'd ever been in my entire life, with a man I hardly knew.

I had the feeling I knew where his lips and their journey was going to end, but when he slid down my ratty old panties, it was still a surprise. If I was turned on to a ten before, the

moment his breath tickled between my legs I was bolted to an eleven, or who was I kidding, I was wet and writhing and at about a thirty. I needed Max to touch me more desperately than I had needed the air when we kissed below the surface of Windswan Lake.

But his breath was all he gave me, bypassing my thrumming wetness for my inner thighs, nipping at the tender skin. My breath hitched with the slight sear of pain his bites left behind. I was a goner. I was on the brink of an orgasm and he'd barely touched me.

“Max.” I tapped his shoulder with my free hand. “Kiss me.” I couldn't take one more second of his teasing, I needed a break before I broke.

“You bet, pretty girl.” His voice was still low and growly.

I exhaled, waiting to feel his mouth on mine, my body had relaxed and I felt like my breathing was on its way to its regular pace.

It didn't last long. His mouth didn't meet mine, it met the part of me that had yearned for his touch so intensely, that when it was given, my entire body bucked. The warmth of his mouth as he slowly sucked had pushed me to the brink, but when he added his thick finger to the mix, first one, then two, that was it. “Oh...my...god.” I could barely get the words out as the warmth radiated from between my legs to the crown of my head. My orgasm wasn't a wave lapping across my body, it was a goddamn tidal wave, one that surged to the brink of every point in my body, my fingertips, my toes,

EVEN MY EARLOBES tingled with the rolling sensation. My body writhed and bucked a final time as the last surge rocked

me.

Max kissed each of my thighs once again. I was so sensitive that when his breath passed over my sex, I winced. “Sensitive,” I whispered. “Can I look now?”

“Sure. But I’m not quite done with you.” I blinked, the sun was behind a puffy cloud, but my vision was still spotted with sparkles. I propped myself up with my elbows and watched as Max followed his original route back to my face until his crystal blue eyes met mine.

He smiled and kissed me. “I like your birthmark.”

Growing up, the red splotch of skin on my inner thigh had embarrassed me. “What do you think it looks like?” I asked. I’d spent enough time looking in the mirror at the oblong mark with the jagged points, trying to turn it into something cute.

“An orca.” He didn’t even hesitate.

“That’s what I think too.”

He shifted so he was sitting upright and traced the lines of the birthmark. “The dorsal fin is too big to be a shark, and this looks like a rudder, not a fin. Although having a shark guard your vag would be pretty cool too.”

I hacked out a laugh. “Did you just say vag?”

“Guilty. I’m a dude, remember?” He held up his hands. “What do you want me to call her?” He rested his hand on my bush.

I shrugged. “I don’t know, but let’s strike vag from the shortlist.”

His boxers were tented out with such intensity I wondered if they were going to split. I traced his cock with my fingertip. “Do you have a name for this?”

“Every guy does..” he laughed. “But I’ll let you pick one out for him.”

“I think I’ll have to meet him first, get to know him, and see what kind of personality he’s got.” I tucked my fingers into the waistband of his boxers. Max looked down at me through his eyelashes.

“Shit,” he muttered and hopped off me.

A car had come into the parking lot. “Can they see us?” I was ten feet from my almost dry clothes – topless with my panties around my knees. Arching my back, I pulled them back into place – noticing that the waistband had ripped a little bit more.

Max grabbed my shirt and leggings and handed them to me before picking up his own set of clothes. I shimmied into my leggings and tank top. Max pulled on his jeans and the two of us walked to where we’d left our shoes. Wordlessly, we made our way to the motorcycle, an unspoken decision between the two of us that it was time to leave the point.

“Here’s the test.” Max held his breath as he used the kickstart. We both breathed out as the bike’s engine purred to life.

I couldn’t help but clap my hands together like a little kid.

Max grinned and wrapped his arm around my waist, pulling me in close. “Can I see you next weekend?”

Right. Max didn’t live in Windswan, he lived in the city. He likely wouldn’t even spend any time at his cottage once the cool breezes of September swept across the valley.

We lingered next to the growling machine while it warmed up. “I’d like that.”

He pulled out his phone. “What’s your number?”

My cheeks burned. “I don’t have a phone.”

His eyebrows knitted with disbelief. “Really?”

“I mean, it fell in the lake and I need to get a new one.”

He nodded. “I lost three last summer. What’s your number though?”

I kicked at the gravel next to the bike. Lying didn’t come naturally to me. “I don’t know it.”

This time his brow furrowed with a different kind of disbelief. “How am I going to find you?”

“Give me your number. When I get my phone, I’ll text you.”

He patted his pants. “I don’t think that I have a pen or paper.”

“I’ve got a good memory.” I tapped my temple. “I can remember it.” As soon as the words left my mouth I realized that I’d contradicted myself. How could I not know my number, but remember a completely new one?

If he picked up on the inconsistency, he didn’t let it show and rattled off the number, starting with the area code for the city. When I repeated it after him, his dimples dented a little deeper into his cheeks. “Come on, let’s get out of here.”

The group of girls that had arrived at the beach had set up chairs next to a blue cooler. Taylor Swift echoed from the wireless speaker that sat on top of it. As I put on the helmet, *Cruel Summer* faded a little into the padding. I held onto Max tighter than was necessary and my heart pounded like a hummingbird’s when he put his hand on my leg.

I couldn't imagine a more perfect guy than Max. He liked me even though my shoes had holes in them, but the truth of my reality was way worse than ratty sneakers. We were from two separate worlds, and I wasn't going to pretend that I could be a part of his. It truly was a cruel summer, and I needed to stop what we had started before it had the chance to hurt me.

I rested the forehead of my helmet on the space between his shoulder blades, shifting as he maneuvered the motorcycle toward Sunflower Lane. Shutting this down now would be better for both of us. I blinked away my tears and squeezed him a little tighter.

"Where's your turn?" he shouted over his shoulder.

Instead of directing him down the rutted road with no name, I pointed to the one on the other side. "That way."

The small subdivision was made of wartime bungalows and I picked one with geraniums in the window baskets and a red front door. "That's my place."

We came to a stop and I hopped off the bike and put the helmet in the saddlebag. Max lifted the visor to his helmet. "Let me walk you to your door."

I stopped him before he could shut off the bike. "That's not necessary."

"What's my number?" he gave me a crooked grin and raised his eyebrows.

I repeated the number, one that I knew I would never forget, and then gave him a peck on the lips. I walked backward for a couple of steps, waved, and then put a little skip in my step as I walked up to the house, holding my breath, praying that whoever owned it wasn't going to open the door and give me and my lie away.

Thankfully, the door remained closed. I held my breath, rested my hand on the brass knob, and turned to give Max another wave.

Satisfied that I had made it home, he waved, revved the engine, and then drove away – and out of my life forever. I waited until the sound of his bike disappeared before walking away from my fake house.

I knew it was the right decision. Max was a good guy. He deserved someone better than a broke maid with an utterly dysfunctional family.

FOUR

MAX

BY THE TIME I reached the landing where I kept my boat, the sun had almost dipped behind the jagged silhouette of Sugar Peak, the largest of the mountains surrounding Windswan Lake. The lake was flat as glass, mirroring the contentment I felt throughout my body. However, it had taken the entire drive for the adrenaline to wear down from the excitement of the afternoon with Daisy.

She had been a bit weird when I dropped her off, but I brushed it off. Nothing about our day had been normal. I had gone out for a quick ride, and she had been walking home from the supermarket. Her groceries. Sure enough, the saddlebags were still bulging with Daisy's bags of food. Food that had likely spoiled. I checked my watch and knew that I could make it into town and to the store if I went right away – and fast.

Leaving a circular burn-out in the dirt parking lot, the u-turn executed, I cranked the throttle and raced into town - pulling into the supermarket parking lot with ten minutes to spare. A quick assessment of Daisy's groceries and one quick trip later, I'd replaced any of the stuff that was already spoiled or in any way suspect.

Trying not to let the phone thing bother me, I retraced our turns and pulled into the driveway of the little white house with the red flowers. A light was on in the front room and I could see someone with white hair reading a book. We hadn't talked about our families in any depth. I chuckled to myself as I thought about the other things we'd done instead. It looked like she lived with a grandparent.

With the plastic bag in my hand, I used the brass door-knocker and rapped three times.

It took a minute, but the door cracked open and a little old woman with round glasses like Mrs. Claus answered. "Can I help you?"

I held the bag of groceries out in front of me. "Daisy forgot this."

"What's that?" the woman cupped her ear.

"Your groceries. I told Daisy I would bring you some milk."

"Oh, I don't drink milk," the woman shouted. "It gives me diarrhea."

I remembered when Grandpa Starling had started to lose his hearing and tried to enunciate my words strongly for Daisy's grandma. "Daisy bought these. I'm just delivering them." Worried that the frail woman would crumple if I placed the heavy bag of food in her hand, I held it open so that she could see what was in the bag.

"Did you say that you brought me daisies?"

My heart sank. Maybe it was hearing mixed with dementia. "No, your granddaughter," I took a guess, "Daisy, she bought these. I'm delivering them."

The woman folded her gnarled hands together. “I’m sorry son. I think that you have the wrong house. I don’t have a daughter, let alone a granddaughter named Daisy.”

I inhaled and took a step back. As much as I hated to admit it, at that moment, I hoped that the old lady had dementia and that Daisy was going to bound down the stairs, kiss her grandma’s wrinkled cheek, and take the groceries from my hand.

“Are you sure?”

“I’m pretty sure I would know if I had a grandchild. I don’t hear well, but I’m not senile...yet. You could try the house across the street. A new family moved in, and they haven’t come by to introduce themselves yet. I was going to bake them a casserole.”

Daisy had waved from the porch. I was one hundred percent certain of it. She lied about her house, and I knew that she had lied about her phone.

But, why?

I cleared my throat. “There might be some good casserole ingredients in here. Would you like to keep this? If not, it will just go to waste.”

The lady took off her glasses and let them hang on the colorful beaded string around her neck. “We can’t let food go to waste. Come in. I’ll get you a cup of Sanka.” She opened the door wide and I stepped into her house. This lady was from both a small town and a different era, one where you invited strangers into your kitchen for instant coffee.

I held up my hand. “I can’t handle caffeine in the evening and I’d like to get going before it gets dark. I’m on a motorcycle.”

“Of course, dear.”

“Let me take this to your kitchen.” As I set the bags on the kitchen table, I took another scan of the main floor of the house. There were plenty of photos, but no sign of Daisy.

She had lied to me. I returned to my bike fueled with both sadness and anger. What kind of game was she playing?

STARLING ISLAND IS the biggest of the cluster of islands on the south side of Windswan Lake. The Starling Estate is located there, hidden amongst the pine trees. It’s a historic stone building overlooking Sandy Bay. My sister and I were each gifted an island on our twenty-first birthdays and while I was quick to build my cottage, my sister decided it was easier for her to squat between my place and dad’s.

When I finally got back to my place, Jessica was sitting around the firepit on the beach with three of her friends.

“Hi, Maxine.” Jessica held up her can of White Claw.

Her stupid nicknames typically didn’t bother me, but I had left deaf Mrs. Claus’ house feeling like a fool. The speed of my bike combined with my anger had whipped me into an asshole frenzy. “What are you doing here? Was Dad’s fridge empty?”

For someone as skinny as a rail, Jessica was notorious for showing up right around dinner time – always empty-handed. “Well, hello to you too.” Jessica shrugged. There was a slight slur to her voice, but even if she was sober, she wouldn’t have given a shit that I was pissed off at her.

I sighed. I wasn’t pissed off at her. I was humiliated.

“Sorry.” I plugged in the lights that were strung around the firepit and sank into one of the empty Adirondack chairs next to one of Jessica’s friends, a girl named Jenny Chen. Or Jenny-Jen-Jen, or Triple J, as Jessica liked to call her.

Triple J took a drag of a joint. “Tough night?” she croaked as she held in the smoke and passed it to me.

I took a hit, a big one, and had to stand to pass it to Jessica. “You okay?” her eyes met mine.

I shrugged. “Yeah. I’m fine.”

She grabbed my arm and pulled me away from the fire and earshot of her gossipy cottage girlfriends. “What’s going on?”

Taking the joint from her, I inhaled deeply, feeling my body finally relax. “I met someone. I thought that she was too good to be true – and it turns out that she was...”

“What? Who? When?” My sister started to rapid-fire questions at me.

I held up my hands like I was in a stick-up, “Easy there, kitten. You’re hitting me with the five w’s.”

She smiled. “Inquiring minds want to know.”

“Are you talking about the *National Enquirer* or your gossip girl circle over there?”

She smiled. “We might be able to give you some good advice.”

I cast a glance at the girls with the pile of vodka and soda cans in between them. I had no idea what was going on in Daisy’s head, but maybe Jessica was right, maybe a group of tipsy girls could translate what had happened with Daisy because I sure as hell didn’t understand it. Maybe these

women could help me translate her actions into something that made sense.

“I met this woman today.” I hadn’t even gotten the word woman out of my mouth when the trio of girls snapped to attention.

“Who?” Jenny asked.

“Where?” Ramona said.

“What’s her name?” Amanda was the last one to add to the interrogation.

Sinking back into the chair I accepted a White Claw from Jessica and cracked it open. “Her name is Daisy.”

Roman rolled her eyes. “What kind of a name is that? I’ve already decided that we don’t like her.”

“Easy.” I took a sip of my drink. “She’s smart, pretty, and knows all about—”

Ramona interrupted. “Where did you meet this smart and pretty Daisy?”

I chuckled, knowing that the next sentence out of my mouth would send the girls into a full-on tizzy. “The side of the road.”

I was right. Their screams of laughter echoed across the lake. Amanda’s was practically a screech.

When a loon called back after their outburst, they lost it again.

“You sound like a bunch of horny loons.” I shook my head.

Jenny’s eyes were watering. “You’ve got to be making this up. You met a girl named Daisy on the side of the road. Have

you seen *Pretty Woman*, Max?”

“Oh. my God..” I groaned. “Not like that, and I’m pretty sure that there aren’t hookers in Windswan.”

Jessica smacked my arm. “Sex workers, Max. That’s what they’re called.”

“Or escorts.” Ramona held up her drink. “I know that there are a few of those in town. I’ve heard rumors about some of the good old boys at the club and their pretty ‘dates’ for the golf fundraiser.” She made quotation marks with her fingers.

“She was walking home from the grocery store. My motorcycle was broken down on the side of the road. She helped me start it.” The crackle of the wood in the firepit was the loudest sound in the air. Jess’s friends were all staring at me with the intensity of a bunch of dudes watching a shootout in a hockey game.

“And...” Jenny prodded.

My cheeks burned and it wasn’t from the extra log Jess had just added to the pit. “We kind of hit it off. She seemed different than all of the other girls.”

Ramona rolled her eyes. “Sure. So different.”

My stomach clenched. “Yes. Different. She knew all about my motorcycle.” I realized that sounded dumb, so I continued. “She seemed smart, tough, sweet, and...” my voice faded. She was all of those things, but she was also something else – dishonest – a trait that almost all of my ex-girlfriends had also possessed.

“So she was a cool girl.” Jess filled the silence. “What happened next?”

“We went for a ride. She’s used to motorcycles, she was the perfect passenger.” The sensation of her arms around my waist and her thighs squeezing mine lingered, as though she was still there, the heat from her legs lingering on mine. I rubbed the thighs of my jeans, my hands sweating as I recounted my afternoon with Daisy. If that was even her real name.

“Stop.” Jenny held up her hand. “Before you wax poetic about her balance on two wheels, what did this mysterious Daisy look like?”

“Beautiful.” I shook my head. “In a really understated kind of way.” I wasn’t going to tell the girls about the worn-out shoes, or sweaty thrift store baseball hat. “She has long hair, blonde I think.”

“You think?” Jess laughed.

“It was in a long braid. Under a hat.” With every second that passed, the details started to fade. Her hair was light brown, maybe blonde, but her eyes were definitely blue. That birthmark though. I will never forget the killer whale on her thigh. “It was either blonde or light brown. She was average height, like your height Jess.”

“I’m five foot ten.” Jess crossed her arms across her chest. “I’m far above average.”

Was she as tall as my sister? Dammit. We had spent so much time on the rock, on the bike, suspended in the water, I really couldn’t say whether her eyes met mine when she was standing on the ground. “Okay, maybe she’s a bit shorter than you. Her eyes are blue.” Of that, I was sure.

Jess’s eyes glowed from behind the dancing flames of the campfire. “She’s got light brown or blonde hair, she may or

may not be average or above average height, with blue eyes.” She pointed to her fingers as she rattled off my not-so-specific details. “Where’s her cottage?”

The four women stared at me. “She doesn’t have a cottage on the lake. She lives...” I stopped and took a sip of my drink. I shook the can, it was empty. “I’ll be right back. I have to get another drink.”

Jess opened the cooler next to her. “Not a chance, Maxine.” She tossed me another vodka soda. “We’re all way too invested in this story for you to pull an Irish exit.”

She knew me well. I had planned to slip into the cottage, get in the shower, jerk off, and then go to sleep, hoping to forget about the woman with the orca birthmark. Cracking open the drink, I eased back into the chair. “I don’t know where she lives. That’s where it got weird.”

None of the girls interrupted, but they all leaned in a little closer. “What do you mean weird?” Jess asked.

“We went for a ride on my bike.”

“Yeah, we got that. She ‘rode’ your ‘bike’ well.” Ramona laughed.

I rolled my eyes. “Grow up Moans.” I used her nickname. “We went for a bike ride.” I paused, waiting for another snide comment. When it didn’t come, I continued. “To Keystone Point.”

“Oh, my God.” Jenny rocked back in her chair and squealed with laughter. “You’re a thirty-year-old man and you took her to Make-out Rock?”

I didn’t correct her. I was thirty-one, and coming from Jenny it did sound like a dirty old man thing to do. “Wait.”

Jenny gripped the armrests of the chair and pulled herself to the edge. “How old is she?”

“I think she’s twenty-three or twenty-four.”

Jess narrowed her lips before speaking. “You think? Max...”

“I know.” I held up my hands. “She’s at least twenty-three.”

My sister let out a huge sigh. “You’ve got to be careful. Does she know who you are?”

Jess meant, did she know that I was one of the richest people in the state? “No. The only thing that she knows about me is that I ride a motorcycle and work in marketing in the city for my dad.”

“Are you sure? Max, you know there are women out there dying to sink their claws into you. You’re the talk of the locker room at the tennis club.”

“She’s not like that.” Of that, I was sure. If Daisy was a gold digger or an opportunist, she definitely wouldn’t have pulled the wrong house stunt. “We went to Keystone Point and these little kids got blown away on a float. We rescued them and then went swimming.”

“Uh-huh.” Jess’s eyebrows were raised. Her forehead would’ve been filled with wrinkles if it wasn’t frozen with Botox. “Swimming.” She pumped the already raised brows.

“We talked all afternoon and got to know each other. It was so easy. It felt so right.” I took a sip of my drink. “And yes, we made out a little bit.”

My audience giggled. “Sure. You made out.” Ramona winked. Even though I was furious about Daisy’s deception, I

felt a burn inside me to defend her. “Yeah, we made out. That’s it. I didn’t fuck her.”

“Whoa.” Ramona blinked. “Easy tiger.”

I took a breath. “We had a great time. It was a perfect day, until the end.”

Jess grabbed two pieces of wood from the pile and sparks flew into the sky as she tossed them onto the fire. We all had to stand and shimmy our heavy wooden chairs back from the intense heat that radiated from the pit.

“Spit it out, Max.” Jenny leaned back in her chair and lit a joint. “This is getting boring. Perfect girl, blah, blah, blah.” She took a toke and passed the joint to Ramona.

I was also getting bored of hanging out with my sister’s friends. “I gave her my phone number and we agreed to hang out when I’m up next weekend.”

Ramona made a get-on with it swirl with the hand holding the joint, the ember glowed as it swirled in lazy circles.

“But this was the first weird thing. She said her phone fell in the lake.”

“Happened to me today.” Jenny shrugged.

“Yeah, but do you know your phone number?” I asked.

Jenny furrowed her brow. “Of course. Who doesn’t know their own number?”

“I have three phones.” Jess offered. “I only know one of them.”

I highly doubted that multiple phone numbers was Daisy’s issue. “Well, Daisy didn’t remember her own phone number. But the weird part is,” I sat up as the realization hit me. “She

didn't remember her phone number but had a goddamn photographic memory when it came to mine. I even asked her to recite it when I dropped her off. She got it – bang on.”

“That is weird,” Jess mused. “Pass that this way, Mona.” She snapped her fingers and I took the spliff from Ramona and handed it to my sister.

“You don't want any?” she asked, the smoldering joint between her manicured fingers.

“Nah. I'm good.”

Jess proceeded to take three large inhales and spent the next ten seconds coughing. She pointed at me, the joint still smoking between her fingers. “You're telling me that this bitch doesn't know her own phone number, but remembered yours. Like perfectly.”

“Yeah.” It was totally weird. “I don't know why she'd lie about it.”

“She's got a boyfriend and she doesn't want you calling her,” Jenny offered. “This way she can reach out to you when she feels like it. That's shady as fuck if you ask me.”

The girls were really stoned and Jenny was starting to slur. I wondered how much of this conversation they'd remember. Jenny's theory seemed plausible, in theory. But it didn't fit. “That's not the weirdest part.” I finished my drink and crumpled the can. “I dropped her off at her house. It was a cute little white place in that old subdivision across from the trailer park. Everything was amazing, I was on my way home and then remembered that I'd promised to buy her milk.”

“Wait, what?” Ramona's eyes were red and she squinted at me. “Milk? I'm confused.”

I laughed and shook my head. “I promised to buy her milk if she went for a ride with me. It was ten million degrees this afternoon and if she went with me, hers was guaranteed to go bad. I was halfway home when I realized that she’d forgotten all of her groceries in the saddlebag of my bike. I hauled ass to get to the grocery store and replaced all the dairy that was in her bags.”

Ramona got up out of her chair and teetered over to the cooler. She distributed drinks to everyone, but I declined. I was already feeling buzzed, and unlike the rest of the people at the bonfire, had to get up early to get back to the city. She sat on the edge of her chair. “You went to get milk for her. I’m still trying to wrap my head around this. Where was her car? Why couldn’t she go get her own milk?”

I forgot that I’d left out the part that Daisy had been trudging down the back road on foot. “It doesn’t matter.” I brushed off Ramona’s question. “When I went back to her house, the lady who opened the door had never heard of Daisy.”

“What?” The three girls seemed to momentarily sober up, their eyes were trained on me. “What do you mean she’d never heard of her?”

I was going to have to spell it out for them. “Daisy had me drop her off at the wrong house. She didn’t live there. She doesn’t know her phone number.”

Jess shook her head. “I doubt that her name is even Daisy. It’s sounded suspect since the start.”

I slapped my hands on the arm of the chair and prepared to pull my exhausted and mildly stoned/drunk body from the chair. “That’s the story. I met an awesome girl who I will never see again.” The reality set in and I slid back in the chair.

“Maybe I will have another one of those.” I pointed to the cooler.

“Not so awesome if you ask me.” Jess got up from her chair and handed me a bottle of water. “You’ll thank me tomorrow.” Her eyes were kind as she smiled at me.

“I just don’t understand.” The anger had officially left my body and it had been replaced with something I didn’t like – sadness. I had been looking for a woman like Daisy all my life. I had started to wonder if someone like her existed. Now I had proof that what I wanted was real, and somehow that made it seem worse.

Jess sighed. “Jenny is probably right. Maybe she got wrapped up in the moment and has a boyfriend.”

I shook my head. “I just can’t believe that. It doesn’t feel right.”

“Maybe she’s a fugitive.” Ramona leaned her head against the wooden slats of the chair. “She was going to murder you, but you charmed the knife out of her hand. Consider yourself lucky.”

The smile spread across my face, even though I didn’t want it to. “I didn’t get a serial killer vibe from her either.”

“Ooh. What if she’s in the witness protection program and told you the RIGHT name, now she’s freaking out that the mafia will find her now.”

Ramona’s scenario was the least likely. “Keep them coming, this is making me feel better.” I laughed. I was Max Starling, I could have any woman in the world. Why was I letting a woman with holes in her shoes get to me?

Amanda tapped her lip. “Maybe she lives in the trailer park and was embarrassed. You hooked up with a trashy townie.”

She slapped the arms of her chair and giggled as she drew her knees to her chest.

“That doesn’t feel right either.”

“Did she have all her teeth?” Jenny asked. Her voice was sincere.

I chugged the entire bottle of water. “Alright. I’m done with you ladies.” Standing, I tossed the plastic bottle into the recycling bin. “Yes, she had perfect teeth.”

“Good night, Maxine,” Jess smiled. “Have a safe drive to the city tomorrow.”

“Good night.” I waved. “I hope that the hangover gods are looking over you four tomorrow.”

Leaving the bonfire behind, I headed to the boathouse to get my saddlebags. The waves lapped against the hull of the small boat I used to get back and forth from the island. It sat next to my wakesurfing boat, and the antique boat my dad had given me on my twenty-fifth birthday.

I was able to bypass the bonfire and slipped into the quiet of my cottage. My mudroom had a cubby specifically for my motorcycle gear, and I hung my jacket and kicked off my Blundstones. I emptied the saddlebag and hung my gloves on a hook. There was an unfamiliar jangle in my saddlebags after everything was removed. I shook the bag and wondered if a pebble had found its way in with my stuff.

Running my finger along the seam, I hit a small stone. I pinched it between my fingertips and was about to toss it out the door when it registered with me just how smooth it was. I stepped into the overhead light and rolled the stone around between my fingertips. It was a ruby, about the size of a small BB pellet.

“Where the hell did you come from?” I dropped the stone into the palm of my hand and squeezed it tightly. Unless rubies were falling off cartons of milk in the grocery store, the ruby had to have come from Daisy.

I went into the kitchen and put the ruby in a small bowl and left it on the windowsill above the sink. Chugging a glass of water, I squeezed my eyes tightly and tried to conjure up an image of Daisy. Was she wearing a ring? No. I had watched her hands on the handlebars of my motorcycle and could picture them as though they were in front of me. I had kissed her neck, was there a chain in the way? I wasn't sure that I trusted my memory, all the blood from my brain had been somewhere else at the time. Could there have been a bracelet on her wrists? Maybe.

Fuck. I didn't know. The three things that I could be sure about, were that I'd met a girl who called herself Daisy, she was short one tiny ruby, and I had no way of finding her.

FIVE

DAISY

ONE YEAR *Later*

ALL THROUGH THE cold dark winter, while I scrubbed toilets, cleaned grout, and sprayed mirrors, ten digits ran through my mind on a loop. I even turned Max's phone number into a song with the same tune as 867-5309. By the time the days started getting longer, and the snowbanks had melted, my hands were chapped and raw. The cleaning company provided gloves, but even with that protection, a full day of cleaning with bleach left my hands in rough shape. With all the palatial cottages closed for the winter, I'd had to take a job cleaning at one of the local factories. It was hard work, but as a nighttime gig, it left me time to study. I'd gotten the reading lists for all my engineering courses and was hell-bent on keeping up my research and critical reading skills until the day that I was declared an actual student.

Christina and Chloe didn't get up before dawn – they were focused on their beauty sleep, so they let me take the car to the factory job. Christina hadn't had much luck in the gold digger department over the long cold winter in Windswan. She hadn't considered the fact that all the rich dudes packed up their cottages and the remaining inventory of men in town were

blue-collar workers. Some went to ski chalets in Chance Rapids. I wasn't sure where the rest of them went. Wherever it was, it wasn't Windswan in January. The lakes had frozen over and colorful fish huts dotted the harsh white landscape. But local fishermen and construction workers weren't in Christina or Chloe's target demographic. For the first time since I'd known her, Christina had gotten a job at the land registry office.

It wasn't because we needed extra money, well we did, but her paycheck went directly to her cosmetic injections. Mine took care of the groceries and the rent on the trailer. Christina was a beautiful woman who played up the dumb blonde stereotype. As if the part had been written for her in a movie – but underneath that glassy skin and high-end makeup, she was as devious as they came. The land registry office gave her access to information. Namely, the addresses and property values of every single person in Windswan and the surrounding areas. Information that came in handy to anyone who could be considered a gold digger?

“Have a good day, Anne,” I called to one of the women who worked on the factory bathrooms with me.

“Not much good about it if you ask me,” Anne grumbled.

When I first met her, the grumpy-old-lady attitude really got to me, until I realized that it was her ‘thing’, and I had a theory that she enjoyed being a grouch – so I went with it.

“Have the worst day ever. I hope your car doesn't start,” I grinned.

Anne hacked out a laugh. “That's better, flower girl.”

I pulled on my raincoat and blinked as I stepped out of the big gray building. Now that it was spring, the sun was rising

earlier and earlier, and I no longer had to go to work in the dark and come home in the dark. The pink of the sunrise over the mountains meant that summer was coming – and that Max would likely be back in Windswan.

I started up the car and navigated out of town to Sunflower Lane. I couldn't pass by the spot on the road where Max and I bump started his bike, without thinking of the way he had made me feel that day. The orgasm was incredible, but that man had made me feel something better. He didn't look at me like everyone else did – with pity or indifference. He saw me for who I was, he gave me the gift of being myself for an afternoon, and I wish that I could tell him how much that meant to me.

The car bottomed out as I splashed through a puddle. I gritted my teeth, hoping that I hadn't caused any damage.

“Shit!” I hissed and turned down the radio. I shut off the car and opened the door as slowly as I could, but the hinges still squeaked. With the harshness of the Windswan River behind us, I was planning on moving back into my garden shed bedroom. The light flicked on in the master bedroom, and I hoped that it was a coincidence.

I hung the keys on the nail by the door. changed into my fuzzy leggings and

t-shirt and crawled into my sleeping bag on the sofa, turning my back to the rest of the trailer.

Somewhere deep in my subconscious, I heard the shower shut off and the bathroom door slam. I didn't open my eyes but could feel Christina towering over the top of me. “Hey.” She nudged my ass with what I assumed was her foot.

Ignoring her, I kept my eyes shut.

This time she put her foot on my lower back and jiggled it so hard there was no way I could've fake slept my way through it. Rolling over I squinted into the fluorescent light above her and shaded my eyes with my hand. "What is it?" I didn't have to try to make my voice sound groggy.

"Don't get too comfy, you've got a job interview at ten."

"Ten?" I sat up and looked over Christina's shoulder to the microwave, the only correct clock in the house. It was nine-fifteen. I felt like I'd been asleep for three minutes, not three hours. "But I already have a job."

Christina sat on my feet. I tried to pull them out from under her, but the slippery fabric of the sleeping bag was firmly trapped underneath my stepmom. Christina slammed a print-out of a job description on the coffee table. She patted the paper and pointed to the address with her freshly manicured fingernail. "I knew working at the land registry office would pay off."

She picked up the paper and pressed it onto my chest. "You have to get this job, Daisy."

I took the paper and scanned the job description. "It's a maid job. What's so great about this one?"

"Look at who it's for." Her bright pink lips made her grin look comical.

I returned my attention to the paper. "It's a numbered company. It doesn't pay any more than the factory." Folding the paper, I dropped it on the coffee table and tried to shimmy back down to a sleeping position.

Christina huffed. She jumped to her feet and pulled the bag right off my body. For a small woman who only did pilates

and barre workouts, she was remarkably strong. “That numbered company belongs to Yates Petroleum.

I inhaled, the pieces falling into place. “A corporation has a cottage on Windswan Lake?” I didn’t mind cleaning for rich people, but the idea of cleaning up for a company that needed to clean up their environmental actions made my blood boil.

“Don’t get all high and mighty, Daze.” She shortened my name when she was irritated. The one time I told her that I didn’t like being called Dazed or Dazer was a mistake. Both Christina and Chloe called me Daze often accompanied by an eye roll. “It’s not a corporation. Yates Petroleum is owned by two brothers. One of them lives out east, and one spends his summer – here.” She spread her arms, they spanned half the trailer. “We could get out of this dump. I just need to find a way to get an invitation.”

“An invitation to what?” I was talking back, but this was a new low, even for Christina. She knew how passionate I was about the environment, and I had yet to find a petroleum company whose values leaned even slightly in my direction.

Christina tossed a towel at me. “Get in the shower and stop asking so many questions.”

The thin bedroom door slid open and Chloe padded into the kitchen. “Where’s the coffee?” She pulled out the carafe and held it upside down.

Shit. The clock on the coffee pot was flashing. “It looks like the power went out. The alarm clock didn’t go off.” I got the coffee ready in the evening when I went to work. “We will have to reset the time.”

Chloe slammed the coffee pot on the counter. “Do I have to do everything around here?” She jabbed at the buttons with

the tips of her long pointy nails. The machine beeped at her and Chloe groaned. “Daze. Get over here and fix this.”

I dreamed about the day that I would be able to tell Chloe to fuck off and tell Christina that she was the worst person I’d ever met, but until I had enough money to go out on my own – or was able to get Christina removed as the trustee of my inheritance, I was going to have to bite my lip and just keep working.

Before I could reset the clock, I felt the breeze from the towel as it sailed over my head, hitting Chloe in the face.

“Daisy is getting in the shower. She’s got a job interview. Chloe – figure out the damn coffee time thing yourself.”

For the first time ever, Christina’s anger was directed at her biological daughter, not me. This Yates Petroleum guy must have been a big fish. She’d never snapped at Chloe.

“Mom,” Chloe whined. “I don’t know how to do it.”

“Figure it out,” Christina ordered.

“I don’t have time.” Chloe’s eyes welled with tears. “I have a filler appointment. I can’t be late.”

Christina pushed past me, yanked the towel from Chloe’s shoulder where it hung, and shoved it into my chest – hard enough that I had to take a couple of steps backward. She put the coffee pot in the machine and pushed the start button. “You two are utterly useless.”

Chloe’s eyes were wide. I was used to Christina’s passive aggression, or aggressive aggression, whatever you wanted to call it – I’d grown a thick skin over the years. Golden girl Chloe didn’t have that callousness built up. Even though she was cruel to me, I couldn’t help but feel a glimmer of empathy

for her – she had learned about life from a snake with a hundred-dollar blowout.

After showering, I wiped the steam from the bathroom mirror. I didn't have time to feel sorry for myself or blame my father for not seeing through the plastic surgery and veneers to protect me from Christina. I was not the victim in this story. I stood tall, wound my wet hair into two French braids, and dabbed on a little bit of lip gloss. Over the winter my hair had darkened, the summer highlights had long faded, and now wet, my hair almost looked as dull as the brown and orange shag carpeting in the living room.

“Here's your resume. I updated it.” I had taken one step out of the bathroom and Christina shoved the file folder into my hands. “Don't be late.”

Chloe was sulking by the door, her arms crossed. “I need the car at eleven.” She glared at me as I stepped out of the trailer, skipping the rotted middle stair.

“Go with her.” Christina shoved Chloe. “Daisy. Drop your sister off at her injector's appointment.”

“Mom. I still need to do my makeup.” Chloe stumbled past me, slipping on the mud at the base of the stairs. “Daisy should be done in time to get back to give me the car.”

“This is too important.” Christina stood in the open doorway, the harsh blue lightbulbs casting a sickly green glow around her body. “Chloe. If Daisy gets this job, everything will change for all of us.”

Chloe and I walked to the car in silence. The rusty sedan grumbled to life and Chloe plopped into the passenger seat and pulled down the visor to study her face. “I can't believe Mom is making me go out in public like this.”

Chloe was easily one of the most beautiful people I'd ever seen – on the outside. Her skin was glossy and she always managed to have that 'dewy,' slightly flushed look. She piled her long blond hair up into a messy bun on the top of her head. Before I could put the car in reverse Christina jogged out of the house in her robe and banged on the passenger window.

Chloe's lips narrowed, but she grabbed the crank and wound down the window. She thrust a handful of cash at Chloe. "Do your cheeks too."

"But?" Chloe's fingertips went to her cheekbones. "I was only going to do my lips. What about groceries?"

We both knew that the cash had come from the jar that we kept in the freezer – for groceries and the bills that kept the lights on and the trailer warm in the winter. "We could all stand to lose ten pounds. The owner of Yates has a son. Chloe, one way or another, we are going to get one of the Starling men. It's time for you to start pulling your weight around here."

"I thought it was Yates?"

That's the company name. I'm going to marry Laird Starling or Chloe is going to trap his son."

Christina turned on her heel and the metal door clanged shut behind her. "Are you okay?" I reversed out of the driveway, remembering to swerve around the rain filled pothole beside the rusty blue mailbox. Chloe hadn't stopped looking at herself in the tiny mirror.

"Of course. I'm okay," she snapped and pinched her cheeks. "Mom's right. I could use a little more volume."

"I meant about the trapping the son thing."

Chloe slammed the visor shut. “I don’t have to trap anyone.”

I wondered if Chloe fully comprehended that Christina had ordered her daughter to get pregnant to snag a billionaire’s son. “You don’t have to do...anything.”

“You’re just jealous that you’re not pretty enough to get the kind of man that we can.”

I had made a mistake talking to Chloe like she had a heart. My stepsister had gone into full-on defensive mode. “Shut up and drive. Mom and I will do all the heavy lifting. All you’ve got to do is go mop some floors. Maybe if you cared even a little bit about what you looked like, instead of getting those eleven lines in your forehead from all that reading, you might be able to find someone to get you out of this place too.”

Getting out of this place was exactly why I was getting all those lines from reading. Shaking my head, I decided that arguing with Chloe was like reasoning with a drunk person.

Chloe unbuckled her seatbelt as I pulled up to her esthetician’s office. “I’m sorry.” Her voice was so hard to hear, it was barely above a whisper.

My grip on the steering wheel eased. Every once in a while, Chloe showed signs of having a conscience, but it was never when we were in Christina’s presence. Before she got out, Chloe paused with her hand on the handle. “You could be kind of pretty if you tried a little bit.”

I narrowed my lips and nodded. Her apology came laced with an insult. “I’ll be back here to get you after my interview.”

“Don’t be late.” She got out of the car. “And good luck.”

Was there a good human being inside my stepsister or was she as selfish and evil as her mother?

The map book was dog-eared, but I found the page and traced my finger over the route. I still didn't have a cellphone and had to rely on a ten-year-old map to get around town. Luckily. Windswan hadn't changed much since the map was printed.

Black smoke burped out the tailpipe as I navigated to the marina. Christina had scribbled a name on the paper next to the marina's address – Faye Graham. I wondered where and how I would find this Faye Graham, but that concern was dismissed as soon as I pulled into the driveway of the marina.

A man wearing a golf shirt and khaki pants was standing on the dock holding a sign that read "Housekeeping Interviewees." He looked to be in his forties, with a bit of graying hair at his temples and crinkles beside his eyes. Was this the man that Christina had in her gold-digging crosshairs? Was Laird Starling himself picking me up for a maid interview?

I parked the car, tucked the file folder under my arm, and strode across the parking lot – wishing that I had borrowed a pair of shoes from Chloe – my black Converse All-Stars weren't exactly interview-appropriate.

"Mr. Starling?" I held out my hand.

The man's eyes twinkled as he furrowed his brow, a smile creeping across his face. "No. I'm Trey Laurier. I'll be escorting you across the lake." He shook my hand, which had remained suspended between his. "And you are?"

"Daisy. I'm here for the maid interview."

The smile was back. “We call it cottage keeping over at Starling Estate. I’m head of logistics. Otherwise known as the chauffeur.”

He winked and pointed to the chest of his golf shirt. The name Trey was embroidered on the chest below a bird, a starling,

My cheeks burned. Growing up we’d had a chauffeur, a butler, and a maid – and that’s what we’d called them. “I’m sorry, I thought...” I couldn’t believe that I’d thought that the billionaire himself would be waiting at the dock with a sign.

Trey undid the lines of a modest pontoon boat and opened the gate, gesturing for me to enter. “Don’t be sorry. I’m flattered. That’s quite the compliment.” He started up the engine. “It’s unlikely that you will meet Mr. Starling though – or anyone in the family for that matter. They’re rarely here, although, with the event this summer, they might be around a bit more.”

“Event?” I asked over the sound of the motor, shielding my eyes with my hand as the sun peeked out from behind the cloud cover.

“You really didn’t do your homework, did you?” He had a smile on his face, and I felt at ease in his presence.

“I didn’t.” I shrugged. “All I know is that I’m meeting someone named Faye for my interview for a... cottage keeper.”

He pressed down on the throttle and the tails of my braids flicked in the breeze. The last time I’d been on Windswan Lake, I had been in Windswan Lake – with Max. As we cruised along the shoreline, I wondered which of the cottages belonged to him. Could he be in the boat that was speeding

along the horizon? Or could he be the one wake surfing behind the slow-moving wakeboard boat to our right?

We rounded the point and headed into the open water. “The Starlings are holding a big fundraiser this summer. A fancy shindig.”

“How fancy?” I had to yell to be heard over the motor.

“Ball gowns and tuxedos fancy. What do they call it when you wear a mask?”

I blinked. “A masquerade ball?”

“That’s it.” He snapped his fingers and pointed at me. “Between you and me, Laird isn’t too happy about it – but the head of his charitable organization decided it was the best way to raise a lot of money.”

“Charitable organization?”

Trey slowed the boat to a crawl. “Come, Daisy. Sit next to me.” He patted the seat beside him.

While the waves of Windswan Lake slapped the hulls of the pontoon boat, Trey explained the history of the Starling’s involvement with Yates Petroleum, the setup of the family compound – a main island with the historical cottage, surrounded by smaller islands owned by the Laird’s children. I would be working on Starling Island, along with four other cottage keepers, a kitchen staff with a Michelin star chef, groundskeepers, and one other transportation coordinator like Trey.

“That’s the main cottage.” Trey pointed to the peaks that jutted above the treeline on the island straight ahead. I had grown up in a wealthy home, but it paled in comparison to the expanse of the Starling Estate. As we pulled into one of the ten boat slips next to a private gas pump, I asked Trey the one

question that had been on my mind across the lake – the one question that would make the summer bearable. “What’s the charity?”

I held my breath.

“When Laird took over the western operations, he started up an environmental charity.”

I couldn’t hide my eyebrow raise.

“I know.” He hopped off the boat and tied the lines. “Believe it or not, this family is actually one of the good ones. They’re trying their best to offset the necessity of petroleum with their environmental charity. Laird is genuine – and he tries his best to balance the economics of his corporation with the needs for environmental protection.”

“Wow.” I accepted his hand as I stepped off the boat. “Maybe I will take this job after all.”

Trey cleared his throat. “To do that you’re going to have to win over Mrs. Graham. You’re not the first pretty girl to come across the lake today. As a matter of fact, I’ve never seen a cottage keeper job with so many applicants that look like supermodels.”

Glancing down at my scuffed shoes, butterflies beat at my stomach. It might be harder to get this job than I thought – especially if you had to look like a model.

“Shit. I’m sorry. That was inappropriate.” Trey’s cheeks were the same color as the light on the gas pump.

“Do you have to look like a supermodel to get the job?” Trey’s candor surprised me.

Trey’s brow furrowed. “No. It doesn’t matter what you look like, Faye wants a hard worker, so as long as you can

prove that you're not more worried about breaking a nail than getting the job done, she'll be able to overlook how you look."

I held out my hands, nails short and unpolished. "I don't think that she has to worry about that with me."

Trey unclipped the radio from his belt. "Interviewee nine at the main dock."

"Does she have heels on?" A voice rasped through the static.

Trey glanced at me and took a few steps away, but he was still within earshot. "Negative."

"Thank God. Send her up."

Trey pointed to a wooden stairway. "Follow those stairs up. Faye will meet you at the landing and take you to the cottage keeper's cabin."

Resting my hand on the railing, I took a deep breath. "Thank you, Trey." I looked over my shoulder. He had the gas pump in his hand but replaced it to give me a wave.

"Good luck, Daisy."

I nodded and my scuffed Converse started their journey up the long flight of stairs. About halfway up I heard the squelch of Trey's radio. His voice was low but audible. "Faye, this is your girl."

Buoyed with Trey's not-so-secret support, I picked up the pace, taking the stairs two at a time. Working out wasn't part of my routine, but the ten-mile walk into town, often carrying groceries was my own form of hot yoga.

As I reached the top of the stairs a woman with white hair and an even whiter apron was waiting for me. After my snafu

with Trey, I was reluctant to assume her identity. “Daisy Carmichael,” I held out my hand.

She looked me up and down, then extended her hand and squeezed mine – tightly. “Mrs. Graham. Follow me.”

For a woman who couldn’t have been more than five feet tall, she was surprisingly fast. I fell into stride behind her, following a flagstone pathway past the main building. Lilies burst from the gardens on either side of the pathway. “The gardens, they’re beautiful.” It was risky, making small talk, but it was true – the gardens were a floral fireworks show that wound past the cottage and lined the pathway as it spread into the cover of the trees, the lilies giving way to shade-loving hostas.

“Mrs. Starling was the gardener, this is all her design, God rest her soul.”

That answered my question about Mrs. Starling, but Christina would need more details. Had the designer of the lily gardens been replaced? Was there a future Mrs. Starling in waiting? From Trey’s comment about the lineup of women vying for a cleaning job, I probably wasn’t the only one wondering. “Who takes care of them now?”

We had arrived at a small cabin. Small when compared to the grand cottage, at least five of the trailers could fit inside the cottage keeper’s space. Faye opened the door and gestured for me to come inside. “The gardeners take care of them.” Her voice was monotone. “Have a seat.”

Faye grumbled as she plopped into the chair at the head of the table. I lifted the wooden chair so it wouldn’t scratch the hardwood flooring and slid onto its seat then slid the folder with my resume across the big harvest table. Raincoats hung on the wall beside the door, and name tags were written on

small blackboards above each of the hooks. Open shelves held teal dishware and notes about not leaving food in the refrigerator were taped next to Garfield comics and more notes about stealing lasagna. It was the most beautiful lunchroom I'd ever seen at a job site – a far cry from the fluorescent lights and cold metal tables at the factory.

“This is a very nice lunchroom.”

Faye slid her glasses down her nose and ignored my second attempt at small talk. She scanned my resume, her finger tracing down each line. “You’ve actually got experience.” Her eyebrows were raised, crinkling her forehead.

Was that a question? “I’ve been working as a housekeeper for a while now.”

My years of working far exceeded what was on that piece of paper, but Christina would’ve been in trouble with the authorities if they found out I’d been working under the table for cash when I should’ve been doing homework and going to soccer practice like other thirteen-year-olds.

“Let me ask you a question.” Faye closed the folder and set it aside, crossing her hands on the table in front of her.

I gulped but nodded.

“Why do you want this job?”

I blinked. “I don’t understand...”

Faye sighed. “It’s a simple question.”

How honest did I need to be? I crossed my hands just like hers. “Mrs. Graham. As you can see, I have a lot of experience in the custodial arts. You will also see that I don’t have an education. I’m working to change that.”

“But, why housekeeping? You’re a pretty girl. You could make much more waitressing at the Stone Oven. Probably have a lot more fun too.” She crossed her arms and stared me down.

“The Stone Oven isn’t open year-round. If it rains, the patio closes down. The factory cleaning happens every day, no matter what. I get twelve-hour shifts, and they pay overtime. I listen to textbooks on my earphones while I work. I’m studying while I mop.” I glanced at my hands, I had been unconsciously wringing them. I slipped them onto my lap. “I get into a zone. As ridiculous as it sounds, right now cleaning is my escape. It’s not glamorous, but it’s my way out of this town.” My voice wavered and I hated myself for it.

Her eyes softened. “We need more staff for this summer. The hours are going to be long, and you won’t have any access to Mr. Starling, or any of the Starling family. If you do a good job, we can keep you on year-round. How does this sound to you? We may even need you to stay over as this ridiculous masquerade thing gets closer.”

“Consistent long hours and no commute? I couldn’t think of a more perfect way to spend my summer.”

“We’ve got bunks in the back here. It’s not...as you call it – glamorous.”

What I didn’t tell Faye was that a bunk in the back of the cottage keepers’ cabin wasn’t just a step up from my twin bed in the garden shed, it was a colossal leap. “I’m fine with that, Mrs. Graham.”

The radio squawked and a girl’s voice came from the box on the credenza behind the table.

Tara to base

“Hold on honey.” Faye pushed herself up from the table.

Honey. I was winning her over.

“Base to Tara.” Mrs. Graham spoke into the speaker.

I didn’t know Tara, but I recognized a panicked voice when I heard it. “There’s a coffee ring on the table in the great room.”

“Shit” Mrs. Graham muttered. “There’s no one at the main cottage. How did it get there?”

“I set down my mug. I wasn’t thinking.” Her words tumbled out of the speaker. “I have the furniture polish in my basket, but I don’t think that it’s the natural stuff.”

Mrs. Graham’s cheeks filled with air that she slowly released through pursed lips. She was regulating herself; I knew because I’d done it myself.

Mrs. Graham looked at me. “That’s a thirty-thousand-dollar table that’s been in the family for a hundred years. The polish we’ve got will fix it up lickety-split, but we’re under strict instructions not to use any chemicals. Mr. Starling is taking this environmental stuff to the next level.”

I hopped up. “Do you mind?” I reached for the microphone.

Her brow furrowed, but she extended her arm, handing me the small black device. “Tara. It’s easy. All you’ve got to do is mix up an olive oil and vinegar solution. If that doesn’t work on its own, cover it with a microfiber towel and use an iron on low heat.. That mark will be as good as gone, no chemicals or varnish required.”

“Who is this?” Tara asked.

Mrs. Graham took the microphone from me. “It’s Daisy, the new cottage keeper. Now, go do it. If there’s no sign of that ring when I get to the main cottage, you can keep your job.”

I stepped away from Mrs. Graham.

“Oh, don’t worry. She gave me the first genuine smile I’d seen from her, showing her bright white teeth. I wouldn’t fire her, but she can’t know that. Although an early twentieth-century oak table would take a huge chunk out of her paycheck for the next, oh, fifteen years or so.”

She folded her arms. “How did you know about that trick?”

It was my turn to smile. “I told you, I don’t have an official degree, but I’ve practically got a Ph.D. In the custodial arts. I also plan to study environmental engineering, so there’s that too.”

Mrs. Graham wrapped her arm around my waist and squeezed me tightly. “You’re perfect. When can you start?”

“I would have to give the factory two weeks’ notice.”

Her grip on my waist loosened. “Oh.”

“But I work the night shift. I could start days here, well, today if you needed me.”

Mrs. Graham looked me up and down. “Are you sure? That’s a lot.”

“I’m a hard worker, and I have a few days banked that I can take off. I can catch up on my sleep then.”

She shook her head. “I hate to do this to you, but you’re perfect, and if you think you can do it. You’re hired.”

I clasped my hands together. “I can do it. And, if it’s okay with you, I’d love to help you revamp your cleaning closet. There are some great environmental alternatives that I’d like to recommend.”

Mrs. Graham held up her index finger. “You’re hired. On one condition.”

The serious tone in her voice caught me off guard. “Okay. What is it?”

“You have to stay away from the Starling family. You need to be invisible.”

“Only speak if you’re spoken to?”

“Basically.” She scratched her head. “I know it sounds outdated, but this is their vacation home. It needs to be clean, but they don’t need to see someone doing it.”

“Trust me.” I gave her a big smile. “I don’t have any interest in getting to know any of the Starlings.”

It was one hundred percent true. I was the spy. Staying in the shadows and gathering intel for Christina and Chloe was part of my unwritten job description.

“Now, should we go save that dining room table?”

SIX

MAX

THE SUN BEAT in through the glass windows of my penthouse office. After a long winter filled with drizzle, slush, and meeting after meeting it felt like the city, and my body, was waking up. Spinning around in my chair, I rested my head against the back of the chair, closed my eyes, and let the sun beat against my lids, just like my cat Fanta.

“Mr. Starling?”

Blinking, I paused for a minute to check my watch to make sure I hadn’t just had an actual cat nap. Luckily, I had only been basking in the June sunlight for a minute. I spun around to face Eloise, my assistant. She held her hand over her eyes like a visor. I hit the remote and the blinds slid down, returning the office to the darkness of winter. “Yes?”

“I’ve got more budget items to be approved for the fundraiser.”

I shook my head. “Please tell me they got rid of the peacock idea.”

She laughed. “Once I played them their mating call, they were happy to strike them from the list. But you just wait.”

Eloise set the folder on my desk. “Your tee times for this evening are confirmed.”

“More great news.” I shook my head. Eloise knew that I’d rather be out on my motorcycle than schmoozing on the golf course, but if my new enterprise was going to be successful I needed to prove to my father that we could incorporate environmentalism into Yates’ image. “Thank you, Eloise.”

She nodded. “Your plane is fueled and ready at the aerodrome.”

Eloise’s desk lamp clicked off as she left for the day. I opened the folder and scanned down the new additions to the masquerade ball fundraiser. The executive director I’d hired didn’t seem to get the concept. We were raising money for environmental initiatives. The excessive opulence of the masquerade ball was a sharp contrast to the mandate of the charity. We had cleared the Windswan airport’s schedule that day to accommodate all of the private jets that were going to be flying in that day. He’d somehow convinced me that the money we’d raise would far outweigh the costs involved with bringing in the wealthiest investors in the country.

The peacocks had been removed, but an A-list country singer had taken their place. “A different kind of peacocking.” I muttered to myself but scribbled my signature on the bottom of the page. I dropped the folder on Eloise’s desk, pulled on my leather jacket, took my aviator sunglasses from the pocket, and headed for the aerodrome on my newest motorcycle – a custom café racer.

The circle of islands that make up Starling Cove dotted below me as I did a slightly too-low fly by, tilting my wings when I saw Trey on the gas docks. He waved and I could see his smile from the sky. I returned to a less cowboy altitude and set my sights on the Windswan airport. I hadn’t been back since that day with Daisy, and even though I knew that she

didn't live there, I did a slow circle over the subdivision where I'd last seen her.

My R9 was waiting for me at the airstrip. It wasn't until I was on the open road, with my favorite bike between my legs, that I felt the stress of the city melt away behind me.

“YOU'RE lucky your dad didn't see that stunt.” Trey laughed as he pulled up to the dock.

I tossed my saddlebags into the vintage wooden boat, the favorite of my fleet, and hopped in as Trey reached the dock. “He's not coming up for another week, so I've got time for more irresponsible debauchery.”

Trey shook his head. “Your sister has stepped up in that department, it might be your turn to retire.” He pointed to the steering wheel. “Would you like to drive? Planes, bikes, and a boat?”

Our transportation coordinator was mostly stuck shuttling staff back and forth from the mainland to the island on the clunky, slower than a turtle, pontoon boat. “Nah, I'm going to relax and take in the fresh air. God, I hate the city.”

“As you wish Sir.” Trey tapped his hand on his baseball cap. He had been an employee at Starling Island since he was twenty, and I'd known the man since I was ten. The sir bit was a joke, and we both knew it. He navigated the craft out of the shelter of the marina and charted a course for Robin's Island, the second largest of the Starling Island cluster – mine.

Lacing my fingers together behind my head, I stretched my chest wide and took in the fresh air of Windswan Lake. It felt

good to be back. “But Trey...” I clapped him on the shoulder. “Make it count.”

Trey grinned. “Your wish is my command.” The engine growled as he pushed down the throttle, the boat cutting through the chop of the open water. We both turned our hats backward as we zipped across the lake at fifty miles an hour.

“Wait. Slow down.” I shouted as we passed by Starling Island.

Trey eased up on the throttle and we were able to speak to each other without shouting. A massive floating dock was being set up on the point of my father’s island. “It’s even uglier than I thought.”

Always a professional, Trey did not confirm that the temporary docks that would hold the tent for the masquerade ball were an eyesore, but the narrowing of his lips as he held in his opinion, told me that he agreed. “It’s all anyone can talk about.”

“Very diplomatic, Skipper.”

We cruised past Starling Island and even though my father wasn’t due for a week, the place was bustling. “Is he running at a full staff?” I asked.

“And then some. They’ve hired a few new people.”

Squinting, I could make out several of the Starling Estate uniforms buzzing around the property. “I’m sure Mrs. Faye loves that,” I laughed. Faye Graham had been there longer than Trey, and even though I’d had nannies growing up, she was the one who I turned to when my mom wasn’t there – both before and after her death.

“Max, you should’ve seen it – it was a spectacle.”

“What do you mean?”

Trey angled the boat towards my boathouse, the bay in front of Robin’s Island was calm as glass. “Somehow it got leaked that the numbered company belonged to, well, your dad.”

“Say no more.” I held up my hands. “Let me guess, a whole lot of middle-aged gold diggers wanting to put on a maid’s outfit and pretend like this is a Jennifer Lopez movie.”

“Not even close.” Trey’s eyes crinkled beside his glasses. “It was like Mrs. Graham was holding an audition for America’s Next Top Model. They were all young and not so hard to look at.”

“Ever the diplomat.” I winked. “Do they think my dad is that stupid?”

Trey shrugged. “I think that some of them just want to get close to...” he gestured to the Starling grouping of islands, “this lifestyle. But, what they didn’t take into account was that a cottage keeper job actually requires, you know, cleaning.”

“It was a fun couple of days for me though. I have all the contact information for the interviewees if you’re interested.”

I focused on my cottage. I had spent the winter skiing in Chance Rapids, the next town over, but hadn’t been able to make it to Robin’s Island until now. I always thought that as I got older, I would spend more time at the cottage, but it turns out that running the charity for my dad was way more work than I’d anticipated. Being a responsible adult was not all it was cracked up to be. I had everything I’d ever wanted, except time, and a beautiful woman to spend it with.

“Maybe.” I shrugged. “I’ve got a lot to do before this stupid ball. I miss the days when I would show up on the

Memorial Day long weekend and stay here all summer.”

“And bribe me to keep quiet about your raging parties?”

We had reached the dock and I hopped out to help Trey secure the lines once we were safely in the shelter of the boathouse. “Yet, he still found out.”

“He was young once too.”

Trey started the pontoon boat. “Do you need anything else? Mrs. Graham has your place completely stocked.”

“I’m good. Thanks.”

Trey disappeared around the cove and I kicked off my motorcycle boots, rolled up my jeans, and stuck my feet in Windswan Lake for the first time that year. I’d trade my wingtip shoes and Armani suit for board shorts and flip-flops if I could. This place felt like home more than the penthouse in the city I’d owned for the last ten years.

I didn’t like the new staff at the main house. We treated our employees like family, and the idea of strangers milling around our family estate, people who hadn’t built up trust with us, irked me a little bit. I knew Trey and Mrs. Graham’s intentions, and that their hearts were in the right place. Over the years we’d had family drama leaked to the press, expensive jewelry stolen, and even before my mom was out of the picture, women trying to get into my dad’s pants.

The day after the fundraiser couldn’t come soon enough. Until then, I’d stay away from the epicenter of the madness as much as I could.

My phone buzzed with a text, but I ignored it. I wasn’t ready to deal with any more questions about catering, fireworks, or lighting. What I needed, was to get out of my sweaty clothes and into Windswan Lake.

After changing into my boardshorts, I slung a towel over my shoulder and grabbed a beer from my fully stocked fridge. A firey sparkle from the dish above the sink caught my eye and I picked up the stone that had sat there since the end of last summer. I'd put in a valiant effort trying to find its owner, Daisy, although I doubted that was even her real name. No one seemed to know who she was. I held it up to the beam of sunlight streaming in through the picture window.

“Who are you?” I spoke to the gem. It pinged as I dropped it into the dish. “And why did you lie?”

I took a sip of my beer and picked up the stone again. “Maybe I should pull the old lady at the end of the *Titanic* and drop you into the lake.”

“Who are you talking to?” I dropped the stone and whirled around. My sister padded over to the fridge, her flip-flops slapping with her sassy stride.

“No one. What the hell are you doing here?” I hoped that Jessica hadn't heard my reference to both the *Titanic* movie and the Britney Spears song – I'd never hear the end of it.

Jessica took an open bottle of white wine from the fridge and pulled out the cork. “I left my wine here.”

“You've been hanging out at my place?” I glanced around the kitchen, the clues obvious once I looked...the wine glasses in the dish rack, the pink towels slung over the glass railing. I shouldn't have been thinking about Daisy, I should've noticed that Jess had been squatting at my place for who the hell knows how long.

Jessica took a wine glass from the rack and poured herself a glass. “It's crazy over at Dad's place. I needed a little peace and quiet.”

She sidled up beside me and took the ruby from the dish. “Still pining over the mystery girl?”

“Nah.” I shrugged. “You can have that if you want it.”

“Really?” Jessica slipped it into the little pocket in the front of her jeans. I hadn’t expected her to actually take the ruby. “I want to make Ginger a new name tag.”

“That’s a pretty nice name tag for a cat.” Jessica and I had adopted our cats at the same time – two identical orange cats – Fanta lived with me and was currently being spoiled by my city cat sitter, Florence. Jessica brought Ginger to the lake for the summer. If I wasn’t so busy going back and forth with work, I’d have Fanta with me at the lake too.

“She started her life in a dumpster, I’m making it up to her.” As if on cue, the chunky orange cat sauntered into the kitchen and rubbed her face on my calf.

“Jessica!” I picked up Ginger and tried to sound as mad as possible as she purred and head-butted me. “What is this fatso doing in my cottage?”

Jessica shrugged as she sipped her wine. “I think that you already know the answer.”

I did know the answer. “You’ve moved in here until that damn fundraiser is over?” It wasn’t a question, so much as a statement.

“It’s so crazy over there, Max. They’ve got all these new staff that I don’t know. It feels like I’m being watched. In all fairness, I didn’t think that you were coming up until next weekend.”

I laughed. “Oh, okay. That makes it better, the fact that you were going to camp out here and not tell me.”

“You would’ve said no.”

I probably would have. “Not necessarily. I wouldn’t want to be around all of that either.” I pointed to Dad’s island. “Let’s make a deal.”

Jessica looked at me with narrowed eyes. “What kind of a deal?”

“I let you stay here for the summer...”

“I’m listening.” She tilted her head and had a hint of a smile.

“If I let you and Ginger stay here for the summer,” I clarified. “I’m bringing Fanta up the next time I come here and you have to look after him for the entire summer.”

Jessica thrust her hand at me. “Deal.”

After shaking, the two of us, followed closely by Ginger made our way to the dock. Jess reclined on one of the striped loungers while I dove into the lake. There was something transformative that happened when I was immersed in the cold water, and not the in the pants shrinkage kind of transformation. I emerged from the water with a clear head and a relaxation that I hadn’t ever been able to recreate with meditation, breathwork, or weed.

I flopped onto the lounge next to my sister. “How’s the summer been so far? I can’t believe it’s already July.”

“You’ve missed some good parties. Amanda hooked up with an NHL player and Tripe J has been dating a hedge fund trader.”

Water dripped from my hair as I leaned my head against the lounge and closed my eyes, taking a page from Ginger’s book, and basked in the late July afternoon sun. Damn, it felt

good. “I’ve missed this, but I have to admit, I don’t miss the parties. The same thing has been happening every year since we were fourteen.”

“It is getting a little tedious, but everyone is pumped about the masquerade.”

The masquerade. “Right. That,” I groaned. “I can’t believe that we have to hold it here. I pushed to have it in the winter in the city. It just seems so out of place to be having such a formal event...here.” I sat and rested my elbows on my knees, studying the sparkling lake.

Jess stretched her arms above her head. “That’s what makes it so special, Max. How many fundraisers have you gone to in the city? They’re all the same. The Summer Ever After Ball is going to be remembered.

I imagined one of the wooden boats sinking to the bottom of the lake, like a Titanic lifeboat, filled with the elite of the country. “I hope that it’s remembered as famous, not infamous. There’s so much that could go wrong.”

Jess swiped some sunscreen across her nose and pulled down her big floppy straw hat. “Is Max Starling, Mister go with the flow, worried about something? Don’t worry. You’ve got the best event planner in the city. And don’t forget, Mrs. Graham is in charge of everything here on the island. Your biggest concern should be finding the perfect date.”

Sighing, I finished my beer. “I wasn’t going to bring a date.”

Jess slid her oversized sunglasses down her nose to stare at me. “You’re bringing a date. No more of this most eligible bachelor in the state stuff. You’re getting too old for that. It’s starting to look weird.”

“I call it my Clooney years.”

“You can’t sit around pining for your Amal, Max.” Wait. She sat up and ripped off her hat. “Don’t tell me you’re staying single in case your little flower petal girl shows up.”

Daisy. I said the name inside my head. “No, I just don’t have time to deal with the drama that comes with bringing a date. I’m way too busy to get involved with anyone, and don’t you think it would be worse for the family optics if I string along a bunch of socialites?”

It had crossed my mind that she might show up. I knew that it was a ridiculous thought. Tickets to the ball were five thousand dollars a plate. Somehow, I didn’t think that the girl with the duct tape on her shoes was going to magically appear next to the martini station.

“Why don’t you just pick one and date her? I’ve got a few friends who are crazy and think you’re cute.”

“Great sale, Jess. I want to minimize the crazy.”

She put her hat back on and sipped her wine. “I mean that anyone who thinks your hideous face is cute has to have a few screws loose.”

We had been mistaken as twins all of our lives, even though there was a two-year age gap. “If I’m hideous, you’re hideous with tits.” I kicked at the water, droplets splattering across Jess’s body. She squealed and threw her hat at me. It missed and sailed over my shoulder and into the lake.

“My hat.” She hopped to her feet. “Max, you have to get it.” Her voice echoed across the bay.

I crossed my arms across my chest. “I’m not the one who threw it into the lake, Quasimoto with boobs.”

Jess pursed her lips, but I could tell that she was holding in a smile. Like a lot of siblings, our love language was teasing each other. When we were younger, we often took it too far and she was the one who usually ended up in tears. As a kid, I found myself wishing that I had a brother so we could fight with our fists instead of words.

“Get my hat.” She pointed to the hat which was slowly sinking, the brim floating below the surface.

I dove into the lake, surfaced with it on my head, and returned to the dock. The brim sagged over my ears from the weight of the water, and drops flowed down my face.

“Thanks.” She held out her hand.

I crossed my arms. “I’ll give it back to you on one condition.”

“I’m already cat-sitting.” She jabbed at my chest with her pointy finger. “And if I become known as the cat lady of Windswan Lake it’s going to be all your fault.” Her eyes glinted as she put on a fake pout.

Jess had a lineup of men from the mountains to the city that would jump in the lake ten million times for a chance with her - becoming a crazy cat lady was not in her future. “Leave the whole date thing alone.” I held the hat high above my head. “I don’t want any surprise set-ups, and new eligible friends showing up here. I just want to be left alone.”

Jess’s eyes softened. “Fine. No surprise set-ups.”

“No more talk of dates?” I prompted, lowering the hat an inch.

“Not a word.” She made the zipper motion across her lips with her fingers. “I won’t say anything, even if you decide to bring Fanta as your date.”

Right now that's the only pussy I need in my life. I thought to myself. Over the winter the women I'd dated had been duller than the November skies. "That's not a bad idea." I rubbed my chin with my free hand. "Although I'd have to hire someone to follow me around with a lint roller, and he'd probably annihilate the caviar table."

I held out the hat for Jess. She snatched it and winced as she put it on her head, lake water dripping down her face, but she was too stubborn to take it off. A horn tooted and we both turned to see the pontoon boat departing from the main island.

Jess and I returned Trey's wave. The passengers were all wearing matching shirts, but the boat was too far for me to tell if they were the new staff or the ones who had been with us for years. "Is Mrs. Graham on there?" I shielded my eyes from the sun.

"I doubt it. She's been sleeping out here for the past couple of weeks. I think that she's more nervous about the event than you are."

I made a note to go talk to Faye. "She doesn't need that stress."

Jess shrugged. "You tell her that."

"Maybe I'll bring one of the maids as my date." I elbowed Jess. "That will really stir things up."

"You're just trying to get a rise out of me." Jess returned to her lounge. "I know that you would never do that."

"Why not? Are you classist, Sissy?"

"Of course not. I fucked one of the landscapers last weekend," she laughed. "But I'm not bringing him to the event of the year. No, the event of the decade."

Trey's stories about the women lining up for the maid job repeated in my head. It sounds shitty, but when you're as rich as we are, you always have to wonder about people's motives. And if the pool of new staff was filled with gold diggers, there was one thing I was sure of – I was going to stay far, far away from them.

SEVEN

DAISY

AFTER TWO WEEKS at Starling Island and the factory job, the circles under my eyes felt as big as the canvas laundry bags Mrs. Graham was lugging from the dock to the cottage. Tara sat beside me on the front of the pontoon boat, our feet dangling over the frothy water as Trey hummed along to the country station.

“This commute is a lot better than walking to the factory in the mosquitoes.” I stuck my toe in the water that rushed beneath our feet.

Tara leaned her head back, letting the sun beat on her pale neck. “No kidding, and Mrs. Graham can be a stickler but she’s the nicest boss I’ve ever worked for.”

Over the past couple of weeks Tara and I had become close. Friendships always felt a little foreign to me, after Dad died, we hadn’t stayed in one place long enough for me to meet people. My work and school schedule didn’t leave any room for extracurricular activities, so while Chloe was cheerleading or hanging out with the football team on a weeknight, I was usually pushing a mop around under fluorescent lighting.

“She’s a softie.” I leaned back on my elbows and pulled my feet from the lake so they would be dry enough to put into

my shoes by the time we reached the docks at the Starling Estate. “But, I still wouldn’t test her.”

Glancing over my shoulder to ensure that Trey was in his own country twangy world, Tara whispered. “This staff is the most loyal that I’ve ever met. Make sure you don’t talk shit about the Starlings around them.”

I had already picked up on the loyalty. There were photos in the break room with the core staff eating Christmas dinner with the Starling family – at the same table, not serving silver dishes over their shoulders. “Why would I?” I shrugged. “I haven’t even seen any of them.”

“I think that they are keeping clear from this circus.”

We pulled into the docks and the event coordinator was barking orders at several other boats arriving, loaded and practically sinking with boxes and totes of event supplies.

“If it’s this crazy now, imagine when we’re only a few days away from the ball.” Tara hopped off the boat with the line in her hand. “I’ve got the front Trey.” She held up the line.

“Good girl.” Trey cut the engine, hopped off the boat, and headed to the rear to tie it up. “They call that the bow though.”

Tara giggled. “Even though there are two pontoons, not technically a bow?” She tied the knot and pointed to the boat.

It hadn’t escaped my attention that Tara and Trey had been amping up the flirting over the past couple of weeks. “Technically, that’s not a knot.” He nudged the tangle of rope that Tara had looped around the ring on the dock.

“Show me?” Tara tugged at the rope.

Trey cleared his throat. Tara’s baby-voiced tone had clearly leaped into flirting territory. “Maybe Daisy can show you. I’ve

got a meeting with Mr. Starling.” He tapped his watch and jogged away.

Tara chewed on her bottom lip as I showed her how to do a proper knot. “How do you know all this?” she asked as I showed her for the second time.

“My dad used to have...a sailboat.” We had a fifty-foot sailboat as well as a fleet of motorboats, including what I guess could be called a yacht. Now, I knew that even though one was named after me, the Rosie, none of them belonged to the family, but my dad’s stupid numbered corporation – and were likely now liquidated and the proceeds lining the pockets of the new CEO. “Now your turn.” I handed her the rope, but her eyes were trained on the shoreline.

“Huh?”

“Your turn...” I nudged her hand with the rope. “You weren’t paying attention, were you?”

She shrugged. “You got me. Do you think that he’s into me?”

I quickly tied the line and grabbed my plastic bag with my lunch, two peanut butter sandwiches on white bread. I’d been working so much in the past two weeks that I hadn’t had time to go to the grocery store. Christina and Chloe had been busy with their pilates classes and both of them needed to get their highlights touched up, so unlike my sandwich, their schedules had been jam-packed.

“Who. Trey?”

I knew it was Trey. She had been googly-eyed about him since the first day we worked together.

“Yeah. Some days I swear he’s flirting with me, and then the next day he’s colder than this damn lake.”

We walked the pathway to the housekeeper's cabin, I still couldn't bring myself to call it the cottage keeper's cabin. "He probably doesn't want to get involved with someone who works here on the island. If it got messy, I'm pretty sure they wouldn't get rid of their long-time butler – it would be the tart with the housekeeping cart." I elbowed her as we entered the lunch room.

Mrs. Graham was sitting at the table, her glasses perched on the tip of her nose, her big brown eyes staring at us. We froze. Had she heard our conversation?

"Daisy. I need to have a word with you."

Shit.

I hung my raincoat on the hook beside the door and slid my lunch bag into the fridge. "Of course."

Tara shot me a wide-eyed glance. "Miss Tara, you can start with the powder rooms on the third floor. We're scrubbing baseboards today."

"I thought that the third floor was off-limits for the event." Tara kicked her flip-flops onto the mat by the door and sat to put on her white tennis shoes. Open-toed shoes were against the Starling Estate employee dress code.

The wooden chair screeched as it scraped across the pine floor. Mrs. Graham put her hands on her hips. "Every inch of this property needs to be impeccable. It doesn't matter if the only living thing that will see those baseboards are the mosquitoes." Her voice was flat and low. "Got it?" she added.

"Got it." Tara's voice trembled. Perhaps we'd been too friendly with Mrs. Graham. She was putting us in our place, and after my comments about dating other staff, my hands started to sweat. Was I about to get fired?

Mrs. Graham took her seat and pointed to the one next to her. “Daisy, please have a seat.”

I slid onto the chair and folded my hands on the table, fully aware that I’d given notice at the factory. If I lost this job, we’d be in serious trouble. Christina’s job paid for their self-care routine, mine paid for the leaky roof and the food in the fridge.

My stomach grumbled as though I’d already been sacked.

“Tara. Before either of you get any ideas, it’s strictly against house policy for employees to date any of the Starling family, or their guests. We don’t have a policy about inter-staff relationships, because we haven’t had to have one.” She glared at Tara. “And I don’t want to have to write one now.”

Tara’s face was as white as her shoes.

“Got it?” Mrs. Graham growled what seemed to be her statement question of the day.

Tara nodded.

“What was that?” Mrs. Graham’s nostrils flared.

“G-g-g-got it.” Tara nodded ten times in a row. She clipped the radio onto her belt. “I’ll be on the third floor if you need me.”

The screen door slammed behind her like it did every time. Even though I knew that it slammed, it still made me jump in my seat. The seat that I was on the edge of, both literally and figuratively.

Mrs. Graham shook her hand and then to my surprise, smiled. “Was it too hard on her?” Her eyes sparkled and I couldn’t help but return her smile, although hers was a lot slyer.

“Just like the three bears. That was just the right amount of toughness.”

“Good.” Mrs. Graham put her hand to her chest. “I can’t have any of you quitting before this damn event, but I also can’t have a maid canoodling with Tr...” She stopped herself from saying his name. So other people had picked up on their flirty banter as well. “with staff when they should be dusting.”

I slid to the back of the chair and unclenched my stomach. She wasn’t going to fire me.

“I’m glad that I don’t have to worry about that with you dear.”

My body relaxed even further, but I couldn’t help but wonder why Mrs. Graham wasn’t worried about me making out with a landscaper or one of the cute deckhands. That thought lasted a millisecond. I didn’t care, and she was right – I was on the island to work and make money, not have some stupid whirlwind summer romance. I’d had my chance for one of those and I’d blown it. Also, not one man had caught my eye since I’d had Max’s arms wrapped around me. Not even the landscaper who had given me his last bottle of water last week. “No, you certainly don’t have to worry about me.”

Mrs. Graham blew out an exasperated breath, her lips flapping. “I just meant that I know that you are mature, and a serious worker, the best that I’ve had in years, actually.”

“Thanks, Mrs. G. I just want to do my job and do it well.”

The skin around her eyes crinkled as she smiled. “You’re going big places, I can feel it. Make sure that whatever you’re working hard to achieve, you go for it. I think that you’re a wonderful girl, but I don’t want to see you working here five years from now.”

“You’re a great boss, but if everything goes to plan, I’ll be giving you my resignation in two years.”

“All right then. I think that works for both of us.” She clapped her hands together and then rubbed them before opening the file that was sitting on the table. “I have one question though. When I submitted your tax documents, I noticed that your name isn’t Daisy.”

I gulped. How much was I going to have to tell her? “Daisy is more of a nickname. Is that a problem?”

“No, but I will have to have your paychecks issued in your real name.” She closed the folder. “I know that this isn’t my place to ask, but why don’t you go by your given name? Rose. It’s such a pretty name.”

“My stepmom started calling me Daisy and it just kind of...stuck.” I resisted the name change when I was younger, but a few hot slaps to the cheek changed my mind. “I like the name.” I shot Mrs. Graham a smile and should’ve stopped there, but I continued, weaving in a little truth where I could. “My mother’s name was Rosamund, I’m named after her. It’s a little too painful to think of her whenever someone calls my name.” Tears stung my eyes. I swiped at them, surprised by their appearance.

Mrs. Graham stood and opened her arms. I followed her lead, standing and letting myself fall into her warmth, her strong arms wrapping around my body. I let myself rest there for a moment before pulling away. She pulled a tissue from the cargo vest she wore over her apron and handed it to me. “Don’t worry, it’s clean. This pocket almost holds half a box.” She patted one of the many zippered compartments on what I was pretty sure was a fisherman’s jacket.

I dabbed at my eyes and then blew my nose. “I’m sorry about that. Should I go meet Tara on the third floor?”

“Don’t you dare apologize.” She zipped up her vest. “You’re on boathouse detail today.” The boathouse was essentially a full-blown cottage sitting over the boathouse. Everyone hated the boathouse detail because there were so many stairs to get there, but I liked it. I’d open the windows and let the breeze and the sound of waves lapping beneath the floor be my radio station, instead of the pop station Tara liked to blast while she cleaned.

“Got it.” I beat Mrs. Graham to her catchphrase of the day. I grabbed one of the radios, made sure it was on, and clipped it to my belt. The door had just closed behind me when I heard Mrs. Graham’s voice calling me.

“Daisy.”

I opened the door and peeked my head inside. “Yes?”

“I know that you don’t want to be called Rose. But, maybe it would help you to step into your mom’s memory. I wouldn’t want my daughter to be sad every time someone said my name.”

Nodding, I knew that she was right. But Christina would flip her lid if someone called me Rose in her presence. “Maybe.”

“How about we start with Rosie?” It was her smile that got me. This woman had known me for two weeks and already she’d shown me more care than the woman who had been tasked as my conservator.

The smile that spread across my face was involuntary. “I like it...but how about we just use that on the island, you know, test it out a little bit.”

Her smile faltered, but she nodded. “Sure. Mainland Daisy is now Island Rosie.” She clapped her hands. “Now get that butt down to the boathouse and make sure it’s sparkling. Got it?” She beat me to it.

“Got it.” My voice cracked and I turned so she wouldn’t see any more tears. As I plodded down the stairs to the boathouse, a bag of towels and bedding slung over my shoulder I felt strong, and a little taller. Out here on the island, even though I was a maid, I felt like myself.

The red and white striped curtains billowed in the breeze and the open concept main floor of the boathouse, decorated in nautical style without being tacky, was bathed in sunlight from the huge picture windows that ran along the front of the building.

Laughter and squeals caught my attention and I drew the curtains aside. In the distance, the sandy beach on the shoreline was bustling. Boats were anchored, flags flew, and colorful buoys bobbed on the surface of the water. We had approached the island from the north side and if I hadn’t come down to the boathouse I might not have known that I was witnessing the Windswan Lake Regatta. Every lake seemed to have its version, and a wave of nostalgia washed over me as a flotilla of kayaks navigated around the buoys. Growing up we had never missed a regatta, and my swimming trophies had lined the fireplace at our summer home. Well, until Christina moved in. She called them tacky and one day I came home to find the mantle crowded with candles named after sexual positions. I was young and didn’t know what reverse cowgirl meant, but it smelled like peaches. To this day, the smell of peaches makes me queasy.

I drew the curtain shut, closing out the festivities, and set to work. Mrs. Graham checked in a few times throughout the day, especially after I worked through my lunch, but when I got into the zone, I didn't want to stop. The podcast about ice cores was fascinating and sweat beaded on my brow as I climbed up and down the ladder ensuring that the ceiling fans were one hundred percent dust free.

The door flung open as I swiped clean the last blade. A pretty blonde woman stood panting in the doorway. She said something, but I pointed to my headphones and took them out as I climbed down the ladder. "Sorry, I couldn't hear you." I held up the earbuds as though I had to prove it.

"Have you seen my brother?" Her eyes tracked around the room.

"Who is your brother?"

She looked at me like I was insane and I realized that I was looking at one of the Starling kids. Who wasn't a kid at all, she was a full-grown gorgeous woman who looked like she'd just stepped off the pages of a women's health magazine. She was wearing a sports bra and running shorts, but her feet were bare. Her hair was slicked back into a long blonde ponytail. At what I assumed was her most casual, it felt like I was in the presence of a celebrity.

"You're one of the new ones." She put her hands on her hips. "We're supposed to be in the relay and I can't find him anywhere."

"I'm sorry, other than Trey and Mrs. Graham, I haven't seen anyone else today."

She checked her sports watch, pulled her phone from where it had been tucked in her bra, and typed what looked to

be a very aggressive message. “If you see him, tell him he’s in shit.”

I didn’t expect to see any of the Starling family that day, or ever. I nodded. “I will pass it on.”

“Thanks.” She turned on her heel and stared at her phone as she walked away.

Holding my breath, I stood frozen, waiting until she was gone to get back to work. She stopped at the door and turned. “Do you know how to swim?”

“What?” The question seemed absurd.

“Swim.” She threw her hands up. “Or paddle a canoe?”

“I-I-I can do both.”

“Good.” She tucked her phone back into her bra and grabbed my forearm. “We need a fourth.”

She was a hell of a lot stronger than I expected and I trotted along a few steps behind her as she pulled me to the door. “A fourth for what?” I glued my feet to the floor like a reluctant horse and my arm slipped from her grip.

“We don’t have time for this. They’re starting the race soon. You’re going to be on my team.”

“Whoa. I held up my hand, the rag still clutched in my grip. I’m working. Mrs. Graham would kill me if I took a break to go...” I glanced out the window to the action across the bay. I wanted to say, have fun, but I wasn’t sure that’s what what’s her name Starling had in mind.

The blond held out her hand. “Give me your radio.”

I wanted to resist, but the woman in front of me was the heiress to the building I was currently scrubbing, so I

unclipped the radio and handed it to her. “Faye,” she barked into the radio.

“cottage keeper’s Base.” Mrs. Graham’s voice came through the small speaker.

“This is Jessica. I’m stealing...” she clicked off the radio. “What’s your name?” I opened my mouth to say Daisy but instead heard my voice as though it had come from someone else’s mouth other than my own. “Rosie.”

“Rosie.” The girl I now knew to be Jessica Starling spoke into the radio. “We need a fourth for the relay and I’m taking her with me. I’ll have her back in an hour or two.”

An hour or two would be the end of the work day. If we ran longer, I could be late for my last shift at the factory. The silence from the radio filled the room while Jessica tapped her finger on the radio. “There’s no way that Mrs. Graham is going to give me the afternoon off.” I crossed my arms, waiting for confirmation of my assessment to come through the small piece of electronics.

“Have her back before Trey goes home. I don’t want her to miss her ride.”

My mouth gaped open. “I’m not wearing...” I gestured to my shorts and Starling Estate golf shirt – a bathing suit.”

“You’ll be in the canoe with me then.” She jogged to the deck and held open the door. “Come on Rosie. It will be fun.”

Fun. Something that I hadn’t had in a long time. “Fuck it,” I whispered and tossed the rag onto the dresser.

Jessica laughed. “I like your style.”

“I didn’t think that you could hear me.” I grimaced.

“FUCK IT,” Jessica screamed and threw her arms back, shouting into the blue sky. “Let’s go win this thing, Rosie.”

She sprinted down the stairs and I followed, the soles of my sneakers smacking on the boards of the dock as I followed Jessica to the boat at the end of the dock. I kicked off my shoes, leaving them on the dock as I hopped into the wakeboard boat behind Jessica.

The wind whipped in our ponytails as Jessica pressed the throttle of the boat to the maximum. The engine growled and within minutes we were moored to a dock next to the staging area for the relay – the Windswan Lake version of a triathlon. A sailboat, a swim, and a canoe race. “Amanda and Ramona are out there.” Jessica pointed to the little sailboat with the blue sail. The boats had rounded the further buoy and were headed back to shore. “This is Jenny.” Jessica introduced me to a tiny girl with a pink swim cap on her head and shoulders that told me she’d done her fair share of laps at the pool. “This is Rosie.”

“Hi, Rosie.” Her friend shook my hand and her eyes flitted from my face to the embroidered Starling Estate Staff emblem on my shirt. She raised her eyebrows at Jessica. “Your brother bailed?”

“I couldn’t find him. Don’t worry, Rosie is an experienced paddler. Right?” Jessica elbowed me.

Jessica had no idea what level of paddler she’d recruited. Luckily, I’d spent many years at camp and we’d done back-country canoe trips deep into the wilderness. “I…” My voice cracked again. Why was I nervous? I cleared my throat. “I’m going to win this race for you two.”

“That’s the spirit.” Jessica slapped me on my shoulder. “Come on, we should get the canoe ready. Jenny Jen Jen went

to Stanford on a swimming scholarship, the only way she will lose this race is if Michael Phelps bought a cottage on the Lake.”

Jenny grinned. “I’m a little rusty.”

“Stop with the excuses.” Jessica put on a serious voice. “I’ve got money riding on this.”

We left Jenny to do her warmup exercises on the shore as the flotilla of dingies approached the beach. A pretty girl with brown hair jumped out of the blue sailboat and tagged Jenny. She dove into the lake and resurfaced thirty feet away. “Rusty my butt,” Jessica screamed.

“Do you truly have money riding on this?” I ran my hand over the varnished paddle.

Jessica lifted the stern of the canoe and nosed the bow into the lake. “Nah. I don’t gamble.” There were at least twenty other canoes lining the shore, and everyone’s gaze was focused on the bay, turbulent from the swimmers. It was almost impossible to pick Jenny out of the fray, but every once in a while, a pop of pink would be visible amongst the frothy water.

As the first swimmer reached the shore, Jessica and I stood poised next to the canoe, wearing matching paddling vests, paddles clutched in one hand, the gunwale of the canoe in the other.

The referee, a man wearing a Windswan Lake t-shirt and a whistle paced behind the canoes. “Remember, the bottom of your craft can’t leave the sand until you’re tagged by your swimmer.”

“Come on, Triple J,” Jessica shouted.

I kept my eyes trained on the water. This was just a community race, but it felt like an Olympic event. The crowd was screaming and all of the competitors on the canoe lineup were poised like tigers about to strike. Jenny's arms pumped as she ran towards us. She slapped Jessica's hand and the two of us sprinted into the lake.

"Now," Jessica shouted.

I hopped into the canoe and settled into a three-point position, my knees bracing against the sides, my butt perched on the edge of the seat. The canoe surged forward as both Jessica and I stroked at the same time. Her job was more complicated than mine, she had to steer. All I had to do, was paddle, as hard as I possibly could. She was like the steering wheel, while I was the engine. The years of canoe trips had given me the skill, and the hours of scrubbing floors and wielding mops had kept my arms in shape.

For the first half of the race, we jockeyed for first place position with a canoe paddled by two men who looked to be in their fifties. They were suntanned and looked like they spent their summers on the golf and tennis courts. One man shouted 'stroke' to the other, but Jessica and I had managed to get into perfect synchronization without any verbal clues. We rounded the buoy and we both executed a draw maneuver, cutting in front of the golf dads before returning to our powerful rhythm.

We had created a gap that only got larger the closer we got to the finish line. I was breathing hard, but it felt good. The sun beat down on my face and I wished that I had a pair of polarized glasses like the men now in second place. I squinted as we paddled into the sun, the lake sparkling all around us as a light breeze flicked my ponytail. Sweat had formed under the

band of my bra and I hoped that my work shirt would camouflage my sweaty pits and lower back.

Sand scratched the hull of the canoe as we hit the beach at top speed. I wondered whose canoe we were using because we'd definitely added some scratches. Jessica and I hopped out and sprinted down the beach, breaking through the finish line ribbon at the same time.

Romona, Amanda, and Jenny ran to Jessica and threw their arms around her. "Get in here, Rosie." Jessica waved from their huddle. The friends opened their arms and without thinking I stepped into the winner's embrace. Camaraderie like that was something I hadn't experienced since my field hockey days and tears sprang to my eyes.

"You two were incredible." Jenny stepped back. She smiled at me. "You can let go of the paddle now."

"Thanks." I hadn't realized that it was still in my hand. "I'll go put it with the canoe."

After placing the paddle in the canoe, I returned to watch the rest of the participants cross the finish line with my 'team'.

Jessica hooked her arm around my neck. "Where did you learn to paddle like that?"

"I used to camp a lot."

The silver-haired second-place finishers came to shake our hands. "Who is your ringer?" The tallest of the team draped his arm over Jessica's shoulder. He looked to be in his fifties and Jessica didn't look much older than twenty-five. I hoped that I was able to hide my cringe. After seeing some of the dinosaurs that Christina had dated, I didn't have much respect for either party in a gold-digger relationship. Although Jessica Starling didn't need any gold.

“Dad, this is Rosie.” Jessica elbowed...her father.

I was a judgemental jerk.

“Please to meet you, Rosie. I’m Laird.” The sides of his eyes crinkled from behind his polarized Ray=bans.

“Nice to meet you...” My voice trailed off as I shook his hand. “Mister Laird.”

I squeezed my eyes tightly as I fumbled my words. He was my boss, I should’ve called him Mr. Starling, but he had introduced himself as Laird. My brain mashed the two of them together into one embarrassing half-name. “Mr. Starling.” I corrected.

He laughed. “It’s just Laird. Nice work out there. You and Jessica make a great team.”

“Thank you. Although I think that there might be a few more ringers on this team.” I smiled at Jenny. “Are you a professional swimmer?”

“Not anymore.” Jenny winked. “But I was All American at Stanford – and Ramona still races sailboats, but she specializes in big boats, not dingies.”

“A sail is a sail and a keel is a keel.” Ramona also winked. “And what about you?” I asked Jessica.

“Harvard rowing alumna.” She held her hands up in front of her as if she’d been caught with her hands in the cookie jar.

Laird surveyed the crowd. Only one canoe was left on the course and the crowd was shifting to the start line for the next race. “Where’s your brother?”

Jessica rolled her eyes. “I don’t know. He was supposed to meet me at the main cottage, but he didn’t show.”

Laird's lips narrowed, but his look of annoyance was brief. "If it doesn't have an engine in it, he's not interested. Well, your substitute paddled a hell of a lot better than he would've. It was nice to meet you, Rosie. I hope to see more of you this summer."

The only way that Laird Starling was going to see more of me was with a mop in my hand, not a canoe paddle. "It was nice to meet you too, sir."

Laird shot me an amused look and then disappeared into the crowd. I pulled Jessica aside. "I should get back to work."

"We still have to get our medals." Her eyes were trained on a good-looking guy easing into a kayak. He had taken off his shirt and looked like a bronzed god. His shoulder muscles rippled as he eased into the kayak.

"Do you know Mrs. Graham?" I put my hands on my hips.

Jessica laughed. "I sure do. She looked after me and my brother. She's like my second mom. If my second mom were a drill sergeant battle axe. Just kidding," she sighed. "Faye has a good heart and cares as much about this family as she does her own." Her eyes drifted over my shoulder to the kayak god who was stretching his arms above his head, the paddle in his hands. "I'll take you back after this race..."

BACK AT STARLING ISLAND, Jessica eased the wakeboard boat to the dock. I tossed my shoes onto the wooden planks. "Thanks for inviting me to the regatta. That was a fun afternoon."

“No, thank you.” Jessica reached into the compartment in the boat and handed me a roll of cash. “I really did have money on that race. You saved my bacon.”

“I can’t.” I held up my hand. “I can’t take that money.”

“Why the hell not? You earned it.” Jessica grabbed my hand, uncurled my fingers, and closed them around the band of cash. “I’ll bring you your medal later. They’re not really medals, they’re pieces of wood, but they’re cute.”

“It’s ok. I really should get back to work. I promised Mrs. Graham that I’d have the boathouse done by the end of the day.”

Jessica smoothed the flyaway from her ponytail flat. “You should come to the Stone Oven tonight. It’s karaoke.”

I laughed and then realized that she was serious. “I’ll think about it.”

Jessica narrowed her eyes. “That means you’re not coming. Give me your number then, I think we should hang out. Or at least plan to go to the Chance Rapids regatta and win some more cash.”

Squeezing the money, I realized that I could go out to the bar and drink something other than tap water. “I’ll come tonight.” I did not want to go to the Stone Oven for karaoke night, but admitting to Jessica Starling that I didn’t own a cell phone seemed mortifying. She wasn’t looking at me like the help, she was treating me like an actual friend. Maybe it was immature, but it had been so long since I’d made a friend, that I didn’t want to break the spell.

“See you there.” She gunned the engine and waved as she headed back to the regatta. Probably to watch that kayaker, whose name was Jasper, win another race. He had easily taken

first place and had jogged over to plant a kiss on Jessica as soon as he was done.

I felt a pang of jealousy at Jessica and her life, but I couldn't hate her. She was easily the kindest person I'd met in years and didn't look down on me. Was it because we'd won? I opened my hand and counted the money. She'd handed me one thousand dollars. But, something told me that even if we'd tipped the canoe and come in last place, she still would've invited me to go out with her friends. As a girl who hadn't had a new friend, other than co-workers – since she was thirteen, an unfamiliar feeling beat in my belly. Nerves.

I had made a friend. And an extra thousand dollars that Christina didn't know about. Slipping the cash into my pocket, my heart sank. In the excitement of it all, I had forgotten about my last shift at the factory. I couldn't meet Jessica at the Stone Oven. I had to go home, nap for as long as I could before putting on the polyester button-up shirt and go to my second job.

While I finished scrubbing the boathouse until it was spotless, the excitement of the afternoon dissipated. I stared at the waves lapping at the side of the pontoon boat as Trey drove me and Tara to the mainland. I felt lower than I'd felt in a long time. I'd had a glimpse of a life that was out of my grasp.

“Bye, Trey.” Tara hopped off the boat. She'd been avoiding Trey since her failed attempt at flirting with him, and her warning from Mrs. G. “Good night Miss Tara and Miss Rosie.” He winked as he said my name. Mrs. Graham must have told him to call me my real name.

“Good night, Trey.” I tried to smile at him, but couldn't muster the energy to do much more than turn up the sides of

my closed mouth.

“What’s up with you?” Tara asked as we walked away from the pontoon boat. But Tara’s voice had turned into muffled white noise. There, parked in the marina parking lot, sat a motorcycle that I knew well.

He was here. Somewhere. I gulped. How could I face Max again, after the way that we’d left things? The way that I’d left things...

“Earth to Daisy.” Tara waved her hand in front of my face. “Whatcha thinking about?”

I shrugged. “Nothing.” I was thinking about the way Max’s thumbs dug into my hip bones. The way that my stomach flipped when he smiled at me. “I’m just tired.”

“Let me give you a ride home. I’ve got the car today.” Tara held up a set of keys.

The late afternoon sun was beating down on us, and there was no way I could refuse a ride home in the air-conditioned comfort of Tara’s Honda Fit. I didn’t tell her about the invite from Jessica, it didn’t matter anyway, I was going to stand her up and probably never see her again.

Tara rambled on about Trey while I stared out the window. Of course, Max would be back in Laketown. I don’t know how I expected to go the entire summer without running into him, it was a town of four thousand people after all.

I fingered my necklace, a gift from my dad on my tenth birthday, a gold necklace with a gemstone representing him, my mom, and me, along with my initials on the back. Only the stone representing me, a ruby, was gone. I couldn’t bring myself to take it off though. One day I’d replace the ruby, but until then I still felt like I had them with me.

Back at home, I bypassed the trailer and slipped into my shed. I flicked on the oscillating fan and flopped onto my bed, pulled out one of my textbooks, knowing that I would be asleep in seconds. It would act more like a blanket than a book.

But, instead of sleeping, I tossed and turned. Then I did something that I never thought I'd do. I slipped into the trailer. "Christina," I shouted.

The shower was running and Nickelback was blaring. That meant Christina was home and would be in the shower for at least thirty minutes. I tiptoed into her room, found her cell phone – and called in sick for my last day of work at the factory.

EIGHT

DAISY

EVEN BEFORE I could see the Stone Oven, I could hear it. Someone was singing a Bon Jovi song, and not well. I smiled and cringed at the same time as they attempted one of the high notes. Guilt gnawed at my guts about bailing on my last night of work, but my supervisor didn't seem to care when I told her that I wasn't feeling well.

I slipped the ten speed into the trees next to the entrance grabbed the hem of my t-shirt at the back and tried to waft some fresh air up my back. It had been a hot summer day that had turned into a hot summer night. The last pink of the sunset lingered on the horizon over Sugar Peak. The lake was flat and the moon was already rising, casting a white line across the reflective surface.

My fanny pack hung across my chest and I patted the front pocket, feeling for the roll of cash I'd tucked in there before I left, leaving the majority of it hidden in the bottom drawer of my dresser in the shed. Taking a deep breath, I headed up the stairs in the direction of the off-key rendition of *Dead or Alive*.

"Identification?" A bouncer the size of a refrigerator stood in the doorway.

"I'm twenty-three." I shot him a smile, hoping that he would step aside. My driver's license was in the glove box of

Christina's car.

He crossed his arms and widened his stance. "And my name is Cleopatra."

"I'm meeting some friends here. My license is in the car. I promise. I'm twenty-three."

His eyes softened. "I believe you, but I can't take your word for it. If your identification is in the car, I can wait."

Tears welled in my eyes. I swiped angrily at them with the back of my hand. Crying at the door of the bar wasn't exactly a mature thing to do and wasn't helping my cause. I felt like a little kid at the height measurement board at an amusement, crying because I couldn't get on the roller coaster. "I rode my bike."

He turned his hands up and shrugged. "I wish I could help you." He put his hand to his mouth as though he was sharing a deep dark secret with me. "Trust me, you're not missing much. There will be someone butchering classic rock here every week for the rest of the summer."

I sighed. "If you see Jessica Starling could you tell her that I was here?"

His eyebrows raised. "Jessie Starling?"

"I was supposed to meet her here."

He rubbed his chin with his hand. "You swear that you're twenty-three."

I nodded.

He stepped aside. "Bring your identification next time."

"Seriously?"

“Hurry up before I change my mind.” He gestured for me to enter like a butler. “And next time, lose the braids, you look like you’re fifteen.”

“Thank you.” It came out as a gush.

He shook his head. “Kids. Don’t make me regret this.”

“You won’t.” I patted his arm.

The room was packed. I wove through the crowd, shimmying sideways as I tried to avoid full-body contact with sweaty strangers. Bon Jovi had been replaced with someone singing Shania Twain. Unlike the first guy, this singer was good. I stood on my tiptoes to catch a glimpse and recognized Jenny. Jessica was sitting at a table near the front. She looked in my direction and I stretched my arm to wave at her. She returned the wave and with a destination in sight, I changed course through the crowd, like a salmon swimming upstream.

“Hi,” I shouted over *Man, I Feel Like a Woman*.

Jessica patted the chair next to her. “Beer?” She held up a pitcher.

“Sure.” I settled in next to her.

She handed me a glass half filled with beer and topped with foam and topped up everyone else’s glasses at the table.

“You know Ramona and Amanda.”

“Hey.” The two girls smiled and held up their glasses. “Our paddle machine has come to celebrate.”

My cheeks flushed. I tapped my glass to the other’s and made eye contact as we drank.

“Cute braids.” Jessica tugged on one. “What’s with the miner’s lamp?”

I touched the light that was stretched over my Brankmere Hall baseball cap. “I forgot that I was wearing this.” I laughed and took off the headlamp, zipping it into my crossbody bag. “I rode my bike.”

“No wonder you’re in such good shape.”

“We should’ve had her for the traditional triathlon.” The swimmer girl grinned. “Rosie can be our ringer.”

I laughed. “My bike is about forty years old and half of the gears don’t work.”

“How far did you ride to get here?” Jessica took a sip of her beer. “We could’ve had our driver come and get you.”

“Trey?” I asked. I glossed over Jessica’s question. It was fifteen miles from the end of Sunflower Lane to the downtown core of Windswan. I wasn’t sure how many miles it was from town to the Stone Oven.

“Yeah. My dad is so paranoid about us drinking and boating after that accident, Trey drives us everywhere.”

“He’s so cute.” Amanda grinned.

Jessica swatted her arm. “He’s too old for you.”

Amanda shrugged and pumped her eyebrows. “I didn’t say I wanted to fuck him, he’s just, you know, cute for an old guy.”

Jessica leaned in toward me. “He’s too good for her.”

“Hey.” Amanda tossed a piece of popcorn from the wicker basket in the center of the table. It felt like I was hanging out with regular girls, not daughters of billionaires. Easing into my chair, we all watched Jenny finish off the Shania song with a high kick.

“Woohoo.” Jessica was on her feet and her beer sloshed onto the table as she thrust it into the air. “You’re up next.” She tugged at my arm.

“Absolutely not.” I pulled my arm from hers. “I will paddle, row, swim, any day of the week, but you will not catch me doing that.”

Luckily, someone else was on the performance list, and over the evening Jessica lost interest in trying to drag me up to the stage. I didn’t drink very often, and after four glasses of watery draft beer, I was convinced to join the girls in a very terrible rendition of *Respect* by Aretha Franklin. As the crowd cheered, we tumbled back into our seats.

A guy with a backward hat who looked like he’d just walked off a lacrosse field and was on his way to a frat party slung his arm over Ramona’s shoulder. “Can I buy you ladies a round?” he asked.

Ramona shrugged his arm off her shoulder. “Only if it’s a bottle of Cristal.”

The guy grinned. “I don’t think that they carry it here. It doesn’t pair well with popcorn.” As if to exemplify his point, he reached across the table and grabbed a handful of popcorn.

Jessica pulled the basket toward her. “Actually, it’s my favorite, so they stock it here. For me.”

The cockiness deflated from him like a freshly pricked balloon. “Oh.”

Ramona put her hand on the front of the guy’s t-shirt. “I was just joking. We’re drinking whatever this is on tap.” She held up the empty plastic jug. The guy took the jug from her. “I’ll be right back.”

Jessica shook her head. “What are you doing?”

“He’s cute,” Ramona said. “It’s been a while since I’ve been laid.”

Amanda leaned out from the table and watched the frat boy disappear into the crowd. “He’s wearing construction boots. Ramona is going to get a blue-collar lay tonight.

“You two sound like spoiled little rich girls.” Jessica rolled her eyes.

“We are.” They giggled. “There’s nothing wrong with slumming it.” Ramona crossed her arms and with a sassy head tilt said, “You’ve done it too.”

For the first time, I saw a blush travel along Jessica’s perfect jawline. “Enough.” She hissed and I don’t think that she intended for me to see it, but cut her eyes at me. The slumming it with the blue-collar boys was likely a conversation reserved for the tennis club dressing room, not one to be had with the maid sitting at the table.

“I don’t care,” I shrugged. “They’re all the same to me.”

“Do you have a boyfriend?” Jessica studied me.

“I’m too busy. Maybe after college.”

“Good for you.” She slapped her hand on my leg. “Although you’re probably too good for any of these guys in here.”

It had crossed my mind more than once that Max might be at the Stone Oven, but somehow I didn’t think that karaoke night with twenty-somethings was his scene. It still didn’t stop me from looking up every time the door opened, wondering if there was a motorcycle parked outside.

A young girl wearing a Stone Oven t-shirt appeared at our table with a bucket of ice. “Miss Starling?” There was a quiver

in her voice, she was nervous.

“Yes?” Jessica looked at the bin of ice. “What is this?” There was a hint of drunken slur in her voice and it seemed like she was having a hard time focusing on the bucket.

“The man at the bar bought this for your table.” She held up a bottle of champagne.

Jessica held onto the table and craned to look at the bar. Her lips turned up ever so slightly. “Tell him we need two.”

“What?” the girl blinked.

“Tell Jasper that a gentleman makes sure everyone will have a full glass.” Jessica took the ice bucket and handed it to the waitress.

While we waited, Jessica fixed her hair. “Is my eyeliner running?” she asked.

“It looks perfectly smoky,” I said. “Who is that? Is that the guy from the kayak?”

“He’s no one unless two bottles come back.” Jessica glanced at the bar and tucked her blond strands behind her ear. She was playing it cool, but whoever was at the bar was clearly making her nervous. It was refreshing and made her seem even more like a real person.

The backward hat guy in the construction boots had sidled up next to Ramona with a full pitcher of beer. Amanda and Jenny had disappeared onto the balcony dance floor, wrapped in the arms of some guys who I didn’t recognize. The guy with Jenny had his hand firmly clamped on her muscular butt. These women were acting like college girls. I was younger than them, by quite a few years, but felt like the responsible older sister. “Is Jenny ok?”

“Oh yeah. That’s the guy she’s been hooking up with every summer – Braydon Benson. I’m not too sure about her though.” Jessica gestured to Ramona and the construction boot guy.

The waitress returned with another waitress in tow, each carrying two bottles of champagne. “That’s more like it.” Jessica relaxed into her chair as the bottles were opened. She pointed to her own chest, then at me, Ramona, Construction boot guy, and the two empty chairs counting. “Pour seven glasses please – and tell Jasper to come over and have a drink with me.” She opened her purse and handed the girl a hundred-dollar bill. “Just in case he didn’t tip well.”

“That’s not necessary...” The waitress shook her head and tried to hand the money back, but Jessica pushed her hand away.

I wasn’t sure if it was a total boss move, or if Jessica was being obnoxious. “Jasper and I have quite the history. He fucks up every year and spends the rest of the summer trying to win me back. This is a little game that we play. Trust me, he likes it.”

As if on cue, Jasper appeared, looking like he’d stepped off a yacht, complete with deck shoes and a popped collar. “May I have the pleasure of your company, Miss Starling?” His teeth were perfect, and his grin told me that Jessica was right, he was enjoying whatever fucked up game of cat and mouse they were playing.

“If you must.” She waved her hand at the free chair.

“Cheers.” He held up the glass in front of him.

All of us, including the construction boot guy, held up our glasses. “To the best summer on Windswan Lake.” His voice

was commanding. We tapped our glasses together and as everyone sipped the ridiculously expensive champagne, he added. “And to the most beautiful woman on the lake.” His eyes were glued on Jessica.

The karaoke master had taken a break and put on some music. Everyone in the bar proceeded to get a little bit more intoxicated with every song the DJ played. Ramona and Construction boot buy were full-on making out at the end of the table. Jenny was still swaying on the dance floor with her summer fling, and Amanda had disappeared into the crowd. “Who is this?” Jasper had finally taken his eyes off Jessica to look at me.

“This is Rosie. She’s the best paddler the regatta has ever seen.”

His eyes focused and there was a hint of recognition. “Right, you girls won the regatta today.”

“And the bet. Pay up.” Jessica rubbed her fingertips against her thumb, the international sign for money.

“Nope.” Jasper grinned. “I bet on your team losing when your brother was involved. You forfeited the bet when you brought in a professional.”

“Me?” I pretended to be aghast. “That was the first time I was in a canoe.”

“See?” Jessica draped her arm over my shoulder. “The odds should be changed in my favor.”

Jasper leaned back in his chair, crossed his ankle over his knees, and put his hands behind his head, fingers interlaced. “How about I take you out for dinner instead?”

Jessica squeezed my shoulder before releasing it. “Dinner? You can do better than that, Jasp.”

I couldn't tell whether the nickname was a sign of affection, or if she was dismissing him. Jessica Starling could join the pro poker circuit, she was so hard to read. She stared at her perfect French manicure and then the side of her mouth turned up. "You can be my date for the masquerade ball."

Jasper groaned and dropped his hands from behind his head. "Come on. The masquerade? What are we sixteen?"

"It's not a debutante ball." Jessica turned her palm to further study her nails, her fingers curled into a loose fist. "It's a fundraiser."

His look of annoyance didn't fade. "It's so pedestrian, Jess. You know that." He leaned forward. "I heard that they're even doing a locals rate if any of these schmucks can even afford that."

Jasper was quickly falling down the rungs of my ladder of opinion.

"I think that it's forward-thinking to include some of the people from town. Maybe they should even sit on some of the committees. They may not have a pedigree or a fancy degree, but they might be able to give you some local insight that you can't get from flying over the countryside in your helicopter, or read about in your textbooks."

His laugh was so obnoxious it turned into a cough. He released his fingers from his head to hack into his fist. "Daisy? Is it? What kind of fairytale land do you come from? There isn't a secret botanist living in the trailer park that's going to teach us about saving the ecosystem."

He was probably right, but he was so pompous I wanted to punch him in his perfect teeth. "There are fishermen here who know a lot about the lake..." my voice trailed off. I couldn't

think of any other blue-collar people that could teach this asshole a thing or two about the environment.

Jasper shook his head and wiped a tear from his eye. “The local fishermen, the ones who throw their beer bottles in the lake and claim that they’re creating an ecosystem?”

I hadn’t heard this, but it wouldn’t surprise me. I’d come across some pretty rough characters in the trailer park who tossed their beer cans out the window as they drove, claiming they were contributing to the local economy – that people worse off than them would clean up the litter and collect the deposit.

“Jasper.” Any hint of a smile was gone from Jessica’s face. “Don’t be such an arrogant asshole. I like the idea of a few local people getting to mingle with the one percent. It was my brother’s idea, and I like it. The only way that you’re getting into my sauna this summer is if you take me to the ball.” She brushed invisible dust from her hands. I couldn’t fathom why she wanted such a jerk to take her to the ball, but like she said, they had a complicated history.

It was like watching a bad tennis match with these two.

Jasper grinned. “Only if we do what we did in the sauna last year.”

“Deal.” Jessica stuck out her hand and I tried not to roll my eyes as Jasper shook it.

Jasper looked directly at me. “We fucked. We fucked in the sauna last year.”

“Jasper.” Jessica shook her head and gave his chest a play shove. Then she looked at me. “It’s true. We did.” She leaned into me and I’m sure she was whispering in her drunken mind. “He’s got a huge dick.”

“I think that’s my cue to go.” I stood.

“Don’t go.” Jessica grabbed my hand. “We’ll change the subject.”

“I doubt there’s any subject that Jasper and I have in common.”

“Oh, come on Heidi.” Jasper leaned across the table and tugged one of my braids. “We’re just playing around. It’s our thing,” he shrugged.

“Would you want me to stick around if you knew that I scrubbed her toilets?”

Jasper’s laugh was low and far too loud. “That’s a good one.” My hands were balled into tight fists and I stood, putting them on my hips. His man cackle stopped abruptly.

“You’re serious.”

He turned to Jessica. “Is she serious?”

Jessica nodded. “She’s a hard worker, and she’s saving up for college. She’s going to save the world from people like us.”

Jasper bit his lip and crossed his arms across his body. “I’m sorry. For laughing. I thought it was a joke.”

“Well, it wasn’t. I’m one of those local hicks you don’t want at your fancy party because we might use the wrong damn fork.”

“Daisy. Shit. I didn’t know. I wouldn’t have...”

“You wouldn’t have been yourself?” I had officially had enough. I wasn’t missing anything at the Stone Oven. I’d rather have spent my night under the fluorescent lights in the factory than spend one more second at a table with Jasper.

It was Jessica's turn to watch the banter, although unlike hers, I wasn't flirting. Jasper inhaled and drained the glass of champagne. "You're too sensitive Heidi."

"Her name isn't Heidi." Jessica put her hand on my arm. "Don't go. I'll get rid of him." She jerked her head toward Jasper and again likely thought that she was whispering.

"I'll save you the trouble." He emptied the bottle of champagne into a beer glass. "I'll leave you to your charity case, Jess." His chair toppled backward as he stood. He stumbled as his legs got tangled up in the legs of the chair – jutting out like a road kill carcass. He held the champagne glass up over his head as he recovered. "Didn't spill a drop." He stumbled once more, but there was nothing in his way – he was much drunker than I'd first thought.

"I'm so sorry, Rosie." Jessica's eyes were filled with tears. "He's not usually like that."

I sighed. "Well, they say a person's true nature comes out when they drink."

"He is a jerk, but that was...enlightening." She crossed her arms. I'm going to have to find a new date to the ball, but I haven't met anyone as good at 'sauna' as he was. Her eyes drifted over my shoulder and then widened. A grin spread across her face. "It looks like Amanda's true nature is slutty."

Turning, Amanda was holding onto one of the poles that held up the awning. She kicked off her Hermes flats and kicked her leg above her head, inverting herself on the pole.

"She was a gymnast," Jessica explained.

"I'm impressed. That looked effortless."

Amanda returned to the ground and everyone in eyesight of the patio clapped. She held onto the 'pole' and bowed. "I

wish I could bottle your confidence.”

“Whose?” Jessica asked.

“All of you. Look at you. You do whatever you want and don’t care what anyone thinks.”

Jessica took her eyes away from the action and her smile vanished. “That’s where you’re wrong, Rosie. We act like this because we care what everyone thinks.” Her voice had dropped an octave and she swayed on her feet. I felt like she’d just divulged a deep dark secret. Jessica Starling was beautiful, and smart, had traveled the world, and had the richest men in the state falling at her feet. There was no way she was insecure.

“You.” She pointed at me. “I’m jealous of you. You don’t have to deal with any of this world.” She twirled her finger.

I highly doubted that Jessica would last one day if we traded places. “That’s true, but you don’t have to worry about whether or not there’s food in the fridge.”

Her eyes snapped to mine. “You don’t have to worry about that do you?” Her eyes brimmed with tears. “I’m sorry.” She swiped at her face. “I’m drunk. I always cry when I’m drunk.”

“We should get you home.” I eased her into the chair, she leaned heavily on my arm. How had she gotten so wasted? I felt tipsy, but I could still stand and had my wits about me. I couldn’t say the same thing for any of the group. They were a mess.

Jessica rested her forehead in her hands. “Can you call Trey and tell him to come and get us?”

“Sure.” I waved to the waitress. “Can you bring us some water?” I mouthed as she got closer. She nodded and returned with a pitcher and four plastic cups. I poured a cup for Jessica

and one for myself for good measure. Amanda and Jenny were still dancing on the patio.

“Thanks, Rosie. I’m sorry for getting so wasted.” She seemed to go cross-eyed as she brought the red cup to her mouth. She wiped her lips with the back of her hand. “Can you call Trey?”

“Right.” I held out my hand. “Give me your phone.”

She patted her legs and some invisible pockets on her t-shirt. “Can’t you use yours? I can’t find mine.”

Sighing, I pointed to her purse. “I don’t have a phone. Check your purse.”

Her brow furrowed as she stared at me. “You don’t have a phone?”

Shit. I hadn’t meant for that detail to slip out. I’d managed to avoid that conversation earlier, albeit by agreeing to show up at this shitshow of a night.

“Here.” She typed in her password and handed her phone to me.

Before I could locate Trey’s phone number, the screen lit up. “Someone is calling you. I read the name on the screen. Big Bro.”

“My brother.” Jessica took the phone from my hands and accepted the call.

Come get us.

Her eyes were closed and she seemed to be getting drunker by the second if that was possible. She was going to be incoherent if she kept going at this rate.

I searched the sea of swaying and grinding couples, searching the patio, hoping that at least one of the other two girls was going to be in good enough shape to get Jessica home.

Jessica's side of the conversation consisted of clipped one or two-word responses.

Stone Oven.

Drunk.

Come now.

I love you.

She went from barking orders at her brother, to a sweet tone I hadn't heard from her yet.

"My brother is coming to get us. He can drive you home."

Ramona teetered to the table, workboot guy in tow. "Darryl is coming home with us. Jenny is fucking Braydon in the bathroom. I don't think he's going back to her house. I don't know where Amanda went..."

"Cool." Jessica's eyes were now half closed.

I didn't want to get a ride home with Jessica's brother, but I also didn't feel right leaving the girls alone at the bar. "When is your brother going to get here?" I asked.

"Soon." Jessica's one-word answers continued.

"I'm going to find Jenny and Amanda. You two stay here. Got it." I pointed at both of them and they nodded, Construction guy did too.

I wove through the crowd and paused at the bathroom door, knowing that I was likely walking in on Jenny bent over

the toilet with Braydon behind her, his shorts on the bathroom floor. “Lord help me.” I took a breath and pushed on the door.

Jenny was at the sink applying lip gloss. “Hey!” her eyes flickered with recognition in the mirror.

A glance under the stalls didn’t reveal any men’s feet. “Jessica’s brother is coming to get us.”

“Good.” She screwed the top of her gloss onto the tube. “I’m ready to go.”

“Does Braydon need a ride?”

“He left. He’s got some important business call with Tokyo or something.”

I laughed. “Ramona told me he was in here with you, you know...” My voice trailed off. I had just met these girls and already knew a lot more about them than I figured they wanted me to know.

Jenny dropped the lip gloss into her handbag. “We just finished. I’m ready.”

We found Amanda, who was in the best shape of the group. We tromped up the stairs and returned to the table. The crowd had started to thin and it was easier to navigate among the sticky tables. “Why didn’t Jessica call Trey?” Jenny asked. “Her brother has such a stick up his ass, he’s going to give us shit the whole way home.”

Chalk up another point for the brother I’d never met. These socialites were supposed to be classy. And while they’d been kind and welcoming to me all night, I was shocked by their behavior. I thought they’d be stuck up and look down on everyone who wasn’t on their level. It turns out they could rival the trashiest women in town.

“I’m not sure why she didn’t call Trey.” It was easier than explaining that she was likely not capable of calling their chauffeur. I also wouldn’t want Trey to have to deal with the fallout from the bar. For sure Ramona was going to puke off the side of the boat.

Jenny draped her arm over Amanda. “You know that Jess is protective of her staff.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Amanda had a smile on her face but sounded pissed off. Like she hadn’t decided whether or not to be offended by Jenny’s comment.

“You know.” Jenny was clearly enjoying this. “You’d break that guy’s middle-aged heart.”

“True.” Amanda tilted her head as she swayed on her feet. “But, I bet he’d be good in the sack. You know, being all Gen X and everything.”

The brother couldn’t get to the Stone Oven fast enough. I kept glancing at the door, hoping to see the male version of Jessica appear behind the bouncer. “What does Jessica’s brother look like?” I asked.

When I looked back to the door, a pair of eyes settled on mine – a set that I knew very well.

Chloe.

Her eyes narrowed as recognition settled in. She definitely saw me.

Ramona leaned against the table, and it lurched toward her. Glasses and empty pitchers tumbled onto the floor. Every eye in the place turned to look at us. “Oh no.” Ramona was sitting on the floor, amongst the sea of plastic cups and empty champagne bottles.

Amanda doubled over, squeezing her legs together. “I’m going to piss my pants, Ramona, are you okay?” She held out her hand to help her friend up from the puddle of booze on the floor. As she heaved Ramona up from the ground I bent to pick up the cups and Jessica was right beside me.

“I can’t take these two anywhere.” Jessica shook her head as she stacked the plastic cups in each other and then set them inside one of the empty beer pitchers.

Was I helping to pick up the mess? Yes. Was I also hiding from my stepsister? Also, yes. “Do they always get like... this?” I didn’t know how to politely ask if her friends always got fall-down-sleep-with-men in the restroom drunk.

Jessica shrugged. “Not every time. Sometimes they’re worse.”

My eyes must have widened a little too dramatically.

“Just kidding,” Jessica nudged me and set the pitcher on the table. “They’re usually way worse.” She brushed her hands together and I knew that I’d have to stand up eventually. I held my breath and hoped that Chloe had left and that by some miracle – hadn’t seen me.

As soon as I stood, I knew that no such miracles had happened. “There you are,” Chloe said with a grin plastered on her face.

“Hey, Chloe.” She was about to cause a scene, I could feel it.

“I thought that you were at work tonight. You forgot your lunch. Mom made me go all the way out there to drop it off. Did you have the night off?” Chloe’s hands were on her hips and bunched into fists. Her cheeks must have hurt from her giant fake smile. Chloe was more into the local scene than I

was and likely could tell that Jessica and her friends were from the upper crust of Windswan

Jessica looked at Chloe and then at me, her brow furrowed. “Is everything okay, Rosie?”

“Rosie?” Chloe raised her brows at me.

Jessica’s phone buzzed and she picked it up. “Our ride is here.”

She slung her designer handbag over her shoulder. Chloe’s eyes were drawn to the chain and her eyes took in Jessica’s multi-carat diamond tennis bracelet and designer clothes. “Are you coming?” Jessica paused and put her hand on my forearm.

I could feel Chloe’s eyes burning into the back of my skull and then she gripped onto my free arm. “She’s coming home.”

“Rosie?” Jessica didn’t let go of my arm. “Do you know this...person?”

Chloe stepped between me and Jessica. “I’m her sister, Chloe.” She thrust out her hand for a shake.

Jessica’s chin jerked back ever so slightly. “Rosie. Is this your...” her voice trailed off.

“Step. Sister.” I replied.

“Oh. Ok.” Jessica didn’t move to shake Chloe’s hand, her arm was still outstretched.

Chloe cleared her throat and dropped her hand. “Come on Rrrrrrosie.” She said my name a little louder than necessary and squeezed my arm, which she still had in her grip.

“Come on, Jessica.” Jenny was leaning against the doorframe that led to the patio. “The boat is here.”

“Are you going to be able to get them home okay?” I asked.

“We’ll be just fine.” Jessica checked her watch, a vintage Cartier. “Are you heading home with your stepsister?”

Chloe answered for me. “Yes. She’ll be just fine.” She used Jessica’s exact wording and mirrored her tone.

“Ok. Bye.” Jessica waved and joined up with the other girls waiting by the doorway. “Bye, Rosie.” They shouted and then the three of them disappeared down to the docks.

Chloe dug her fingernails into my forearm. “You’re not going to be fine at all, Rosie.” She yanked me and held onto my arm in her death grip until we were at the car. My paper bag with my lunch sat on the passenger seat. “I rode my bike.” I pointed to the bush where I’d stashed the old ten-speed.

“I’m not letting you out of my sight. You can come and get it tomorrow, that is if Mom lets you out of the house. She’s going to lose her mind when she finds out that you skipped work to go drinking with those losers.”

“That was Jessica Starling. My boss.”

“That was Laird Starling’s daughter?” She started the car. “Get in.”

I slid into the passenger seat and put my lunch on my lap and rubbed my arm where the half-circle indents from Chloe’s nails still burned bright red. As we crept down the dirt road, Chloe took out her cell phone and called Christina.

When we pulled into the driveway Christina was standing in the doorway in a fluffy pink robe. “You’re in so much shit.” Chloe shut off the engine and snatched the lunch from my lap. She handed Christina the keys to the car as she strode past her and into the trailer.

Christina was at the passenger door before I got out. She yanked it open and then pulled me from the car. “You quit your job at the factory?” she hissed.

“I thought that if I got the job at the island I wouldn’t have to work two jobs.” I could’ve sworn this was our agreement.

Christina shoved me with both hands hard enough that I slammed against the side of the car. “Oooof.” I wanted to rub my tailbone but was too afraid to move. Christina had that look in her eye, the one she got before she went psycho.

“The island job is just for the summer. What happens in the fall?”

Emboldened by the draft beer, I pushed away from the car so I was standing upright. “Hopefully you’ve snagged your next victim and I don’t have to work eighty hours a week to keep this leaky roof over our heads.”

Christina shook her finger at me. “You watch your tone. You know that I decide whether or not you get your inheritance. Me.” She pointed to her chest. “One word from me and all of that money is donated to charity and you don’t see a cent.”

I still couldn’t believe that my dad left Christina in charge of my inheritance and that I had to wait until I was twenty-five years old to get it. “The job can go into the winter.” I crossed my arms and tried to make myself smaller. Threatening Christina wasn’t going to make my life any easier.

“Good.” Christina shoved her hand into the pocket of her robe. “I was able to talk to your boss at the factory, and you can keep that job part-time through the summer, going back to full-time in the fall.”

I inhaled sharply. Working didn't bother me, I actually liked it, but I needed some time to study and to well, sleep.

"Is there a problem?"

Appealing to Christina's social climbing side was the only way to get me out of the factory job. "They need me to work extra hours for their masquerade ball. I think I will even get overtime. If I'm working at the factory, I won't be able to work at the ball."

Christina's evil glint seemed to fade and was replaced with a joker-like smile. "Can you get us tickets to the ball?"

I turned my palms up. "I don't know. I think that they're offering a discount to locals who want to go to the event."

"Tell you what." Christina rubbed her chin. "Get me two tickets to that ball and you can quit the factory job...for now."

I had no idea if I could get tickets, but the roll of cash along with some of my savings might be enough for at least one. "I'll get you one."

"Two." Christina stepped toward me. "Laird Starling has a son that would be perfect for Chloe."

I hadn't thought much about Jessica's brother. In fact, the only thing I knew about him was that he was older than her and skipped out on the regatta. I highly doubted that he was perfect for Chloe, but in Christina's world, anyone who was in line to inherit a billion-dollar fortune was Chloe's type.

"Alright. Two. I will get you two tickets to the ball."

Christina's smile widened. "Good."

I exhaled, and thinking that the conversation was over started to walk to my shed. "Where are you going?"

“To bed.”

Christina’s slippers padded on the dirt and suddenly my head snapped back. She had grabbed one of my braids. “Ow.” I reached to hold the braid above her hand to ease the pressure on my skull.

“There are consequences for your actions. Get the tickets, or lose the other one.”

She pulled a pair of scissors from her housecoat pocket and snipped off the braid that hung down the right side of my head. Freed from her grip, I stumbled forward, holding onto the section of hair. She tossed the braid to me. “Think about that the next to you embarrass the family.”

NINE

MAX

WASHING OFF THE CITY. That's what I called my first swim in Windswan Lake after being at the office. There was something about diving into the lake that cleared the slate. I was no longer Max Starling, businessman. I was Max, the guy who knew the names of all the people at the marina. The guy who had formed friendships with people from all over Windswan Lake, regardless of how many zeroes were in their bank account.

I set my towel on the dock next to me and Fanta rolled onto his back, basking on the dock in a beam of sunlight. Closing my eyes, I did the same, stretching my hands over my head, and turning my face to the sun. Every year I started to hate the city even more. I didn't care about the restaurants, the nightlife, the women. It was so weird. I was bored in the city that could offer me everything, but when I came to the cottage, where the loudest sound that morning was the water lapping against the dock and a faraway loon call, I felt energized.

After consulting the thermometer, it confirmed what I already suspected – that the water had reached its peak summer temperature, a refreshing seventy degrees. I dove in and swam as far as I could before my lungs felt like they were going to explode. When I surfaced, Jess was standing on the dock. She held up a cup of coffee.

Back in the lounge chair with the towel wrapped around my shoulders, I sat and sipped my morning coffee. “I can’t believe you’re up,” I said.

Jessica moaned and draped her arm across her forehead. “I need to jump in the lake to get rid of this hangover.”

“Do you need assistance with that?” I jerked on the chair, threatening to get up and throw her in.

My sister didn’t flinch. “You wouldn’t dare.”

“You’re right. You would probably throw up on me.” The coffee and the swim had left me feeling energized.

“Nah. I’m only medium hungover.” Jessica took a sip of her green juice and chased it with black coffee. “I’ll bet Triple J and Ramona are feeling a hell of a lot worse.”

The last thing I wanted to do after arriving in Windswan was pick up my sister and her drunken friends at the Stone Oven. “You four were a mess.”

Jessica sat up and pulled her sunglasses down her nose to look at me with her bloodshot eyes. “Don’t you lecture me, Max. You and your buddies were ten times worse – especially when you hung out with the construction guys.”

It was true. I had done my fair share of partying, but when I walked into the Stone Oven and saw the scene in front of me, I was glad that those days were over. Sure, I still drank here and there, but after the accident, and the death of a friend of mine, I hadn’t looked at booze the same way. That was the main reason that I’d gone to pick up Jessica. I couldn’t lose another person to an accident on the lake.

“Where were you?” Jessica asked. “We needed you.”

I was confused. “You needed me when?” I screwed up my forehead. “What are you talking about?”

Jessica sipped her green juice and then relaxed back into her chair. “The regatta. You didn’t show up.”

“Shit.” I shook my head. “I’m sorry about that Jess. I really am. There was this thing that came up with the fundraiser. I had to stay at the office late. Trust me, I would’ve much rather been paddling the canoe with you than dealing with the logistics of porta-potties on an island.”

“I hadn’t even thought about that,” Jessica murmured. “Don’t you have a planner to take care of all that?”

“I do.. I sighed. “I still have to oversee everything. “So far, this event looks like it’s barely going to break even. We’re supposed to be raising money for the environment, but it turns out that we might just be creating a night that makes it worse.”

“Yeah, especially if people start pooping in the lake.”

I groaned. “Gross. Jess. That’s not what I meant. I wanted to give the local Windswan people a break on the ticket price, but that pissed off a lot of the...” I pulled out the air quotes, “upper crust people out here, so there’s only going to be a few available.”

Jessica sat up. “Really? People care about that?”

“I guess.” I shrugged. “But enough about that. The event is happening this weekend, whether we’re ready for it or not.” The wind picked up and sent a shimmer of ripples across the water and a bunch of goosebumps across my chest. “How did you do in the regatta?”

Jessica took off her sunglasses and groaned as she rolled off the lounge chair and onto her feet. She walked to the end of the dock and climbed down the swim ladder until she was

waist-deep in the lake. “We won the water triathlon.” She grinned. “We beat Dad.”

“No way.” I sat and draped my towel around my neck. “Did he have all of his super fit ringers?”

She nodded. “Mmmhmmm. But we had Jenny, who was varsity swimming, and then I pulled in a ringer of my own for the canoe race. She was amazing.”

“She?” I knew that it sounded sexist, but for a team of all women to beat my dad and his crew, who trained all year for the regatta, would’ve been a huge upset.

Jessica splashed water at me. “Yes. She. You’re such a chauvinist.”

“Who was this girly Hercules?” I wiped the splashed water off my chest. Someone to paddle the front of the canoe would’ve needed to be strong as hell.

“Her name is Rosie. I know that we already made the deal, no more setups for the grump, but I think that you’d like her. You actually just missed her at the bar last night.”

“Grump?” I rinsed my cup off in the lake. “I don’t think I want to date a girl who has bigger biceps than me, and if she was with you four, I’m pretty sure she’s not for me.”

“You’re turning into the Grinch of Windswan Lake.” Jessica raised her eyebrows. “And, she doesn’t have bigger biceps than you, just better technique – and she’s not us. She’s actually one of the coolest women I’ve ever met. I wish you’d get over that girl from last year and open yourself up to new opportunities.”

This wasn’t the first time that Jessica had said something like that. “I’m not closed off Jess. I’m busy, there’s a difference.” Although, I knew that I was kidding myself.

Every woman that I met was measured against what I felt with Daisy – and every single one of them came up short. “Well, I’m sure that anyone who bet against you lost their shirt.”

Jessica grinned. “I made ten grand.”

“I sure hope that you shared it with your team. And, if Dad finds out that you’re gambling again...”

Jessica narrowed her eyes. “It’s not gambling. It was a friendly wager.”

“I think that’s the exact definition of gambling, Jess.” I shook my head. “Are you going into the lake or are you just going to stand there?”

Jessica gave me a wry smile. “I did share it with the team. Most of it. And no, I’m not going all the way in.” She shook her hips and then got out of the lake.

“You just peed in there, didn’t you.”

She shrugged. “A lady never tells. Hand me your towel.” She held out her hand.

I wrapped the towel around my neck like a scarf and backed away from my sister. “A lady never pees in the lake.”

Leaving my sister to dry off the old-fashioned way – in the sun, Fanta followed me as I headed up to the cottage. If Jessica’s new friend was anything like her or her friends, she wasn’t the one for me.

I got out of my swim trunks and slid into a pair of jeans and a white t-shirt. The packet of tickets to the ball sat on the island in the kitchen. If selling the tickets for a discount pissed off the board of directors, I wondered how giving them away would go over.

Not well, and I was fully prepared for the fallout.

I shoved the tickets into the inside pocket of my leather jacket, grabbed my helmet, and jogged to the dock. Trey dropped me off at the marina and I was soon kick-starting life into my motorcycle. My best thinking happened when I was riding my bike, and as I drove the winding road from the marina into downtown Windswan, I formulated my plan. I was going to Robin Hood the shit out of these tickets – and give them away to people who would never in a million years be able to attend a gala like ours.

I knew my father would hate it, but I didn't care. I was going to do it anyway.

THE TOWN of Windswan is located at the south end of the lake. The year-round population of the town is about four thousand, but in the summer, swells to about ten thousand. It is the opposite of the neighboring town, Chance Rapids, which is also a small town, but because of the ski resort, gets the bulk of its tourism in the winter.

My family has a vacation home in both towns, yet I've never really spent any time off the mountain slopes, or the water, so finding a place to give away the tickets was an adventure in itself. Windswan is anchored with a round town square if that makes any sense. The downtown curves around the park, which is always bursting with flowers. Other than tourism, the biggest industry in town is the greenhouses, which provide the northwest with flowers. I didn't know much about flowers, except that when we opened the cottage, tulips filled the town center, and when we closed it and packed up to head to the Chance Rapids chalet, it was the bright yellow and black sunflowers that dominated its core.

I parked my motorcycle in the town center next to a garden filled with flowers that looked too heavy for their stems, layers of pink petals formed big balls that looked ready to nosedive into the dirt. Daisy had stepped out of the field of sunflowers. Soon enough they would be blooming again, and it would have been a year since we'd made out on the beach.

A realization hit me. One so strong I couldn't believe I hadn't thought of it already. I had no idea what an actual daisy looked like. I set my helmet on the handlebars of my motorcycle and looked up and down the street, wondering where to start my mission.

Parker's Petals was directly in front of me. "That's as good of a place to start as any," I said to myself. Charms tinkled over my head as I stepped into the flower shop. To my surprise, a man wearing a pink leather apron stood behind the counter. "What can I do for you?" he asked as he stripped the leaves off of an orange and black spotted flower.

"I would like to order a bouquet of flowers." I leaned on the counter.

The man set down the flower and pointed to the cooler behind him. "What's the occasion?"

It wasn't the first time I'd given flowers to someone, but it was the first time that I'd actually ordered them myself, usually it was my assistant. "Do I need an occasion?"

The man smiled over his glasses. "It's a beautiful day and the sun is shining, I think that's a good enough reason."

"Me too." I had been in the corporate world so long, it felt foreign to talk to someone whose day wasn't based on how well the stock was performing and whether or not the shareholders were happy. "Do you have any daisies?"

He pulled two buckets out of the fridge behind him. “I’ve got Gerbera.” He pulled a bright pink flower from the bucket and showed it to me. “Or, I’ve got some field daisies.” The second bucket was filled with smaller flowers, with delicate white petals and pretty yellow centres.

I took one of the small daisies from the bucket and holding it by the stem, twirled it in my fingers. “I see these all the time on the hills outside Chance Rapids. I just never knew what they were called.”

“Most people don’t like those.” The man smiled and took another flower from the bucket. “My daughter wanted to make a crown out of these, so I picked them on the way to work for her.”

The Gerbera were big and saturated with color, the wild were delicate yet intricate, and understated – if I had to guess, I’d say that Daisy was named after the latter. I put the flower back into the bucket. “I don’t want to take the flowers away from the crown.”

The man laughed. “There’s plenty more where this came from. If these flowers speak to you, I think that they’re the ones that you should have.”

“Are you sure?”

He was already assembling the daisies with some other little white puffball flowers and some spiky green things. “It’s rare that a man buys flowers for himself. I wish more guys would pay attention to how things in their environment make them feel, rather than the practicality of it all.”

I knew exactly what he was talking about, those flowers were going to look pretty for a week or two, and then shrivel up and die. Knowing that, I never would’ve bought anything

with such a short return on investment, but a couple of weeks of waking up to see the daisies on my nightstand would feel good.

The flower man rolled up the bouquet in some brown paper and tied a rough piece of twine, securing it, and handed it to me. I set it on the counter and pulled out my wallet. “How much?”

“It’s on the house,” he held up his hands as I opened my wallet. “You’ve made my day, truly.” He smiled.

“Are you sure, Hank?” His business cards were sitting on the counter and I took one and tucked it into my wallet after glancing at it to read his name.

“I’m sure.” He pointed to another cooler filled with white roses. “I need to make room for the arrangements for that big ball that’s coming up.”

I made a mental note to give my event planner a bonus for hiring a local company to do the flowers for the fundraiser. It warmed my heart knowing that my stupid event was helping out this kind man, and it also made me see just how many people were going to be impacted, in a good way, by a bunch of rich people getting drunk and wearing masks.

Tucking the bouquet under my arm, I extended my free hand. “Pleased to meet you Hank, I’m Max Starling.”

“Oh.” The man tilted his head and then his eyes lit with recognition. “Of Starling Island.”

“You got it.” We shook hands and then I reached into my pocket and pulled out the envelope of tickets. “Are you going to the ball?”

The man shook his head. “That’s a little too fancy for me. My daughter needs new figure skates this year. I’ll put

together some nice arrangements for it though.”

“Here.” I took two tickets out of the folder and handed them to him. “On the house, for you and your wife.”

His eyes filled with tears and at first, I felt a swell of pride, until I realized that they weren’t joyful. “That’s incredibly kind of you, Mr. Starling, but my wife, Parker, passed away last year.”

“I’m so sorry.”

“Thank you.” He pulled a handkerchief from the pocket of his apron.

I put the tickets on the counter. “If your daughter needs an occasion to wear a flower crown, this would be it – you could bring her along if you’d like. Or, if you know someone who would like to come, you can pass these along to them.”

Giving away those tickets felt almost as good as jumping out of an airplane. When I left the flower shop, the bouquet of daisies in my arms, I felt a little high. I had been too far away from the receiving end of our charities. Could giving be addictive? I felt like I was hooked and wanted to recreate the feeling I got from leaving those tickets on Hank’s counter.

For the rest of the afternoon, I visited the beach, the local arena, and the courthouse. I had conversations with at least one hundred people and gave away the entire block of ten tickets that had been allotted for the local discount. Two for Hank, two to the woman who worked at the counter at the diner, the man who worked at the general store named Rocky took four for his friends at the senior’s center,

My last stop was the courthouse. There had to be someone deserving in that building.

Inside the overly air-conditioned lobby, I was met with a woman wearing a tight skirt, heels, and boobs that looked like they were about to compromise the threads holding the buttons onto her shirt. “Are you Mr. Starling?” she gave me a coy look and a shiver went up my spine – not the good kind.

I looked past her, hoping to see someone that would save me. “I am.”

She grinned and held out her hand. “I’m Christina Parrot. I heard that you are giving away tickets to the Starling Masquerade Ball.”

“I guess word travels quickly in a small town.”

“It sure does.”

She didn’t seem to pick up on the disdain in my voice. “But I’m out.”

“Oh.” The sides of her lips quivered, and her face seemed to flash with anger – but it was momentary, and her smile returned. “I’d be happy to buy one or two off you. Or...” she trailed her fingertips across her sun-damaged cleavage.

The receptionist was still missing from her desk and I needed an excuse to get away from this woman. “My apologies ma’am. Unfortunately, all of the tickets are spoken for.”

“Ma’am?” she raised her eyebrows. “Oh, you don’t understand.” She rested her hand on my arm. “It’s for my daughter. She’s been sick and just finished treatment.”

Tears sprang in her eyes and she let one fall from her caked-on eyeliner to her chin before wiping it away. I wasn’t an asshole and was raised to be a gentleman. I plucked a tissue from the receptionist’s desk and handed it to Christina. She

dabbed at her eyes. “It’s always been a dream of hers to go to a masquerade ball. Her hair has just grown back...”

Something didn’t feel right, but I did have two more tickets in my pocket. A drop of rain fell outside the glass doors, and I didn’t want to get completely soaked on the ride home. I could give away the last two tickets now, and be back on the island before the storm clouds rolled in. As much as my instinct was telling me not to believe this woman, I handed her the tickets. “Here you go. I hope that she enjoys herself.”

“Oh, we will.” Her face transformed from grieving back to desire. She pulled a petal off one of the daisies in the bouquet. “If you’re looking to impress a woman, Mr. Starling. You might want to reconsider these weeds.”

I wanted to yank the tickets out of her hand.

“A weed is something you don’t want in your garden,” I remembered the words that Daisy had said like it was just yesterday that she had wrapped her arms and legs around me as we ripped around on the dirt roads of Windswan. “I like daisies.”

Christina shrugged. “Suit yourself, but whoever you’re giving those to – is going to be disappointed.”

“You have a nice afternoon, ma’am,” I repeated the word, secretly enjoying the way that she flinched when I said it.

I walked away before she could take up any more of my time. Dark clouds hung on the horizon and one drop of rain splattered on the visor of my helmet. My motorcycle growled to life as I kicked it to a start.

At a thousand dollars a ticket, the discounted rate, I had just given away ten thousand dollars worth of paper. Exhilaration ripped through my body, and aside from the last

lady, I was looking forward to seeing every one of those local
Windswan people at the ball.

TEN

DAISY

TARA and I huddled together in the corner of the pontoon boat. Shivering, I pulled the hood of my raincoat over top of my Brankmere Hall hat. The mist was heavy on the lake, but I trusted that Trey knew where he was going.

“Do you ladies mind if I speed up a bit?” Trey asked.

“Go ahead,” I shouted. Trey usually took it easy on the trip across the lake, especially when the visibility was bad. I yanked the drawstring on the hood of my raincoat tight around my face.

The boat crested a wave and then a rush of water spread across the platform of the boat. Trey immediately eased back on the throttle. “Whoa, sorry about that. I guess we can’t push it too fast today.”

We held up our feet as the water rushed back into the Lake. “What’s the hurry today Boss?” Tara asked.

“I’m going to be crisscrossing this bay all day today,” Trey said. “There are so many things that need to be brought to the island. I’ve hired two more boats and now I’m wondering if it’s going to be enough.”

It had been three days since I promised Christina that I would find tickets to the ball for her. Every night she asked if I

had been successful and I'd had to tell her no. I heard that all of the local's tickets were sold and that none of the staff were given tickets. My only shot at getting tickets was through Jessica, whom I hadn't seen since Karaoke night. "Are you going to the ball Trey?" I asked, wondering how cruel it would be to ask him to take Christina as his date.

Trey laughed. "No, the transportation coordinator is going to be running shuttles all night long."

"How is everyone getting to the island?"

Trey took a deep breath. "It depends on how many zeroes they've got in their donation. We've contracted a fleet of float planes and helicopters for the high rollers. The antique boat society has come together and donated a whole bunch of wooden boats for the mid-tier guests, and the rest are going to be shuttled here on Bessie." He patted the steering wheel.

"What about the locals?" Tara asked. "Are they swimming?"

Trey's eyes glinted. "They're the Bessie crew, although Mr. Starling has put the florist and his little girl on the airplane list."

"Hank's coming?" Tara tucked her knees under her sweater and tried to tuck the hem under her painted toenails. "That's nice. He's such a good man. I'm surprised he could afford it though. Everyone knows that they almost lost the flower shop when his wife got sick."

Tara had grown up in Windswan and knew pretty much everyone in town. She was thirty years old and divorced from her high school sweetheart, who had remarried and already divorced Tara's best friend.

Trey inched the throttle forward again and steered us into the wind on a direct course to the island. “Rumor has it that someone gave away the local’s tickets – for free.”

“Really?” I sat up. “Are there any left?” I knew better than to approach Laird Starling for such a thing, but if he was giving them away, he might remember meeting me at the regatta and...

Trey shook his head. “I don’t know anything about tickets. Trust me, I’ve been getting harassed by everyone I know.”

“Right.” I sagged into the wet vinyl seat.

The engine noise got a little quieter as we approached the dock. “It surprises me that you’d want to go to something like that anyway.”

“I don’t.” My voice was quiet. “I know someone who wants to go.”

Tara clicked her tongue. “There you go again, being all vague.”

“Vague?” I grabbed my backpack and slipped it over my arm. We were getting close to the dock. The wind was shifting and I knew that Trey was going to need some help with the boat.

“Yeah.” Tara unfurled from her fetal position and slid her feet into flip-flops. “I’ve worked with you all summer and I don’t know anything about your personal life.”

I laughed and tossed my bag onto the dock as Trey put the boat in reverse to stop our forward momentum. “That’s because you’re looking at my personal life” I held onto the rope and hopped onto the dock. Tara wasn’t totally off base. Any time she’d asked questions about my home life, I’d brushed them off. It was easier to deflect than to talk about my

situation. It was something that I'd gotten so used to doing, it came as second nature, but it surprised me that Tara picked up on it. Maybe I wasn't as good at playing it as cool as I thought. "My stepsister wants a ticket." I started to tie up the boat but Trey stopped me.

"I'm going right back to the shore."

"Ok." As I tossed the line onto the boat a gust of wind whipped up the bay and blew my hat off my head.

Tara's reflexes were lightning fast and she grabbed it before it went swimming in the very cold looking water. Trey's eyes widened as he looked at me. "What happened to —" He stopped speaking mid-sentence and his face turned bright red. "Never mind."

I was confused until Tara handed me my hat. "Your hair." She reached to touch my now ear-length bob. "You cut it."

Both of them stared at me, and not in a good way. I slicked my hair back with my fingers before putting on the hat – the hat that I'd worn all week to avoid this exact conversation. "Yeah, so?"

"It looks nice, Rosie. I'll see you ladies at the end of the day." Trey saluted and reversed the boat. He was lying about the haircut. It looked awful. The kitchen scissors in the trailer had rust on the blades. They had done a great job when my hair was wound in a braid, but I hadn't been able to even up the sides very well.

Tara took the hat off my head. "Did you do this yourself?" Her eyes searched mine as though assessing my mental state.

"I just felt like a change. What's the big deal? It's just hair."

“Right.” Tara absentmindedly touched her long blond ponytail.

One of the dock hands rushed to the end. “You two. Upstairs. Mrs. Graham is in a tizzy.”

We looked at each other. It was the day before a multi-million-dollar event, and our boss was a perfectionist. “It’s going to be a long day,” Tara muttered under her breath.

MRS. GRAHAM SCRIBBLED FURIOUSLY on the whiteboard. “It’s about time you two got here.” She didn’t turn to look at us when we stepped into the cottage keeper’s cabin.

“We’re early...” I gave Tara an elbow and a look that said ‘Shut up.’

“Early?” She turned her upper body, her hand holding the marker suspended in the air. “There’s no such thing as early on a day like this.”

Tara shot me a glance and rolled her eyes. I didn’t dare acknowledge her gesture, Mrs. Graham noticed everything. “What do you need us to do?” Being proactive was what our boss needed, and I was ready to work hard for her.

Mrs. Graham’s shoulders visibly softened. “I need you to help the catering crew with the tables. I want that place cleaned as it’s set up. Those caterers are leaving a mess everywhere. I swear they tromped through a mud wrestling pit before getting to the island. The linens are coming later today and you’re going to steam them after they’ve been placed on the tables.”

“Alright.” I nodded. “We are on it.”

“I knew that I could count on you...two. This ball is going to be the death of me.”

This was my shot. Every night Christina had asked me if I'd secured tickets for her yet. Her threat to cut off my other braid was thwarted when I did it myself, but what was I supposed to do? Walk around with half a head of long hair and half short – a sideways mullet of sorts? “Mrs. G. I was wondering if you could do me a favor.”

“What kind of a favor?” She had gone back to scribbling on her whiteboard which surfaces hadn't been dusted three times in the past week. “I heard that there might be some tickets floating around for the ball. Is it possible to get two? I can pay...a little bit.” I added the last part. Full-price tickets would clean out all the money in my bedroom drawer.

“Rosie Carmichael.” She put the lid on the marker and set it down. “You're not the first person to ask me about this, but you are the very last person I expected to try to pull strings for tickets.”

I sighed. “I know. I wish that I could explain, but it would mean a lot to me if I could get a couple.”

“We're going to be working late tomorrow, I'm not sure I could let you off in time to go.”

Shaking my head, I let out a low laugh. “They're not for me. I'd rather scrub floors than rub elbows.”

This made her smile, a cherubic grin spread across her face. “Tell me about it. Rosie. You've been a great worker, I'll see what I can do.”

“Thank you.” I couldn't believe I'd waited so long to ask her. It was the day before the event, but I could still make

things a little more hospitable on the home front if I could come home with two of those golden tickets in my hands.

“I can’t promise anything.” She handed me a radio. “Check in with me after lunch.” Clapping her hands, she dismissed me and Tara.

THE MIST HAD LIFTED from the lake and the sun was drying the condensation from the roof of the tent. The catering crew had rolled up the sides of the structure and were moving banquet tables into place. Tara and I approached from the southernmost bridge. We were halfway to the tent when a low hum swept across the water, ripples spread under our feet and I could feel the vibration in my whole body.

“What is that?” Tara stopped and put her hand to her chest.

It happened again, only this time I could place the sound. “It’s the orchestra. They’re tuning their instruments.”

We stepped into the tent behind the stage. The string instruments hummed and plinked as each musician got their instrument in tune. “Wow.” Tara stopped as we rounded the stage. “I’ve been to weddings in tents, but this is something else.”

The inside of the tent was draped in fabric and full-sized chandeliers hung from the ceiling, rocking as the waves from a boat met the floating structure. “It’s going to be magical in the nighttime.” A few of the caterers walked by and I looked to their shoes. “Mrs. Graham is overreacting, there’s no mud in here.”

“Oh well.” Tara shrugged. “Shall we get to steaming?” She held up the steam end of the portable unit we’d lugged from the main cottage.

We spent the morning watching the tent turn into something from a fairytale. Wisteria hung heavily from the ceiling, huge all-white arrangements towered in the center of each table, of which the cloths were impeccably smooth thanks to me and Tara. It looked like a fresh snowfall in June, on top of a lake. We got to work accompanied by the small orchestra – it was the perfect morning. “Did you hear that they hired Norah Jones?” Tara asked. “I love Norah Jones.” Her voice was dreamy as she dragged the steamer over what felt like the three thousandth tablecloth.

Sweat pricked on my forehead, the steamer was doing double duty as a facial treatment. “I heard that they hired Coldplay.” I smoothed out the tablecloth and turned off the steamer. “Should we head up for lunch?”

Tara laughed. “Sure. I’m starving. I sure hope it’s Norah Jones. I’ll be able to hear it at Keystone Point.” Tara had filled me in on her plan to bring a bottle of wine to the public beach and listen to the concert – for free. “But, can you imagine dancing to *Come Away with Me* on this dance floor?” She grabbed my hand and twirled as we walked across the hardwood dance floor. “You’d probably spin off into the lake.” I spun her in the opposite direction. She giggled, let go, and continued to twirl across the dance floor, flapping her arms like the wings of a bird. “Let’s get lunch.” She skipped out of the tent and over the bridge. I surveyed the tent before leaving, Mrs. G was going to be happy, it looked perfect.

In the lunchroom, Trey dropped into the chair next to Tara. A platter of sandwiches sat in the middle of the harvest table.

“What’s this?” He grabbed a ham sandwich and took a bite.

“I think they call that ham.” I couldn’t help myself.

Trey smiled and swallowed his bite. “Did Mrs. G put these out?”

Tara shrugged. “We don’t know. They were out when we got here, along with the charcuterie board.”

“A charcuterie board? Fuck.” Trey shook his head. “That means we’re working late.”

“Weren’t you expecting that?” I took a bite of a roast beef sandwich.

“Yeah.” Trey gestured to the spread of food that looked like it belonged in a fancy hotel along with bottomless mimosas. “This means we’re working reaaaally late.”

“He’s right.”

We turned to see Mrs. Graham toddle into the room. “See?” Trey rolled up a slice of prosciutto and popped it into his mouth. The sandwich was the best thing I’d eaten in months. I’d work all night if it meant I had access to an all-you-can-eat gourmet buffet.

Tara opened one of the sandwiches and crinkled her nose. “Aren’t there any vegetarian options?”

Trey plucked the roll of ham off her sandwich. “There. Now it’s vegetarian.”

Mrs. G. swatted Trey’s hand. “Smarten up. You’re a grown man.”

Tara’s cheeks were the same shade of pink as the meat that had just been stolen from the sandwich. If there wasn’t something going on with her and Trey, there should be. The

two of them ignored each other like high schoolers, but I caught them sneaking glimpses at each other. “And you, Rosie. The hat?” Mrs. G folded her arms. “We don’t wear hats at the table here.”

“I don’t mind.” Trey interrupted.

“Me neither,” Tara added. “I think it’s okay if you’re a girl.”

Mrs. Graham looked at the two of them. If I could see the electricity between Trey and Tara, so could she. The rest of the cottage-keeping staff had started to trickle into the work cabin. Mrs. Graham’s radio squawked and she pulled it from where it was clipped on her vest. She pointed at me with the antennae – “Rosie. The hat. If I let you do it, I’ll have to let everyone.”

I gulped down my bite of roast beef sandwich, pulled the hat from my head, and hung it on the side of the wooden chair.

“My dear Lord.” Mrs. Graham stepped backward like she’d been slapped. Self-conscious, I attempted to tuck my hair behind my ears. She walked behind the chair and set my hat back on my head. “Come and see me after lunch,” she whispered.

ELEVEN

MAX

IN THE WEEK leading up to the ball, the event coordinator Tracy had moved into one of the cabins on Starling Island. She had been working twelve-hour days, and now it was the day before the event and she looked like she'd been run over by a truck.

“The logistics of this event, Max.” She shook her head as she tapped a message on her phone. “Never again. Dry land only.”

We walked through the tent. “I hear you, but you have to admit, this looks good.”

She looked up over her glasses. “Enchanting. Do you know how much we had to spend in extended coverage to insure this?”

“I heard that it was a custom quote. Tracy, if I knew how much the insurance was going to cost, I would've axed this thing immediately.”

“It was an honest mistake. Something that I should've anticipated – but I've never done something like this. Thanks for not firing me.”

The profit margins for the event had been getting slimmer by the second. “Even with the insurance, are we still going to

be able to raise some significant funds for the charity?”

“As long as nobody important falls into the lake.” She peered over the side of the structure - the entire tent was on a floating dock. The only thing stopping a drunken partier from falling into the thirty feet of water surrounding it was white velvet ropes.

“Did my uncle RSVP?” I asked.

Tracy scrolled through her phone. “Yes. He’s coming, along with his daughter and her family.”

“Really? Bronwyn is coming?” I hadn’t seen my cousin in years. She was the East Coast version of me, daughter to the Yates Petroleum dynasty. Their family cottage was in Laketown – the bougier version of Windswan. Brownyn almost got disowned when she married their boat mechanic. “I can’t wait to meet her family.” She had surprised me. After years of gallivanting around the world as a model, spending her inheritance, I’d expected her to turn into a typical socialite, not fall in love with a blue-collar guy and have his baby. She’d been prepared to give up her inheritance for him too. It was something I’d admired from afar, and I couldn’t wait to see her in person and tell her just how inspiring she was to me.

Leading me to the seating chart, Tracy pointed out where the who’s who of the party was sitting. We had specifically separated a couple of the big fish for the auction; nothing gets people more worked up than two men battling it out from across the room. “We’ve got a hole here though.” She tapped a vacant seat.

“I thought we were sold out.”

“We are. Talk to your sister about that.” Tracy’s phone pinged with a message. “Oh my God.” She shook her head. “I

have to make a call. The peacocks weren't canceled and they're loose at the marina."

Tracy was doing a good job, and if we were able to get through the evening without any major incidents, I was planning to give her a nice fat bonus.

A hand clapped on my shoulder. "It looks good, son."

My father's hand felt big and strong on my shoulder, even though I was a full-grown man. "Thanks. But you just missed Tracy. She's the one holding it all together."

"That's not what I heard. I heard that it's all you, Max my man." My father was wearing his golf clothes.

"Shit. Dad, I'm sorry, I forgot about the golf game." I had promised my dad that I would play with him and a couple of the executives that morning.

"You need more than a secretary, Max. There's room in the budget for you to get a personal assistant, one that can run your social calendar. You seem to be forgetting a lot of things these days."

I knew that he was referring to the regatta. It wasn't that I was forgetting about things, it was that this damn event had taken over my entire life. We walked past a ladder and a white rose fell to the floor in front of me. I paused to pick it up. The florist, Hank, clambered down the ladder. "I think you dropped this." I held up the rose.

"Thanks." His eyes lit up when he saw me. "Mr. Starling. I didn't expect to see you here today."

My dad tilted his head. "Why wouldn't I be here today?"

It was Hank's turn to look confused, but I saw what was happening. "Dad. This is Hank, he owns the flower shop in

town. Hank. This is my father, Laird Starling.”

Hank pulled the worn baseball hat from his head and extended his hand. “Pleased to meet you, Mr. Starling.”

My dad shook his hand. “I’m still getting used to having another Mister Starling in the room. You’ll have to excuse my confusion.”

“Your son is quite the guy.” Hank spread his arms, gesturing to the room. “Look at what he put together.”

The venue did look spectacular. It was way more lavish than I’d originally planned, but with the caliber of guests, we needed it to look like an ice queen had plunked her ballroom in the center of the lake and vomited sparkle all over it. “It sure is something.” My father squeezed my shoulder. “He finally took a break from his toys to do something productive.”

That’s the way it went with my father. A compliment followed by a critique. He didn’t hide the fact that I had disappointed him over the years. When I told him I wanted to drive race cars instead of report to the shareholders, he’d laughed and told me that was the best joke he’d ever heard.

“My daughter is going to love this.” Hank’s eyes shimmered. “Thank you again for the tickets.”

I stiffened. The fact that I’d given away a bunch of tickets for free was one that I’d kept to myself. “You’re welcome. I’m so happy that you’re going to be able to see your work in the evening.”

Hank took the rose from my hand. “Are you enjoying your daisies?”

The arrangement had sat on my bedside table, and as much as I hated to admit it – brought a smile to my face every time I

woke up. “I sure am. Although my cat likes them too.” A few of the petals had some very cat-like teeth marks on them.

Hank chuckled. “Next time I’ll give you one with catnip just for the little fella. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I have about three thousand stems waiting to prick me.”

The florist clambered back up the ladder and my father and I walked over one of the bridges to the shore of Starling Island. “What was that all about?”

“What?” I rubbed the back of my neck.

My father crossed his arms. “You’re buying yourself flowers?” The skin beside his eyes crinkled as he smiled. “Your mother would like that.”

“I was just supporting one of the local businesses. He’s been working hard on everything here. He also just lost his wife, I thought that it was a kind thing to do.”

Dad squeezed my shoulder. “You’re more of a businessman than I thought. Good for you. There’s nothing wrong with fostering relationships with people in town here. God knows our name could use some good publicity. This event has been criticized...

“I know, Dad. It’s opulent. It’s ridiculous, but it’s all for a good cause.”

“Good.” This time it was a clap on the back. “As long as we turn a profit for the charity, I’ll consider this a success.”

Dad left to get changed out of his golf clothes, leaving me to stare at the monstrosity that I’d created. The masquerade ball had to be a success, the reputation of my family’s company depended on it.

TWELVE

DAISY

THE BUNK ROOM of the cottage keeper's cabin was at the back of the building. I followed Mrs. Graham into the large room and she shut the door behind us. A small lamp was lit in the corner and it felt like we were having a clandestine rendezvous – a couple of spies dressed up as housekeepers.

“How does everything look? Are the caterers making a terrible mess out there?” My boss looked nervous, wringing her hands in front of her. I took them in mine and squeezed her palms, soft from years of scrubbing with chemicals.

“Mrs. G. Everything looks perfect. Why do you worry so much?”

Her eyes twinkled and she pulled her hands from mine, searching the compartments of her million-pocket fisherman's vest. “I worry about the boy. He's in over his head. I'm doing everything I can to help him out. He's a good kid.”

“The boy? Are you referring to Jessica's brother?”

Mrs. Graham nodded. “Yes, he's the one in charge of this fundraiser.”

“But I thought he was older than Jessica.” She was talking about Jessica's brother like his voice hadn't changed yet.

“Oh, dear.” She smiled. “He’ll always be a boy to me. A sweet boy who should be out flying airplanes and climbing ice walls, not caged in that loft in the city wearing suits.” Her eyes started to well with tears. “My apologies, Daisy. Please ignore me, I’m just an old woman.”

“You’re not just an old woman, Mrs. Graham. You’re one of the kindest women I’ve ever met.”

She grabbed my arms and pulled me in close to her, her breath tickling my ear. “Don’t you ever tell anyone. I want to be feared around here.”

I laughed. “Your secret is safe with me, and I think your strategy is working. Even Trey jumps when you clap your hands.”

“He’s another one.” She smiled. “He deserves to meet a good girl too. But enough about that.” She pulled an envelope from the inside pocket of her jacket. “I was only able to get one ticket. I guess Miss Jessica changed her mind about her date.”

“Thank god.” I thought to myself. Jessica deserves so much more than that asshole.

Mrs. Graham pressed the envelope into my hand. “I hope that your friend enjoys herself.”

Years of tears spilled down my face. I sagged into Mrs. Graham’s arms. “It’s okay, child.” She held me as I sobbed. I wept in gratitude for what she had done for me, but I also felt sorrow that it was being wasted on Christina. After one last heaving inhale, I pulled away and wiped my eyes with the sleeve of my Starling Estate work shirt.

“I...I...” I couldn’t get the right words to come out. “Thank you.” I tucked the ticket into the pocket of my

leggings. “You have no idea what this means to me.” It meant that I wouldn’t have to work eighty hours a week. It meant that I wouldn’t have to use the money I’d scraped together over the years to buy a full-priced ticket. Mrs. G had no idea that the envelope in my pocket was one more step towards freedom.

“May I make a phone call?” I asked.

She pointed to a phone on the wall between the bunk beds. “Be my guest. Back to work at one o’clock though.” Her pointed finger swung from the phone to me. “Got it?”

“Got it,” I smiled. My face was sore from the hot tears. I picked up the phone and dialed Christina’s number.

Her voice was as cold as usual.

“What?”

“I got a ticket, but I was only able to get one”.

The line was so quiet I wondered if it had gone dead. Hello?

“You got one ticket after I asked you for two.”

“It was the best I could do. I’m pretty sure it’s the last available ticket. My boss pulled some strings.”

I was rapid-firing my argument. I thought that Christina would be happy, but she seemed totally pissed. “I’ll bring it home tonight after work.”

“One ticket?”

Her tone was hard to place.

“Yes, one,” I whispered, hoping that Mrs. Graham wouldn’t overhear the conversation and think that I was ungrateful.

Then, a cackle erupted through the phone. It was so loud that I had to hold the earpiece away from my head.

“You stupid girl. I already have two tickets. I knew that you’d fail at this, like you fail at everything else. Bring the ticket home though. I’m going to sell it.”

“When?”

Rage was building in my body and I gripped the earpiece of the phone so tightly I’m surprised it didn’t crack.

“When what? I’m at work, Daze. I can’t play your word games.”

“When did you get the tickets?”

“Oh, a few days ago.”

She had asked me about the tickets every night - even though she already had them. My cheeks burned and I wanted to smash the phone on the ground.

“You could’ve told me,” I whispered, worried that if I didn’t it would come out in a scream.

“I wanted to see if you could actually do it. Looks like you lost the deal.”

I was lost for words. What a cunt. It wasn’t a word that I used often, but in that situation, it felt like the only appropriate word to use.

“But...”

“Don’t but me. Bring home the ticket. Ta-ta.”

She hung up the phone. I slid down the wall, the receiver to my ear. I thought that I heard a weird click, but brushed it off, since it was an old phone.

Two more years. Could I do two more years of this? Christina had to release my inheritance to me. She told me that there was a clause in the agreement that allowed her to deny it to me, if I didn't deserve it. It was the story I'd been told for the past ten years. I'd toughed it out this long, what was two more years of hell when you'd already lived through ten?

I replaced the phone on the hook and stood, giving myself a minute before returning to the lunch room. Mrs. Graham wasn't in her office. I tiptoed across the room and set the ticket on her desk. There was a little notepad and a pen and I scratched a quick note, thanking her, but told her that my friend didn't need it, and to give it to someone who deserved it.

I'd lie to Christina and tell her my boss needed it back. There was no way I was going to let her scalp a ticket to the classiest event in the state. An event I couldn't believe that she and my sister were attending. An event that needed a lot more steaming.

The steamer was where we left it, and Tara and I set to making the napkins perfectly flat, ready for the caterers to fold into elaborate shapes.

"What did Mrs. G want?" Tara asked.

"Nothing, really. She wanted to get more details about the setup. I guess she didn't want to talk about work in the lunch room." I shrugged, hoping that my face didn't give me away. I should've given the ticket to Tara. That's what I should've done. "What's going on with you and Trey?" The subject needed to be changed.

Tara blushed. "I texted him a couple of nights ago and we flirted a bit."

“How old is he?” I asked.

“Not too old for me.” Tara sidestepped the question. “I like an older man.”

She draped the napkin on the stack that was now taller than her. “How about you? Any prospects?”

I shook my head. “I’m too busy for dating.”

“I know that.” She steadied the stack. “I’m going to start a new pile before I get buried in an avalanche of linen.” She took the top portion of the pile and smoothed it, setting it next to the existing tower. “Do you like older dudes?”

Max had been older, but I don’t think that’s what Tara meant. “What’s older?”

She shrugged. “Well, I’m thirty and Trey is...more than ten years older than me. How old are you?”

“I’m twenty-three.” I dragged the steamer over what felt like the millionth white square of fabric.

“No, you’re not.” Tara screwed up her forehead. “Are you serious right now?”

“Yep.” I nodded. “I’ll be twenty-four in the fall.”

“You’re just a baby. I thought that you were in your thirties.”

“Thanks.” I rolled my eyes. I didn’t really care, but it seemed like an odd thing for Tara to bring up.

She took the steamer from my hand. “I didn’t mean that you look old. You’re just so mature, you seem like you’ve got your shit together.”

If she only knew. I thought to myself. When the final napkin was steamed, we unplugged the unit and I called Mrs.

Graham on the radio.

Tara looked at her watch. “It’s five o’clock, what are the chances that we’re going to get to go home on time tonight?”

I thought back to the sandwiches and Trey’s prediction. “I’d say it’s highly unlikely.”

“Cottage keepers base to Rosie.”

“Go for Rosie.” I clicked the button on the radio.

“I need you two to stay a little later tonight.”

Tara shook her head. “I knew it,” she mouthed.

“Of course. We were expecting that,” I replied. “What do you need us to do next?” The room looked impeccable, but there were so many moving parts to the ball, that there were things I was likely overlooking.

“I’m on my way down. I need to have a quick meeting with you. Get Tara to polish the fixtures in the bathroom. I want to be able to see my face in the toilet handles”

Tara rolled her eyes. “She’s on it.”

By the time Mrs. Graham arrived on the floating ballroom, Tara had left, her polishing chamois in hand. “Look at this place.” My boss’s eyes were wide behind her round glasses. She scanned the room and then finished her three-hundred-and-sixty-degree turn looking at me.

“It sure is something. I would love to see it when all the candles are burning.”

“You might have the chance. I was talking to Florence, the sous chef, and the catering staff is short on people to clear the tables, what do they call that, bussing? I thought that you

might be interested in working as part of the catering staff tomorrow night.”

“I’ve never worked as a waitress—”

Mrs. Graham held up her finger. “I wasn’t finished. It pays double your cleaning rate, and I’ll need you to stay here overnight to prepare. It’s going to be a lot of overtime in a short amount of time.”

“How do I say no to that?” My stomach was full of butterflies. A huge paycheck and the opportunity to work at one of the most exclusive events in the country was thrilling, clearing plates away from my stepmom and Chloe – not so much. But I’d been cleaning up after them for years, what was one more night?

“Good. Go talk to the catering manager. He’ll get you set up with your uniform for tomorrow. I’m pretty sure you’re going to be folding all of these napkins into loon shapes all night.” She dragged her finger along one of the tablecloths and nodded approvingly. “You girls did a good job here today.”

“Thank you.” Even though it was a menial job, I liked to put one hundred percent into everything I did. “The steaming was quite meditative.”

“I’m sure it was, dear. Now, where is Tara?”

I directed Mrs. Graham to the bathrooms and waited at the table for the catering manager. Christina had been so cruel on the phone, I had been dreading going back to the trailer all day. Now that I was staying on the island, I felt my shoulders relax. Work was a safe place for me, I’d rather scrub toilets than walk into the trailer on Sunflower Lane. At least I knew what to expect when it came to toilets, when it came to my

stepmother, I wasn't so lucky. Dealing with Christina was a total crap shoot.

THIRTEEN

DAISY

THE BUNKHOUSE MATTRESS was ten times better than the one in the garden shed. To my surprise, I was the only staff member staying the night. The caterers were all being housed at the hotel on the mainland, and the rest of the island staff went home on the last pontoon boat ride with Trey.

Mrs. Graham had her own private bedroom, so I had the place to myself. The wind rustled the leaves on the trees outside my window, and loons called from down the lake. I was so exhausted from setting up the tent and learning the protocol for clearing the tables – always from the right – that I dropped onto the twin bed and curled up under the quilt – and had the best sleep I'd had in months, maybe even years.

When I woke up, the sky was pink, the sun just peeking over the tops of the jagged mountain peaks in the distance. In my dreams, Max had been a guest at the masquerade, but the dream turned into a nightmare, as he was there with another woman. As I brushed my teeth, the dream replayed in my mind. I had been walking towards him, and a beautiful woman with a giant engagement ring stepped in front of me and wrapped her arms around him. Of course, he was in love with someone else. I was a blip on his radar a year ago. I had spent the entire year thinking about him, there was no way he had done the same.

I showered and started the day in my Starling Estate uniform, the all-black catering uniform, complete with a black bowtie folded on one of the spare bunks, ready for action that evening.

The harvest table was covered in trays of pastries, croissants, and strips of bacon. I smiled, imagining what Trey would have to say about the breakfast spread. My feet ached from working fifteen hours the day before, but I felt invigorated. Mrs. Graham had no idea how much peace she had brought to my life by ordering me to stay on Starling Island for the night.

The screen door creaked open. The clock above the sign-in sheet read six thirty. Who the hell was at work two hours early? I ripped a chunk off a croissant, popped it in my mouth, and chased it with coffee.

“Rosie?”

Jessica stuck her head in the door. “What are you doing here so early?”

I swallowed the pastry. “I stayed here last night. I’m moonlighting with the catering crew.”

“Of course you are.” Jessica smiled. “Do you ever sleep?”

“I did last week,” I laughed. “At least twice. What are you doing here?”

We hadn’t spoken since karaoke night, but rumor had it that Jessica was staying at the neighboring island, far away from all the action. “I’m looking for Faye. Is she here?”

“I’m here Jessie.” Faye padded out from the bathroom, a towel wrapped around her head.

Jessica rushed into the staff house. “Good. Is that ticket still available? You mentioned that the person who needed it backed out.”

“It is on my desk.” Mrs. Graham glanced at me.

Jessica rushed past both of us and into Mrs. Graham’s office, returning with the envelope in her hand. “I’ve just been told that I have to bring a date. There can’t be any empty seats at this stupid thing.” She rolled her eyes. “Why can’t they just hire some seat fillers?”

“Who are you going to bring?” I asked.

“I hope it isn’t someone whose name starts with a J and rhymes with Asper.” Mrs. Graham wasn’t quiet about her opinion, although I was thinking the same thing.

Jessica dragged the envelope over the fingers of her free hand and looked to the ceiling. “I don’t know. I’m sure I can find someone.” Her eyes widened. “Rosie. You. You should be my date.”

I laughed. “That’s ridiculous.”

“Why?” Jessica pulled out a chair and took a bite of a piece of bacon. “You’re the most interesting person I know, and I don’t think that you’re going to try to sleep with me at the end of the night. Or are you?” She pumped her eyebrows at me.

“You’re beautiful, but you’re not my type.” I peeled another section of croissant and popped it into my mouth. “I would love to be your date, but if it’s escaped your mind, I’m going to be the one clearing the plates, not eating off them.”

“Right.” Jessica inhaled. “I did forget about that. Could you just blow it off?”

I cut my eyes to the bathroom door, where a hair dryer droned. “My boss gave me the afternoon off to paddle a canoe, I don’t think that she’s going to give me the night off when they’re already short-staffed. I’m also short one ball gown.”

“They’re short-staffed?” Jessica’s forehead knitted. “I hadn’t heard that.”

“Yes. They pulled in a few of the cottage keepers to help out with the caterers.” I ran my hand through my hair and Jessica’s gaze followed my hand.

“Your braids! I knew there was something different about you. Rosie. They were so pretty, why would you cut them off?”

“One got caught in something and I had to cut it off. I had to cut the other side to match.” I ran my hand self-consciously over my hair, my fingertips rubbing the rough ends. “I was going to try and clean it up a bit this morning.”

“Do you want some help?” Jessica asked. “I’ve got a stylist coming this afternoon.”

“Do you think a stylist can help this mess?” I dragged both of my hands up into my hair, so it was standing straight up.

“My stylist can do anything,” Jessica smiled.

“I was thinking about shaving it,” I shrugged. “Start from scratch.”

Jessica tilted her head. “I can see it. You’ve got such beautiful eyes, I bet it would look amazing.”

Mrs. Graham came out of the bathroom, her hair in pink rollers. “Faye. Is there a set of clippers in the bathroom?” Jessica asked.

“Yes. Why?” she pulled her white apron on over her clothes and shrugged into her fisherman’s jacket.

“We’re going to shave Rosie’s head.”

“Is that okay?” I asked. The idea of cutting off my hair suddenly felt liberating. The jagged edges that hung next to my eyes were there because of Christina. Shaving my hair would be my choice, and next to the superficiality of my stepmom, the idea of cutting off something that she saw as so valuable, felt powerful.

“Of course,” Mrs. Graham smiled. “I think short hair will look good on you. You’ve got the bone structure for it.”

Jessica had already finished her piece of bacon and was in the bathroom washing her hands. “Come on, Rosie. Sinéad O’Connor wasn’t the only woman who could rock this look.” She held up the clippers and turned them on, the buzzing drawing me to the bathroom.

“It’s too bad you can’t come to the ball.” Jessica bit her lip as she took the clippers to my hair. “We’ll have to hang out some more this summer.”

“I would love that,” I spoke to Jessica’s reflection in the mirror. Her hands worked quickly and clumps of my brown hair dropped into the waste basket. When she was finished, she gripped my shoulders and looked at me in the mirror. “Beautiful.”

The girl in the mirror looking back at me looked free. And beautiful. I ran my hand over my head. “It feels good.”

Jessica put away the clippers.

I shivered as a hair tickled my neck. “I’m going to have to have another shower.” I wriggled in my shirt, trying to find the

hair. “I’ll see you tonight. I hope that you find someone to be your date.”

“I will.” There was no hesitation in her voice. The confidence of the woman was inspiring.

She left the bathroom and I shook out my clothes over the bathtub and then got in to rinse off the remnants of my old life. Christina thought that cutting my hair was a punishment, I took that power back. Cutting it on my terms was empowering.

When I came into the kitchen, Mrs. Graham and Jessica were in her office whispering. I didn’t want to accidentally overhear what they were talking about, so I turned on the radio to the local station and poured another cup of coffee. It was going to be a long day, but I felt fresh and ready to tackle anything that came my way – including an evil stepmother and step-sister.

THE ENTIRE COTTAGE keeper staff was on the island. Each of us had a checklist like an airline pilot. We had to go through every room in the place, we had to check every pen to make sure it worked, and we had to ensure that the towels were hung exactly one inch apart. The most minute details were included on the list. A few of the VIP guests were staying on Starling Island, and their suites had to be immaculate.

Tara and I were on steamer detail again, this time in the main cottage, making sure all of the bedding was as crisp as a sheet of paper.

“Do you think that people notice all this...stuff?” Tara checked off one of the items on the list.

I shrugged. “They might not notice that the sheets are turned down ten inches and that the monogram is in the center of the bed, but I’m sure that it all...feels good.” I didn’t know how else to describe it.

Tara adjusted the pen on the notepad next to the desk and ensured that the television was left on the weather channel. “You’re one of the few women that can pull off a shaved head, Rosie. I can’t believe you had the balls to do it though.”

“Balls?”

“Yeah, I mean. Guys won’t like it.”

I laughed. “I don’t base my appearance on men.” I rubbed my hand over my head. “It feels good.”

Tara wound her long hair into a messy bun on top of her head. “Trey likes to run his fingers through mine.”

“Tara.” I pulled the vacuum from the cupboard. “You said you guys were just texting?”

She popped a piece of gum into her mouth. “Last night something happened. We were the last two on the boat. I guess you’ve been cramping our style all summer.”

“Did you...” I couldn’t believe it.

Tara crossed her arms. “Of course not. But, it was close. He’s got these big sexy hands, and he knows what to do with them.” She undid the messy bun. “That man knows how to pull hair. I can tell.” She grabbed her strands and tugged.

“Lalalalala. Too much information.” I put my hands on my ears and then laughed, removing them. “I wouldn’t know much about that,” I said. “Especially now.”

Tara's eyes glazed over and I could tell she was thinking about a certain set of hands doing something to her. "Just be careful, remember what Mrs. G. said."

Her smile was sly. "We talked about that. Mrs. G basically permitted us. I didn't see it that way at first, but why else would she tell us that there isn't a policy about staff members dating each other."

I plugged in the vacuum. "Um. She told you that so you wouldn't do it?"

"Tomato, to-mah-to." Tara checked off a few more things on the list.

"You could lose your job, or get hurt..."

"Oh, Rosie. We're just having a little fun. You know, that three-letter word that you know nothing about."

It stung, but she was right. "Come on, we have to drop these checklists off and get into our catering clothes."

IT WAS FOUR O'CLOCK, and the gourmet sandwiches were back on the lunchroom table. I made sure to tuck an extra one into my backpack. I'd been warned that once the evening started, there wouldn't be time for any of the catering staff to eat.

Helicopters buzzed over Starling Island and the corridor between the island and the mainland had turned into a shipping lane. Throughout the day, boats had been constantly traveling back and forth. The event started with a cocktail hour, followed by an auction, and then dinner and dancing.

Tara's garment bag hung on the hooks by the door. "Come on, let's get changed. We need to be there when cocktail hour starts."

I followed her into the bunkroom and went to get my uniform from where I'd left it, carefully folded on the bottom bunk.

There was nothing there but a perfectly made bed. "No." I patted the bed, even though it was obvious that the clothes hadn't been tucked underneath the patchwork quilt. "Come on." I dropped to my knees and peered under the bed.

"What's going on?" Tara clipped her bowtie around her neck and smoothed out her button-down shirt.

"My catering uniform, I left it here this morning. Right here." I patted the bed.

"Maybe Mrs. Graham hung it up." Tara went to the closet and slid open the bifold door. "There's nothing in here." The wire hangers jangled against each other as Tara peered into the dark corners of the closet. "We have to find it. We're going to be late."

"Shit. Shit. Shit." Everything had been going so well. "I'm positive that I left it here. Why would Mrs. Graham move it?" My voice wavered. I rarely cried from sadness, but frustration drove me to tears more often than I'd like to admit.

I went into the lunch room. "Has anyone seen my uniform?"

The staff looked at each other and most just shrugged. "Aren't you wearing it?" One of the other cottage keepers pointed to my embroidered shirt.

"No, it's one of the black catering uniforms, I left it on my bed this morning." My voice had started to become frantic.

Mrs. Graham had recommended me to the caterers, and I was going to let her down.

“There has to be an explanation.” Tara took one of the radios from the command center. “No one is going to steal a crappy black uniform.”

The door to the staff cabin opened and Trey stepped inside with a huge garment bag draped over his shoulder. “Rosie. This is for you.”

“Oh, thank God. I thought that I lost it.” I rushed to Trey and took the bag from his hand. It immediately dropped to the floor. “What is this?” It was way heavier than a pair of pants and a button-down shirt.

“It’s your gown.” Mrs. Graham stepped out from behind Trey. “It was too heavy for me to carry.”

“My gown? What are you talking about?”

Mrs. Graham pointed to Trey. “Take the gown into the bunk room and hang it on the back of the door.”

Trey had a wry grin on his face. “You got it.” He took the hanger from my hand, it was so heavy it had already cut the circulation off to my fingertips.

“I don’t understand, Mrs. Graham, what’s going on?”

“Rosie. I talked with Jessica this morning. We think it’s better for the event if you fill the chair. I was wrong, the caterers aren’t short-staffed. In fact, you will be helping everyone out if you attend the ball, rather than work clearing plates.”

“You two decided what was best for me?” I pointed to my chest. “Did either of you think to ask me whether or not I wanted to go to this ridiculous event?”

Mrs. Graham's face turned as white as all the napkins we'd steamed the day before. "Well, no. I guess you're right, Rosie. We thought that it would be a nice surprise for you."

Tara elbowed me. "Don't be an idiot, Rosie. Go to the damn ball. If you don't, I will never forgive you."

"But, I don't...belong."

This time it was Trey who spoke up. I had forgotten that he was even in the room. "Rosie. You have more class in your pinky finger than most of those people out there." He jerked his head in the direction of the tent.

"I should work."

Mrs. Graham rested her hand on my arm. "You're going to get paid. You can consider this work. It's just as important, they need someone in a pretty gown to sit at the table beside Jessica. You're her friend, I know that she respects you, and she has asked that you help out. Can you do it for Jessica?"

Tara's hands were clasped in front of her. "Do it, Rosie. Do it." She was bopping up and down like a teenager waiting for the Taylor Swift concert to start.

"Are you sure the caterers won't be short-staffed?"

Mrs. Graham made a crossing motion across her chest. "I promise." She turned and unzipped the dress bag. A hint of blue silk peeked out from the cloth bag. She held up a small basket. "This is my sewing kit, we're going to need to do a few alterations. If that's a yes, we're going to have to get to work right now."

I stepped forward to touch the dress. It was a ball gown with a sweetheart neckline and off-the-shoulder sleeves. "Is that a cape?" I pulled the extra fabric out of the bag.

“It is,” Mrs. Graham’s eyes sparkled. “It was Mrs. Starling’s dress. Jessica thought it suited you.”

“Can I do this?” I said to no one and everyone.

“This might help with your decision.” Mrs. Graham zipped open a compartment on the garment bag and removed a mask in the same shade as the dress, adorned with blue and silver feathers. She handed it to me and as soon as I slipped it onto my face, I knew I was going to say yes.

“I’ll do it.”

Mrs. Graham gave a satisfied nod. She unclipped her radio and clicked on the button. “Send over the makeup artist.” She pointed to Tara. “It’s time for you to get to work. You’ll see the finished product when Trey brings her to the ball.”

“I’m so excited for you.” Tara rushed to me and gave me a peck on the cheek.

“Trey.” Mrs. Graham pointed to the door. “We’ll radio for you when Rosie is ready.”

Trey gave a salute and disappeared, leaving me with Faye Graham. She pulled a needle and thread from the sewing case. “Well, come on now, it’s time to get Cinderella ready for the ball.”

FOURTEEN

MAX

ONCE THE PEACOCKS had been captured, everything else went smoothly. The fleet of helicopters buzzed around the island like giant metal mosquitoes. Every five minutes a seaplane landed, its occupants delivered to the end of the dock that was covered in our version of the red carpet, a lush white one.

The highest profile guests were slated to arrive last, and as cocktail hour started, the pontoon boat had made several trips across the bay, delivering the local guests. Official photographers lined the dock, and our tuxedoed dock hands helped all of the guests out of their boats as they arrived.

My father greeted every guest. My role was a little more behind the scenes. I wore a headset and kept in touch with Tracy. So far, the floating venue seemed stable. I had woken up in a sweat that morning, imagining it going down like the Titanic – taking all of society’s who’s who with it to the bottom of Windswan Lake.

Tracy’s voice crackled through my headset. “Your cousin has arrived. Helipad One.” The helipad was on top of the boathouse, so the VIPs had their own entrance. I wove through the crowd of people, up and over one of the bridges, and jogged to the helipad.

“Bronwyn,” I shouted.

“Max!” she was holding a baby in one arm and waving the other wildly. A good-looking man with wide shoulders and a goofy smile helped her down the stairs from the helipad. When she reached me I kissed both her cheeks.

“Who is this?” I let the baby grab my finger with his chubby hand.

Bronwyn smiled. “This is Mikey – he’s named after Dylan’s father.”

“And you must be Dylan.” I shook the man’s hand. It was rough and calloused, and one of the strongest handshakes I’d felt in a while. “It’s a pleasure to meet you.”

“Same. This party has all Bronwyn’s been able to talk about this summer.”

Bronwyn winked. “Maybe we will get you to plan our wedding.”

I shook my head. “I’m retiring from the event business after this is over.”

Tracy called through my headset. “You’ll have to excuse me.” I pointed to the earpiece. “I’ll catch up with you at dinner.” I pointed at them as I ran back to the tent.

“What is it?” I was out of breath when I reached Tracy.

She pointed to the Starling seaplane. “Your special guest is arriving.”

“Perfect.” I jogged to the end of the dock to meet Hank and his daughter. She stepped out of the plane, a daisy crown on her head. Hank was wearing a three-piece suit that looked like it was straight out of the seventies.

“Hank!” I extended my hand. “I’m so glad you could make it.” I wanted to tell him that everyone had been asking me about the flowers, but I wanted his daughter to feel like a guest, not like one of the help.

“We wouldn’t have missed this for the world. Can you say thank you to Max?” He nudged his daughter. Her beautiful grin was missing two teeth. “Thank you, Max.”

“You’ll find your names on the seating chart. I hope that you enjoy your night. There are a few items in the auction that might be of interest to you.”

Hank’s laugh was gravelly. “I doubt that, but thank you. We’ll go get some Shirley Temples. Would you like that, Melissa?” She nodded, then touched her flowers, ensuring that her vigorous nod hadn’t dislodged her crown.

I adjusted the flowers on her head. “Enjoy your Shirley Temples.”

My heart swelled as I watched the two of them walk hand and hand across the bridge and disappear into the tent. There was a pair of girl’s figure skates in Melissa Parker’s size in the auction. As a matter of fact, I’d researched details about all the local people who were attending the function and ensured that there was an item in the auction that would be of interest to them. The retirement home guys all had grandsons who played hockey – the tickets to summer hockey camp would be right up their alley. The only guest that I couldn’t get any information about was Chloe Parrot, daughter of Christina, who had just recovered from some mysterious illness. It was as though the two of them didn’t exist.

“Speak of the devils,” I muttered to myself as the pontoon boat arrived and the dock hands helped the two bleached blondes onto the dock in their platform heels. Their dresses

were so tight that they couldn't execute a step large enough to bridge the gap between the boat and the dock. Both of them giggled and hiked up their dresses, revealing their spray-tanned legs, so they could move enough to get off the boat.

"Yikes." Tracy's voice whispered in the tiny speaker in my ear. "What were you thinking, Max?"

The two women teetered along the dock towards my father. Based on their teeny stride, they would be at the tent by dessert.

From across the dock, I heard the mom's fake laugh - and then she put her hand on the front of my dad's tuxedo. Hoping my dad was smart enough to brush off the two, I turned and did a walk-through of the tent. We had a jazz band backing up Norah Jones for the cocktail party. The beautiful woman with the even more beautiful voice sat at the grand piano, onshore, it was the one logistic we couldn't solve.

"Hi, Max," a trio of girl's voices sing-songed behind me. I turned to face Jenny, Amanda, and Ramona.

"Ladies." I curtsied and they all giggled in response. Ramona curtsied back but the other two dropped into butler's bows.

"We can't believe you put this together." Amanda sipped champagne.

"I can," Ramona grinned. "Max threw the best parties on the lake when we were young. This is just a fancier version of one of your keggers."

In a way, Ramona was right. Although my keggers usually took place on dry land. "Have you seen Jessica?" I asked.

"We were going to ask you the same thing."

I rubbed my chin. “I asked her to fill that last seat, do you know if she gave it to Jasper?”

Jenny rolled her eyes. “I doubt it. After that last night at the Stone Oven, Jasper was such a dick.”

“Yeah.” Ramona agreed. “Even for Jasper.”

Tracy radioed that almost all of the guests had arrived and that the silent auction would be starting shortly. “You’ll have to excuse me. I’m helping out with the auction.”

The girls held up their champagne glasses. “You did good, Maxi,” Jenny shouted.

Even though I shouldn’t care, the approval of the Windswan socialites’ daughters, meant that the party was a good one. All I had to do was make sure that everyone had a fun time, and that those with deep pockets, opened up their wallets when it came to making donations.

Tracy stepped on the stage and tapped the microphone. “If everyone would take their seats, we will be commencing with the auction portion of the evening shortly.”

It took about twenty minutes for the mingling crowd to settle into their chairs. I stood at the back, next to the jazz band, and watched the auctioneer set records for all of the items – except for the figure skates. I told him to start those low.

I almost teared up when he pointed to Hank. “Sold for twenty dollars. One pair of figure skates to the girl in the flower crown.”

Hank turned to look at me and gave me a stoic nod.

Helping kids participate in sports was my calling. I knew it at that moment.

Amanda sidled up beside me. “Where is that sister of yours? The head table is going to look pretty empty if she doesn’t show up with her date.”

“I know.” I checked my watch. “But, you know Jess. She likes to make an entrance.”

My dad’s finest wooden boat droned by in the background behind the auctioneer. Trey was driving, and the flash of blond next to him had to be Jessica. A few of the photographers slipped from the event to line the white carpet.

Of course, Jess would show up halfway through. I shook my head, I didn’t want any distractions from the auction – but it was impossible. Every eye in the place was focused on the white carpet, where Trey was helping Jessica out of the boat. She was wearing a floor-length red sleeveless gown with a train that ran ten feet behind her, her golden hair styled like an old school Hollywood siren. She was an expert at these events, and even from behind her black lace mask, I could see her ‘smiling with her eyes’. Her red lips moved as she ordered the photographers into better positions.

“Who is that?” Ramona’s voice was a whisper.

Behind Jessica stood, not Jasper, but a woman in a sky-blue ball gown, complete with a cape and matching blue mask. She was as tall as Jessica but a little more built. “Is that a shaved head?” Ramona seemed aghast. “Who the hell is with her?”

The mystery woman held herself tall, and with the cape seemed regal. “Did she call some of her Princess friends from Europe?” I asked. Jessica literally had friends who were heirs to actual thrones.

“Not that I know of.” Ramona’s eyes were glued to the two gorgeous women.

Trey tied up the boat and stood between the two of them, offering his arms to both. They hooked their hands through his arms and the three of them strode towards the tent. I couldn’t figure it out, there was something familiar about the mystery woman. I shook my head. I didn’t know any shaved-head supermodel types, maybe she seemed familiar because she was walking with my sister.

The auctioneer resumed the sale, his nasal voice echoing across the bay as someone bought a weekend at an NHL player’s backyard rink for fifty thousand dollars.

With the auction finished, the orchestra took their seats and classical music reverberated through the tent. The sun had set and the staff had been busy lighting all the candles during the auction. If people thought the venue was pretty in the daylight, it was drop-dead stunning as darkness settled in. Underneath the starry Windswan summer night, a sparkly winter wonderland made mostly from flower petals and crystal, cast a silver glow across the glassy calm water.

The two women swept into the tent and made their way across the empty dance floor. It was as though two of the most famous people in the world had walked into the party, but it was just my sister and her friend. Even the members of the orchestra’s eyes were drawn from their sheet music to watch the ethereal beauty of the two women walk to the VIP table.

Dinner was grass-fed bison from a local rancher served with truffles and local vegetables. Dessert was crème brulee, each portion fired individually as it was delivered. My father sat at the table with Jessica, my cousin Bronwyn, and her family, and the mystery woman.

I couldn't stop looking at her.

I ate my dinner in the kitchen. The only mistake I'd made in the entire evening, was not assigning myself a seat in the ballroom. I didn't really care, and I was starving after running around all afternoon. I practically inhaled the bison steak and ate my crème brulee without the caramelized top.

Tracy leaned against the stainless steel table next to me. "It looks like the shareholders are going to be happy Mr. Starling."

I had switched to scotch and held up my tumbler. "I couldn't have done it without you."

"Yes. You could have. Stop selling yourself short, Mr. Starling. This is the best event I've ever seen in my life, and I've been to coronations."

"Thank you, Tracy." I wrapped my arms around her. "I'm so glad it's almost over."

"Me too." She had tears in her eyes as she laughed. "As long as nobody falls in the lake, I think we can call this a success."

"At this point, I think it would be funny."

"It would definitely not be funny." She crossed her arms. "Don't Jinx things. Your job is done. You need to go and mingle now."

I groaned and reached for a second crème brulee. "Do I have to?"

She pushed me out of the kitchen. "Yes. That's the next part of your job. Schmooze like your life depends on it."

Grabbing my drink, I left the kitchen and followed the sound of *Maroon Five* to the main tent. I spotted my sister

immediately and headed in her direction, but someone grabbed my arm. “Mr. Starling.”

“Yes.” I turned. It was Christina, the woman from the courthouse.

“My daughter Chloe would like to thank you for the ticket.” She elbowed the younger version of herself.

“Thank you.” Chloe rubbed her arm.

“I’m glad you’re enjoying your evening, and that you’re feeling better.”

Chloe’s forehead crinkled. “Feeling better?”

I knew it. Her mom had made up the treatment story. The bad vibe I got from her multiplied tenfold at that moment. Christina plastered a smile on her face. She either didn’t know I’d made them, or didn’t care. “I hope that you save a dance for the prettiest girl in the place.”

“I will.” I nodded. “It was nice to meet you, Chloe.” I shook her hand and left the two of them standing in the crowd. I wanted to ask security to remove them, but didn’t have the energy. Out of the ten free tickets I’d handed out, only two of them had been a mistake.

The band switched to a ballad and couples started swaying on the dance floor. After what felt like half an hour, I made it through the crowd of people. Like a bride at a wedding, I had to stop to talk to every person. The crowd parted as I reached the space where I’d last seen Jess. Her friend was standing next to her. The cape was draped over her left arm, revealing a muscular back. Her head was completely shaved and diamond earrings hung from her earlobes next to her swan-like neck. There was something magical about her. I hadn’t been intrigued by a woman in a year, maybe this was the night I

would finally forget about the woman I met on Sunflower Lane.

FIFTEEN

DAISY

I COULDN'T BELIEVE that I was being paid to get dressed up in a designer ball gown and hang out at a black-tie event with a friend. At first, I was worried that Christina and Chloe would freak out when they saw me, but both had looked at me several times, stared even, and there wasn't a flicker of recognition in either of their dark eyes.

Mrs. Graham had worked her magic with Mrs. Starling's dress, and it fit like it was made for me. Tara leaned over my shoulder as she removed my plate and whispered, "You look beautiful, Rosie."

Trey had said the same thing. I'd never felt more beautiful, and more like myself.

Laird Starling had sat at the other end of the VIP table, and after dinner came up to me and kissed my hand. "Jessica told me that the canoe girl needed a dress. My wife would be so happy to see that dress at her son's event." Tears shimmered in his eyes, and any doubt I had about wearing the dress evaporated.

"Thank you for letting me wear it. This has been a beautiful evening; your son did a great job."

"He did." Mr. Starling nodded and sipped his scotch, the ice cubes tinkling in the crystal glass. "He's been working his

ass off all night; I should find him and give him a drink.

Ramona and Amanda were on the dance floor, making eyes at the members of the band. Jessica introduced me to her cousin and her beautiful family. Bronwyn was apparently a big deal in the fashion industry, but I didn't recognize her.

"Where is that brother of yours?" Bronwyn's eyes searched the party. I turned instinctively to look in the same direction. "He was supposed to eat dinner with us."

"Max?" Jessica shrugged. "He's probably chasing around the peacocks again."

The room seemed to tilt, and I had to grab onto Jessica's arm. "Did the floor just move?" I fanned myself.

Jessica looked at me like I was crazy. "That's just too much champagne." She winked. "Or just the right amount."

I gulped. "Jessica, what's your brother's name?" I realized that I'd never heard anyone refer to Starling Junior by his first name.

"Are you okay, Rosie? You look a little pale." Her eyes searched mine.

"Your brother, did you say his name is Max?"

She nodded. "It is, have you not met him yet?"

I shook my head, unable to form words.

"Really? I guess you missed him at the Stone Oven that night, and he skipped out on the regatta." She stood on her toes and then waved. "Come on, I'll introduce you to him." She tugged on my arm, but my feet seemed glued to the hardwood dance floor. "Never mind, he's coming over here."

I touched my mask to ensure it was in place. It couldn't be the same guy. There had to be two Max's that had cottages on Windswan Lake. My stomach clenched into a tiny ball and my heartbeat whooshed in my ears.

I took a breath and turned. His eyes seemed magnetized to mine. Did he know it was me? It was impossible. I hadn't seen him for a year, and I looked like a different person.

Jessica draped her arm over my shoulders, resting it on my cape. "Max, this is Rosie. The woman who helped us win the regatta. Rosie. This is my big brother, Max. The second-best paddler on the lake."

Max was holding his hand out, but my arm didn't seem to be working. "This is where you shake his hand," Jessica whispered in my ear.

"H-h-h-i," I stammered. Fuck. Luckily my arm started working and when he took my hand in his, it felt like a hand I'd held a thousand times. Could he feel me trembling?

Was he the one shaking?

"Thank you for helping Jessica at the regatta."

Laird Starling returned with the same drink in his hand. "Max! I've been looking for you." Max released my hand and accepted the glass from his father. "I see you've met Rosie, the ringer." The older Starling winked at me.

The band was playing a ballad and couples started to sway on the dance floor. The lights above us twinkled in the reflection of the candles. I briefly wondered if anyone had put fire extinguishers on the floating venue. "Doesn't your mom's dress look great on her?" Laird smiled. He took my hand and kissed it and then placed it in Max's hand. "This band cost us a

fortune; it would be a shame not to be dancing.” He grabbed his daughter’s hand and dragged her onto the dance floor.

“Would you like to dance...Rosie?” He said my name like a question.

“Well, your father did say that it would be a shame to waste this song.”

Max led me to the floor and slipped his hand around my back, resting it on the silk fabric. We started to sway to the music but avoided making eye contact. I was stiff as a board and at one point, realized that I wasn’t breathing. I tried to take in a big sip of air without being obvious.

The floor seemed to give out on me, but it was my heels, slipping on the cape. I teetered backward and squeezed my eyes tightly, waiting for the ground to meet my ass with a thud. Max tightened his grip and pulled me toward him, stopping me from hitting the ground. I gasped as I slammed against his chest. “I think I stepped on my cape.”

“That’s a safety hazard,” he whispered in my ear. “If I recall there are a couple of buttons...” he spoke as he undid the loops that held the cape onto the dress and slung it over his shoulder. Goosebumps sprang up on my neck as his fingertips brushed my skin while they worked to free me from the tripping hazard. His hands resumed their dancing position and we swayed to the music – but we still didn’t speak.

He felt so good. He smelled even better. How had I been so close to Max all summer, and not even known it? When I was sleeping in the staff house, he was one island over. That night at the Stone Oven, I had just missed him when Chloe dragged me out early.

“Did he know it was me?” The question ran through my mind the entire time we swayed together on the dance floor.

I found myself wishing that the band would play an extended version of the song. It was ending, and I wanted to stay in the moment, suspended in time, suspended in the space of wondering whether or not Max remembered me. Because if he did, he would know that the woman in his arms, was the one who had lied to him – and I didn’t want to be that girl.

The musicians played the final chord, and I reluctantly stepped away from Max. We stood next to each other and clapped, close enough that his suit brushed my arm as he clapped.

Another slow song started to play, and he slipped his hand around mine and squeezed it, rubbing the back of my hand with his thumb. “I suppose we shouldn’t waste this song either,” he whispered. My heart was pounding against my ribcage, the room swirling around me. I was standing next to Max, the motorcycle guy, the one who I thought I’d never see again. And he was holding my hand.

“Would you like to dance?” A shrill voice came from behind us. A voice that I knew well.

Chloe tapped Max on the shoulder. He turned but didn’t let go of my hand.

“You’ll have to get the next one.” I stepped in between Chloe and Max. There was no way I was going to let her anywhere near him.

“Seriously?” Chloe put her hands on her hips. “You’re going to dance with a bald girl instead of me?” She jutted out her hip and put on a pout.

“I’m going to dance with the prettiest woman in this room.”

Chloe’s eyes lit up, but her smile quickly faltered when Max drew me into his arms. “It doesn’t matter what you look like on the outside if you’re hideous on the inside.” He pulled me close to him. Unlike the last dance, where we kept a space between us, this time my body was pressed against his, close enough that I could feel the erection in his pants.

“That’s a pretty necklace,” he whispered in my ear. My fingers went to the pendant, the only piece of jewelry of my own that I was wearing. It was the one with my mom and dad’s birthstones, the one with the missing ruby.

“Thank you,” I whispered.

He managed to dance me to the edge of the floor where it was a little quieter. He cupped my chin. “Why, Daisy? Why did you lie? And why didn’t you tell me your real name? I looked for you for a year.”

“You looked for me?”

“Of course, I looked for you. I fell for you that afternoon. Hard. I couldn’t accept that you were gone.”

“Can we talk somewhere quiet?” I asked. Looking around, it didn’t seem like we had many options.

“Come on.” He led me through the crowd, over one of the bridges, and to a secluded dock in a small cove. There was a full moon, and it was bright enough for us to navigate the stairways without a flashlight. Max slipped the mask off my face and took his off too.

“You’re even more beautiful than I remember.” He cupped my chin and kissed me. “I should be mad at you. I shouldn’t be kissing you right now – but I can’t not kiss you.” I wasn’t

sure whether I stood on my toes to bridge the gap between us, or if it was him who had made it happen. It didn't matter, Max's lips were kissing mine, his hand was squeezing my ass through the layers of silk of the ballroom gown. "Oh, my God. I can't believe you're here."

"I can't believe it either." My voice wavered. "I'm so sorry, Max. About everything. I've thought about you every day since we met."

He held onto both of my hands. "Can you make it make sense? I went back to your house to deliver your groceries – but you didn't live there."

I sighed. "Do you think it's okay to sit down in this dress?"

"We'll get it cleaned." Max took off his suit jacket and draped it on the dock. I took off my shoes and hiked up the dress so I could dip my feet into the water. Max did the same, rolling up his pants.

The dark water swirled around my calves. "I don't know where to start."

Max rested his hand on top of mine. "How about with your name? Is it Daisy, Rosie, or is it a flower at all?"

It was a story that I'd kept to myself for years. One that I'd been prepared to keep bottled up inside me until I was freed from Christina's claws. "My real name is Rose. I was named after my mom; her name was Rosamund."

"Rose," Max's voice was quiet. "I like it. Although I liked Daisy too."

"My stepmother didn't like calling me Rose. It reminded her of my mom, and she didn't want that. She thinks that daisies are weeds, and that's how she sees me. I actually don't

mind being called Daisy, but I'd never let her know that. She'd probably insist on calling me Stinkweed or something."

"It doesn't have the same ring." There was a nervousness in Max's laugh, and I could tell that he was trying to keep the mood light. He had no idea what was coming.

"But you didn't have to go along with it. Did you? What did your dad say about it?"

I sighed. This was where I had to rehash one of the most painful memories of my life. "My mother died when I was young, so I don't really remember her – but my dad, he died ten years ago. That's when Christina changed my name. I resisted at first, but after one broken arm I learned to love it."

"She beat you?" Max gasped.

"Not directly. She's more of a pusher, I tripped over one of Chloe's toys and fell into the coffee table -that time." I wasn't sure whether I should continue.

"That's still bad, Rosie. I'm sorry you had to go through that."

I shrugged. "Kids are resilient."

"They shouldn't have to be." There was an edge to Max's voice.

"Anyway," I continued. My father must have been lonely. I can't believe that he married Christina, but he was a smart man. She thought he was rich. We had everything, a huge house, fancy cars, a lake house..." I gestured to the lights of the Starling Estate, towering above us. "but it was all in a numbered company. When my father died, Christina was left with nothing. Except me. My inheritance is in a trust, and she's the trustee. She is the one who can release it to me when I turn twenty-five."

Max turned to face me, resting his wet foot on the dock between us. “That doesn’t sound right. I don’t think that she can do that. That’s more of a conservatorship.”

“She calls it that sometimes. She’s kept me around for the past ten years. I think that she’s waiting to see if she can get the money. That is if she’s unsuccessful at snagging another rich man. That’s her hobby by the way.”

“Wait a minute.” Max looked like he was thinking. “Are you talking about Christina and Chloe, who were here tonight?”

I nodded. “Yes. That’s them. If they would’ve recognized me, there would’ve been a scene. I’m shocked that they didn’t.”

“I recognized you the second I saw your eyes.” Max rested his hand on my shoulder. “But even before that, when you were in the boat with Jessica, I felt like I knew you.” He leaned in to kiss me gently. “Go on.” He squeezed my hands.

I shimmied closer to him. “I’ve been working two jobs ever since I could lie about my age. Whatever wasn’t spent on clothes and makeup and highlights for my stepmom and stepsister, I stashed in a drawer. I always dreamed that I’d be able to save up enough money to get away from Christina.”

“Wouldn’t she still have control of your inheritance?”

It was a good question. One that I’d thought about over the years. “If I had enough to survive, I would leave. I’d walk away from the money rather than spend one more night living under her rule. They treated me like...” For the first time, my voice wobbled.

“It’s okay. I get the picture.” Max squeezed my hands. “It still doesn’t explain why you pulled the old bait and switch

with your house though.”

“Can’t you see Max? It does.”

His brow furrowed. “How?”

“I couldn’t drag you into this mess. Also, if you saw where I lived, how I lived, who I really was, you wouldn’t want to have anything to do with me.”

He bit his lower lip. “You thought that? After the afternoon we spent together? Rosie, you don’t run into your soulmate on a dirt road every day.”

Soulmate.

“I can see how stupid it was now, Max. At the time, I was so embarrassed. I felt something with you that day, something that I’d never felt before, something that I was afraid of.”

Max stood and pulled me to my feet. “You’re here now and I’ll never let that woman hurt you – ever again.” He wrapped his arms around me and held me to his chest, his chin resting on my head. I’m not sure how long we stood in the moonlight in that embrace. Being wrapped in Max’s arms, I knew that nothing in the world could hurt me.

I was crying, but I didn’t let go. He stroked the nape of my neck and held me until my tears stopped. I pulled back, and his face was glowing in the moonlight. “I wish you would’ve told me all this last year. I wouldn’t be single at this damn event.”

Max was serious about me. I knew that I loved him, and my heart ached for the words to tumble out of my mouth. “Kiss me, Max,” I said instead.

“I want to do more than kiss you.” His voice was a growl. His hand rested on my ass, and he pulled me close to him. My body thrummed, and I ached to feel him inside of me. I slid

my hand down the front of his tuxedo pants, his cock, girthy, and hard pressed against the fabric.

His hands slid from my ass to the top of the dress, and he unzipped it. The heavy skirt dropped to the dock in a pool of silk around me. I stepped out of the gown and undid the buttons on his shirt. “Will anyone see us here?” I glanced around as a smatter of applause from the tent echoed from around the point.

“There’s a security guard posted at the end of this dock. No one is coming over here, but...” his voice trailed off. “With those paparazzi, you never know.” He swept me into his arms and tossed the dress over his shoulder. “There’s a bunkie in the woods right here.”

“Take me there,” I whispered in his ear.

Max bounded up the stairs and flicked on a little lamp in the corner of the bunkie. There was a bunk bed, a nightstand, a chair, and not much else. I hadn’t been assigned to this side of the island, so it was a completely new building to me.

He set me down and kissed my chest, the sensitive space between my breasts. I finished undoing his buttons and slid the shirt off his shoulders. His cummerbund fell to the floor and his pants followed. His erection was massive and tented his silk boxers.

We kissed our way to the bunk bed and down onto the bottom bunk. The dress was strapless, and I hadn’t worn a bra, so my breasts were already bare, my nipples puckering in the cold. His lips traveled down my body and he pulled down my panties, replacing the lacy fabric with his lips.

“Oh, Max.” I writhed beneath him. My body remembered exactly what his mouth felt like between my legs. I trembled,

my body tingling as I forgot all about the outside world. The only thing that mattered at that moment, was Max. I stopped him before the wave of my orgasm crested. “I spent the whole year wishing that I had done this,” I whispered and wriggled from beneath him and pulled down his boxers and took his cock in my mouth.

“Rosie, he groaned. “I’m not going to last long if you keep doing—

I took him deep, and then teased with a few strokes, and then took him deep again. His legs were trembling like the leaves on the aspen trees. “Oh, God.” His hand rested on my shoulder. He eased himself out of my mouth. He was panting. “You’re incredible.”

My thighs were slick with desire. Max pressed his weight onto my body, and we kissed, our bodies moving and writhing together. His desire rested at my opening, but he did not push inside. I wrapped my legs around his waist and urged his hips forward with my heels. We both gasped as he pushed inside, filling and stretching my body.

“I don’t have any...protection.” He squeezed his eyes and rested his forehead on my chin. “Rosie. I want to do this with you, like so fucking bad, but we have to be...”

“Responsible?”

“That’s the word I was looking for,” he pulled out and immediately my body felt like there was a piece missing. “We’ve got the rest of the summer.” He stroked my cheek with his thumb. “We’ve got the rest of our lives.”

There was a crackle and a faraway voice called out his name. “Shit.”

Max hopped off the bed and fumbled in his pants, pulling out a small headset. “Go for Max.” He slipped the piece onto his head. I couldn’t hear the other end of the conversation, but Max seemed focused, nodding at whatever the person on the other end was telling him.

“I have to go.” He pulled on his boxers and stepped into his pants. “Come here.” He pulled me from the bed and rested his hands on the side of my waist. “I need to see you again. As soon as possible. Promise me you will meet me in the morning?”

“Where?” I shivered.

He rubbed my arms vigorously and then helped me into this dress. The cape provided a surprising amount of warmth for such a flimsy piece of fabric. “Do you remember Keystone Point?”

“Of course.” I remembered every detail about that place.

“Meet me there, tomorrow morning. As soon as the sun comes up.”

“I will be there.” I buttoned up his shirt and helped him to do up his bowtie. Unlike the catering bowties, his was one that you actually had to tie. “I remember helping my dad with these.” I smiled as the knots came back to me.

We were both a little ruffled, but presentable. “Promise me you’ll be there.” He held onto my arms and his eyes held my gaze.

“I promise. I will be there.” And I meant it.

MAX HAD to go help Tracy with the logistics. I returned to the tent to try to find Jessica. “There you are.” Jessica pulled me aside. “Trey is looking for you. You’re supposed to be on the boat. It’s his last run.” She looked me up and down. “Where were you? Where is your mask?” Her eyes tracked up and down my body and then widened. She pulled off her mask.

“Wait a minute. Where’s Max?”

I shrugged. “I’m not sure.”

Jessica slid the mask back onto her face. “Rosie. I’ve never seen Max look at anyone the way that he looked at you.”

My cheeks burned, but I didn’t say anything.

“He fell for a girl named Daisy last year, and no one has been able to measure up to this mystery woman, and then you show up, and he’s tripping over his words. You’re Daisy, aren’t you?”

I nodded. “I can explain.”

She grinned. “I don’t care. I love you and I love him. I’m so happy you two found each other. Now get to that boat before Trey leaves without you.”

“Thank you.” My eyes welled with tears. “Thank you for everything.” I wrapped my arms around Jessica, and then it dawned on me. “You and Mrs. Graham. You planned this, didn’t you?”

Jessica stepped back and held onto my arms. “Mrs. Graham hears and knows everything. That’s all I will say about that. Now, get going.” She pushed me in the direction of the docks and I held the skirt of the dress up so I could jog along the dock. “But Rosie,” she shouted. “Don’t you dare hurt him again.”

The boat engine idled and Trey stood with one foot on the dock, the other on the boat. “I won’t,” I shouted to Jessica. As I made my way to the boat, carefully avoiding the cracks in the dock with my heels, I wondered just how much Mrs. Graham knew about my situation, and if she knew that she had saved my life.

I hopped onto the pontoon boat and Trey pushed away from the dock. “I almost left without you.”

“I’m glad you didn’t.” Although, I realized that he was heading to the mainland, not back to the dock at the staff cabin. “You’re taking me to the mainland?”

“I thought that was the plan.” He chuckled. “I met your stepmom tonight. What a lady.”

My heart sank. Christina had recognized me. “Yes. Quite a...” I cleared my throat, it was tough to call Christina a lady. “Character.” I improvised.

“She told me that you’d been working so hard, she’s got a surprise for you. I dropped her at the marina on the last trip. She’ll meet you there to pick you up.”

Trey shone the spotlight at the marina and my heart started to pound. Not in the good, Max is touching my ass way, but in the oh my god, what does my evil stepmother have up her sleeve kind of way. I felt like a caged animal being led to a slaughterhouse.

I took a deep breath as Trey pulled into the end of the dock.

“I’ll be fine.” I gathered the skirt in my hand and hopped onto the dock.

Trey paused. “It’s a ghost town here.”

“I’m sure she’s just getting the car.” I wasn’t sure. This could’ve been Christina’s surprise, leaving me stranded at the marina. It would take me all night to walk home.

“I’m going to go back to the island, but I’ll swing by to make sure she shows up.” Trey reversed the boat.

“That’s not necessary. I’ll be fine.”

Trey’s phone rang and he pulled it from his pocket. His lips turned up into a smile. “I have one more passenger to deal with.” The look on his face was the same as when he stole the meat from Tara’s sandwich. “Go deal with your passenger.” I winked.

Trey looked torn, so I decided for him and pushed the boat away from the dock. “Go. Get your girl.” I waved.

He shook his head but turned and was soon out of eyesight. I took off the shoes and looped the straps around my fingers. If Christina was abandoning me at the dock, I had better start walking. The ten-speed was still stashed at the Stone Oven, so it wasn’t a total disaster.

“Nice haircut.” A voice spoke from the shadows. “Did you think that you could fool me?” Christina stepped out of the alcove into the beam of the light.

“I didn’t plan on going to the ball. I swear.”

Christina shook her head. “You ruined Chloe’s chance with the Starling’s son.”

I blinked. “I think that Chloe did that on her own.” I knew that it was a stupid thing to say, but I’d just about had enough of Christina. Max’s vow to protect me felt like a shield, and I could finally say the words I’d bitten back over the years. “He would never be with a girl like her.”

Christina stepped closer to me. She ripped one of Jessica's earrings from my lobe and rolled it around in her palm. "Give me that back." I held out my hand.

"You cost me a lot of money tonight. This barely makes a dent in our lost opportunities."

"Give me the earring." I seethed through gritted teeth.

Christina closed her hand and when she looked at me, all I saw was pure evil. "I found out something today. I can't believe that I didn't think about this earlier."

"What's that?" My eyes were glued on Christina's hand. It wouldn't surprise me if she were to toss it into the lake, just to spite me.

"Let's just say you better start pulling your weight around the house."

My blood was boiling. "Or what?" It sounded like a threat.

Christina took the earring and hooked it into her own ear. "Ooh. This is nice. Heavy. I'd guess it's four carats."

I wanted to pull her ear off her head. "Give me the earring. It's not mine."

My stepmother crossed her arms. "Smarten up, Daze. You've been taking a lot of risks lately. I'd hate for tragedy to strike. As your trustee, I wouldn't be able to forgive myself if something happened to you. Although I sure know how I would spend your money."

Narrowing my eyes, I tried to figure out if Christina was bluffing.

After telling the story to Max I realized that I needed to talk to a lawyer, and not trust the word of the woman who had

basically just threatened to kill me for my inheritance. “Just like you hated to see something happen to my father.”

“That was an accident. Everybody knows that.”

My dad’s car accident hadn’t been regarded as suspicious and his death had been ruled accidental. Faulty brake lines could happen to anyone, but the odds of them happening to my dad’s prized Camaro were slim.

I lunged forward at Christina and shoved her as hard as I could. The shoes in my hand clacked as they came into contact with her skull, the heel jabbing her in the eye. Christina stumbled, clutching her face. “You bitch. You fucking bitch. My eye.” Her heel slipped in between the dock boards and she tumbled backward. While she was down, I crouched next to her and pulled the earring from her lobe.

I crab-walked away from her as fast as I could. Christina rolled onto her hands and knees, and when she looked up at me, a snarl ripped across her face, her eyes flashing with pure darkness. She lunged at me, her arms wrapping around my waist. She was surprisingly strong and we fell backwards together. The last thing I remember is seeing the steel dock cleat coming directly at my face.

SIXTEEN

MAX

RED SKY IN THE MORNING, sailors take warning. The old saying ran through my mind as I sat on the rock watching for Rosie. My motorcycle was waiting, a spare helmet stashed in the saddlebag, the cat charm with the ruby tucked in my pocket.

The red sky turned pink, then gray, then finally blue as the sun fully rose above the horizon. The beach was empty and the lake was calm as glass. Every sound was amplified. Loons called, fish jumped, and cars beeped in the distance. But there was no Rosie.

She had promised. I felt like a fool. She had done it to me again.

I waited another hour for good measure, but by eight o'clock it became clear that I was getting stood up – again.

My bike's tire made a huge rut in the dirt parking lot as I spun out of there. How could I have fallen for it again? I revved the engine and pushed the speed in the corners a little faster than I should. I didn't want safe, I wanted reckless. I wanted adrenaline, fear, a near-death experience – something to take away the dull ache in the center of my chest.

As I reached the marina, an ambulance screamed past me, its sirens wailing. I had to admire the speed, whoever was

driving would put a NASCAR driver to shame. By the time I parked my bike, Trey was waiting at the end of the dock, my wakeboard boat idling.

“Do you know why the ambulance was here?” I tossed my saddlebags into the boat.

“No idea.” Trey shrugged. “Some old guy probably had a heart attack on the golf course or something.”

That was the last I thought about it. “Move over.” I gestured for Trey to get into the passenger seat with my thumb.

“Sure, Boss.” Trey slid over and grabbed at his hat as I punched the throttle down. The owners of the marina hated it when people drove their boats fast, the wakes jostled the boats – but I didn’t give a shit. I dared the owner to come and give me shit for it. My body was tense, I felt like a shaken pop can, ready to explode.

When I docked the boat, Trey hopped out. “Are you going to park it?” he asked.

“I’m going to go for a ride.” The idea of sitting still seemed like torture, I needed to keep moving. I flicked on the radio and searched for the local station. “What’s the forecast?” My mind flashed back to the early morning pink sky. Getting caught out in a storm might actually feel better than heartbreak.

“The wind is going to pick up this afternoon, gusting to twenty knots. As long as you’re back by lunchtime you should be fine though. Or, you could take one of the bigger boats.”

Some country song about back roads was playing and then the radio announcers came on. “Let’s see what the forecasters say.”

Trey crossed his arms. He gathered his weather information from raw data and often complained about the local weather forecasters. The announcer made some lame joke about Windswan's back roads being bumpy and not curvy, and then got serious.

An unidentified woman was found unconscious in Windswan Lake this morning. She has been transported to the Chance Rapids hospital in life-threatening condition. Police are working hard to identify the woman and are asking for the public's help in identifying the young woman. She's described as early twenties, five foot nine, with an athletic build and a shaved head.

I blinked. "You said you dropped Rosie off last night."

"I did." The blood looked like it had drained from Trey's face. "I delivered her right to the main dock. She was fine, Max. I swear."

"Unless there's another woman with a shaved head on this lake, she is clearly NOT fine, Trey. Did you walk her to her car?"

Trey's face went from white to a shade of red the same as the navigational markers on the channel in front of the cottage. "She told me to leave. She was waiting for her stepmom."

I didn't wait for any more information. I launched myself out of the boat. "Dock this thing."

"Max. What are you going to do?" Trey shouted.

Ignoring him, I sprinted to the staircase at the boathouse. The Starling chopper was on the helipad, ready to go. I pulled on the headset, pushed the button to fire it up, and lifted off without any safety checks.

The roof of the Starling Estate shrank beneath me as I flew over Windswan Lake, and headed west toward the mountains, and the Chance Rapids hospital.

THE CHANCE RAPIDS hospital was a typical small-town health building. I landed the chopper in the parking lot and sprinted into the emergency reception area.

“Can I help you, sir?” A nurse in pink scrubs was clicking on a keyboard at the reception desk.

“The woman that was brought in from Windswan. I know who she is.”

The nurse’s eyes went wide and she picked up the phone. “The doctor will be out to see you shortly. Please have a seat.”

“No.” I gripped the edge of the counter. “I need to see her now.”

“Sir.” An air of authority came into her voice. “She’s in stable condition. You need to sit down.”

“I’ll wait here, but I will not sit.” I proceeded to pace in the waiting room, my motorcycle boots pounding on the linoleum floor. I must have looked insane, but I didn’t care.

A doctor arrived along with a uniformed policeman. “Sir, can we have a word with you?”

“Of course.” I followed the pretty brunette doctor and the tubby policeman into a private room. The police officer took out his notepad. “What’s your name?”

“Max Starling.”

“Oh, really?” The policeman looked up at me over his glasses. “I’ve heard about your family.”

“Can we get on with this?” I fidgeted in my chair.

“Are you nervous, sir?” The policeman set down his pen. I wanted to punch him in the face. “I’m not nervous. The woman in that room is Rosie.” I realized that I didn’t know her last name. “She works for my family.”

“What’s Rosie’s last name?”

I knew this was going to come up. “I’m not sure.” I took a deep breath. If I wanted to help Rosie, I needed to calm the fuck down. “She was at our masquerade ball last night.”

“That explains the dress.” The cop chewed on the end of the pen.

“What happened to her?” I looked to the doctor as it seemed the like cop was useless.

“If you’re not family, I can’t release any information to you.” The doctor’s eyes seemed sympathetic, but her by-the-book attitude was pissing me off.

“My driver dropped her off at the marina last night. Her stepmother, who HATES her, was supposed to meet her there. She’s got a birthmark that looks like an Orca on her inner thigh, and her necklace is missing a ruby stone.” I fished the charm out of my pocket and pointed to the stone in the middle. “This ruby stone.”

The police officer’s radio squawked and he stood. “I think that I have all that I need. Your friend bumped her head and fell into the lake.” He left the room.

“Is that what we’ve got for cops in this town?”

The doctor gave a light shrug. “He’s got a big heart and doesn’t always see what’s right in front of him.”

“That’s exactly what you want in law enforcement, someone who sees the good in people.”

The doctor shut the door and then sat down beside me. “There are signs of a struggle. Your friend had a blow to the head and was found floating in the lake. By some miracle, the dress that she was wearing kept her afloat – face up. A local fisherman found her this morning.

I doubled over in my chair and dry heaved. “Is she going to be okay?”

Again, the doctor looked like she was having an ethical dilemma. “I think so.”

“You think?” I pushed myself to an upright seated position. “Can I see her?”

The doctor cleared her throat. “Not yet.”

I tapped the heels of my boots on the floor. “Can we arrange for a security guard to be posted outside her room?”

“I don’t think that’s necessary; and the hospital doesn’t cover that kind of expense.”

I stood. “I’ll cover it. I also don’t want anyone in that room to see her. Especially not her stepmother. That cop might think Rosie slipped and hit her head, but until we can hear what happened directly from Rosie’s mouth, I don’t want that woman, or her stepsister anywhere near her.

The doctor stood and hugged her clipboard to her chest. She looked me up and down. “Mr. Starling. Come with me. I’m going to go to the third floor. You can get off the elevator

wherever you want – but don't get off on the second floor, and don't go into room 211.

“I want to hug you right now,” I whispered.

“Don't make me regret this decision.” She opened the door, and I followed her to the bank of elevators, pushing floor two as she pushed the button for the third floor.

THE CHART at the end of the bed read Jane Doe. Rosie was hooked up to a bunch of machines but looked peaceful. Her head was bandaged, and one-half of her face was bruised and swollen.

I pulled the visitor's chair to the edge of the bed and held her hand. It could've been my imagination, but I swear that she squeezed mine.

I stood and stroked the bandage on her head and bent to kiss her cheek. The fragility of life struck me. Last night, when we were on the dock, I wanted to tell her that I'd fallen in love with her. From the very first time we met, I knew that she was the woman for me – but I didn't – because it was too soon, and we had time.

“Rosie,” I whispered. “It's me. Max.”

The machines beeped and blooped and Rosie continued to sleep. She wasn't going to answer, but it felt good to speak out loud. “I thought that the afternoon that we spent together was the best day of my life. It turns out that last night topped it. You have to get better so we can have a morning together. I have the feeling that every day with you will be the best day of my life.”

I cleared my throat and looked for any sign that she could hear me. There was none.

“Rosie. I don’t know a lot about you. I don’t know your last name, or how you take your coffee, but I do know this, I love you.”

SEVENTEEN

DAISY

THE SUN WAS TOO BRIGHT. Wincing, I blinked hard and tried to bring my hand to my face to block my eyes.

“She’s waking up.” A voice I didn’t recognize spoke somewhere off in the distance.

I blinked again. It wasn’t the sun, it was fluorescent lights blaring down on me. I looked down, an IV was taped to my hand. I tried to push myself to a sitting position, but then hands were on my chest, easing me down.

“Where am I? What’s happening?” I looked around the room and realized that I was in a hospital.

The voice belonged to a nurse. He was a handsome man built like a linebacker, his hair tied back into a...what was it called? A mantail. No, that wasn’t right.

“Rose. You are in the Chance Rapids hospital. There was an accident and you bumped your head.”

I reached to touch my forehead and my fingertips met gauze. “I bumped my head?”

“Yes.” He tucked a pillow behind my back. “Go easy on yourself, you’ve been in a medically induced coma. We needed to make sure your brain was okay before we woke you up.”

“It’s called a man bun.” I pointed to his hair. He smiled and touched his hair. “That is what it’s called. Did you hear what I said?”

I ignored his advice and his pillow and sat upright. “I’ve been in a coma.” The words came out of my mouth, but it took a second for me to register their meaning. “I’ve been in a coma?” This time it was a question. “For how long?”

“Two weeks.” He pressed me back into the pillow.

“Two weeks!” I bolted upright again. “I have to go.”

He chuckled. “You’re not going anywhere just yet.”

“You don’t understand.” I threw back the hospital blanket, revealing my bare legs, tucked into wool socks. “I have to be somewhere. I need to meet someone. I promised.” Tears began to fall. “He wouldn’t wait for two weeks, would he?”

The nurse called to someone in the hallway. “She’s awake and confused.”

“I’m not confused.” I rested on the pillow. The night started to rush back to me. I pressed the heel of my hand to my forehead as the memories played out like a horror movie. “I was supposed to meet a man at Keystone Point. He’s going to think I lied to him.”

The nurse tucked the blanket back around my body. “I think he’ll understand. You were found floating in Windswan Lake. It’s a miracle that you’re here.”

A searing heat shot through my head and I squeezed my eyes tightly with the pain. “I was found...floating in the lake? Who found me?”

“It’s a bit of a puzzle. A fisherman found you.”

“Not a woman named Christina?”

He shook his head. “No. The details aren’t totally clear, but it was definitely a fisherman.”

The last thing I remembered was falling. I must have hit my head and landed in the water. Which meant that Christina left me there. “Has my stepmother visited me?” My throat constricted. I knew that Christina hated me, but was she cold enough to leave me to drown in the lake.?

The nurse took a breath. “Your friend is here. I think that he’ll be able to fill in the details better than me.”

“My friend?”

The door opened and Max Starling was standing in the doorway, a bouquet of flowers wrapped in brown craft paper in his hand. “You’re awake.” He rushed to the side of the bed.

The nurse scribbled some notes on the clipboard and then hooked it on the end of my bed. “I’ll leave you two to catch up.” He looked over his shoulder as he left. “That man has been here every day.”

“Is that true?” I whispered.

Max smiled. “They let me sleep in that bed.” He pointed to the empty hospital bed next to me. “I haven’t left.” He squeezed my hand. “I wasn’t leaving you here alone.”

“Max, I’m sorry I didn’t make it to Keystone Point.”

He seemed to crumple. “Rosie. Don’t you worry about that. I can’t believe I almost lost you again, this time for good.” He bent to kiss me. I pressed into his chest with my hand.

“Max, I haven’t brushed my teeth in two weeks.”

“I don’t give a fuck.” He pressed his lips to mine. Hot tears seared my cheeks. I wrapped my arms around his strong neck

and he hugged me, gently, but firmly. I wasn't the only one crying, tears streamed down Max's face too.

"Come, sit with me." I patted the bed next to me.

"Are you sure?" Max raised his eyebrows.

"Get in here." I tugged his hand. He crawled into the bed beside me and I curled into his body. "Did you really not leave?"

He cleared his throat. "I was here the entire time. Do you remember anything about that night?"

I sighed. "I do. I wish that I didn't though."

He stiffened beside me. "I'm so mad at Trey for leaving you there on the dock."

"Don't you dare be mad at him. I forced him to leave. He's a good man. It was my fault that I was there alone. Mine and mine alone."

"Were you alone?" he asked.

"No. I wasn't. Christina was trying to steal Jessica's earrings. We fought and I hit my head. That part was an accident."

Max kissed my cheek and rested his hand on my neck. "What else do you remember?"

The only thing I really remembered was the dock cleat coming at my face as I tripped. "Not much." I took a deep breath. The next part was going to be tough. "Max. I think that Christina left me there...to drown."

He nodded and kissed me again. "You don't have to worry about that woman ever again."

"What? Do the police think that she tried to kill me?"

He rubbed my arm. “This is a lot for you, maybe we should wait until you’re feeling better.”

“No. What do you mean, Max?”

He bit his lip as though debating whether to tell me something. “Chloe confessed. Christina is going to be charged with manslaughter and leaving the scene of an accident. She was going to try to claim your inheritance. It looks like that stepsister of yours has a little bit of a conscience after all.”

“Oh.” The room became quiet. Then I started to cry. Not just a sniffle, but a full-on sob.

Max held me and rubbed my back. “Let it out, baby girl.”

And I did. Years of living under that evil woman were over. I always wondered what she was capable of doing in the name of her greedy conquest. It turns out she was capable of murder.

Max kissed every one of my tears. “I will never let anything happen to you, ever again.”

“And I will always be there for you,” I smiled, even though my face hurt.

Rolling out of the bed, Max pulled the paper off the bouquet. “Mrs. Graham had these delivered to the hospital for you.” They were flowers from Hank’s shop. “It’s a custom arrangement.”

If flowers could speak, that bouquet was telling a story. There were at least fifty roses surrounding white ditch daisies. “They’re beautiful.”

“They’re you,” Max smiled. “Mrs. Graham overheard a conversation with your stepmother. She was the one who arranged for you to stay on the island and work the event. She

and Jessica conspired to get you to the ball. Both of them thought that you were perfect for me. They didn't know that we'd already met and discovered that for ourselves."

I hugged the flowers to my chest and buried my face in the petals.

"I have something else for you." Max pulled a box from the inside of his jacket. It was a black velvet box. "Open it." He nudged it into my hand. I was weaker than I thought, opening the box took all of my strength. When I saw what was inside, it took my breath away.

"My necklace." I touched my fingertips to the gold chain and flipped over the pendant. The missing ruby had been replaced. "How did you know it was a ruby?" I took the necklace from the box and tried to clip it around my neck. Max sat on the side of the bed and took the necklace from my fingertips and affixed it for me.

"That ruby fell off last year. I found it in my saddlebag and I kept it."

"It's the same stone." I touched the pendant.

"The exact same stone."

I took a deep breath. I might regret what I was about to say, but I was tired of living with regrets. "Max..."

I reached for his hand. "It's too soon but..."

A lopsided grin spread across his face. "There's no such thing as too soon. I feel it too."

I met his gaze. "I love you."

"I love you too, Rosie." He crawled into the bed, wrapped me in his arms and kissed me. I fell asleep with the warmth of

his breath on my ear, feeling truly safe and loved for the first time in years.

EPILOGUE

ONE WEEK Later

SUNLIGHT STREAMED in through the floor-to-ceiling windows in Max's cottage. Unlike the historic cottage on Starling Island, Max's place was modern and brand-spanking new.

“What do you think?”

I looked around. “It's gorgeous Max. It's so...you.” A propellor from an airplane was suspended from the ceiling. Photographs of motorcycles in front of various wonders of the world covered the walls. At first glance, it was one of the most masculine spaces I'd ever seen, but then I started noticing the softness. There were bouquets of roses on practically any surface that could hold a vase.

“I got some throw cushions for you and some cozy blankets. Jessica told me that girls like those things.”

The throw cushions looked pristine like they'd never been squished into the corner of the sofa during a movie marathon.

Max's cell phone rang, but he handed it to me. “It's Olivia Stinson.”

I took the call. Max had been in discussions with a local Windswan lawyer the entire time I was in the hospital. It turns out that Christina had been lying to me all those years. My inheritance was going to be deposited into my bank account in the next few days. Christina was in prison, awaiting trial, and Chloe had disappeared.

I thanked the lawyer and hung up the call. The lock screen picture on Max's phone was a photo of us he'd snapped when I was in the hospital – I still had the bandage on my head.

“Here.” I handed him the phone. “Can we take a better photo for your screen saver?” I asked.

“Sure.” He shrugged. “But that's your phone. You can use whatever photo you'd like.”

It was a small gesture, but Max seemed to be the king of those. “This is my first cell phone – at twenty-three years old.”

“I know. It's crazy,” Max said. “I think that I have a contender for your new lock screen. He held up a giant orange ginger cat. “This is Fanta. I think he's better looking than me.”

Trading the phone for the cat, I buried my face in his fur. Fanta's purrs vibrated against my chest. Max snapped a photo and showed it to me. “You're right. That is my new lock screen picture.” I set down the very heavy cat and he proceeded to wind himself in figure eights around my legs.

Jessica had been living in Max's cottage, but when she heard that I was moving in for the rest of the summer, she'd returned to the main estate – along with Ginger, her fat orange cat.

Max took me in his arms. “I have an elaborate date planned for our first morning together.”

“Tell me more.” I kissed his neck.

“Well, I’m going to give you a choice. We can take the paddleboards around the island and then come back for a swim. I’ll make you breakfast and then we can make plans for all the fun things we’re going to do before you go away to school.

It sounded like the perfect morning. “What’s the other option?”

His eyes glinted and he whispered in my ear. “We starve and I show you my fancy shower.”

“Is there more than one showerhead?” I tapped my chin like I was actually considering the options. Making love with Max had been all that I could think about since I woke up in the hospital.

He picked me up and I wrapped my legs around his waist. “There’s twenty.”

“Fuck food.” I nipped at his earlobe.

With the steam shower activated, Max started by washing my back. My hair had started to grow in, and he scrubbed at the scruff on my head. He bent and bit my neck as I washed his hair, and then he turned me around and spread my legs. I pressed my hands against the black marble tile and arched my back as I received the sensation I’d been fantasizing about for over a year – Max big and hard and thrusting into me. He wrapped his arm around my body and squeezed my breast while we moved together. I leaned my head against his shoulder and moaned as his other hand slipped between my legs. He shifted us so that one of the shower heads was helping out with his hand, and my legs were soon shaking. “Oh, Max,” I moaned, my voice echoing in the bathroom. “I’m going to come.”

“Me too, baby.” His voice was strained. We had prepared for this. I was on the pill and we both had a clean bill of health. Feeling his skin against mine was even better than I’d imagined. He held me up as my legs gave out when my orgasm surged through my body. He grunted and squeezed his arm around my waist as he shuddered, his body twitching inside mine.

I turned to face him. The water from the rain shower head cascaded over our heads as our mouths found each other’s, frantically. He was already hard again, his cock rested warm between my legs. “It’s going to be a good August,” he growled.

We made love, this time slowly on his bed, and then we got dressed. We were invited to the main house for breakfast. The paddleboards were the quickest way to get there, and as we landed on the main island, Mrs. Graham was there waiting for me.

“Welcome home, dear.” She spread her arms wide and I fell into her embrace. “Max is like a son to me. I’m so happy that it’s you that he chose.”

I winked at her. “With your help.” She turned her palms upward. “I have no idea what you are talking about.”

Mrs. Graham’s radio squawked. “Ah, business calls. Head on up. I believe that breakfast is ready.”

We walked hand in hand up the pathway to the main cottage. Laird was standing on the deck wearing golf clothes, a cup of steaming coffee in his hand. “There she is.” He held open his arms. “I can’t wait to steal you from Jessica for the regatta next year.” Laird reminded me so much of my father, he even smelled like him. It should’ve been weird, but every time he hugged me, it brought me comfort.

Jessica slid open the balcony door. “Actually, Dad. I was thinking that the four of us might make a good team. We just need one more.”

Laird looked a little sad, but it passed quickly. “I’ll see what I can do. Maybe you can round up another person to join the family team.”

“Maybe Rosie will meet someone at school and set me up.” Jessica smiled. “Until then I’ll stick with the landscapers.” She leaned on the balcony and as if on cue, one of the workers started up the lawnmower.

“You are going to be the death of me.” Laird shook his head. “For the longest time, I thought it was Max that was going to kill me, but I think it might be you. Come on. Breakfast is on the table.” He jerked his head toward the cottage.

We all took seats at the one end of the huge dining table. “Did you hear the cottage keeper gossip?” Jessica whispered to me.

“No. I’ve been a bit out of the loop.”

“Right.” Jessica shook her head. “Sorry about that. You know the blonde cottage keeper, Tara?”

I perked up. Tara had sent me flowers, but the hospital hadn’t let anyone but Max into my room. “What about her?”

Jessica looked at her father, who was deep in conversation with Max. “She’s sleeping with Trey.”

I laughed. “That’s old news.”

“Yeah, but Faye knows, and she’s letting it slide...” She slowly rubbed her hands together, making a sliding motion.

“Scandalous.”

Laird cleared his throat and held up his champagne glass. Mimosas were on the menu. “To Rosie. I hope your time here this August is divine enough for you to return to us after your year at school.”

I smiled. “It’s already so good I might not go.”

“Good.” Laird laughed. “And to Max for starting the Starling Sports Charity. It’s just a coincidence that it’s in the same town as Rosie’s University, right?”

“Total coincidence.” Max winked.

“I’m so proud of you.” Laird tipped his glass. “And to Jessica. My darling Jessica who has decided to take Max’s place on the board of directors. You’ve got some big shoes to fill, but luckily you’ve got some damn big feet.”

Jessica smiled and I think I even saw a tear in her eye.

“Most importantly,” Laird continued. “To family.”

We clinked our glasses together and sipped the cocktails. Somehow I started the summer scrubbing toilets and finished it drinking mimosas, made with freshly squeezed orange juice and Dom Perignon – which was nice, but it wasn’t the best part. No, I had started the summer alone and finished it with a brand-new family, complete with my very own Prince Charming.

For more Windswan Lake, be sure not to miss Cash and Hollie’s story. A standalone second chance romance with plenty of skinny dipping, campfires, and a runaway terrier.

[Mine for the Summer is available now.](#)

Dear Reader,

Thank you for reading Summer Ever After. I hope that you enjoyed Max and Rosie's (aka Daisy's) Cinderella story. If you missed book one in the Windswan Lake series, Mine for the Summer, you can get it [here](#).

Book 3 is coming out in July 2024. Be the first to hear about the details by signing up for my newsletter [here](#).

If you enjoyed meeting Max's cousin Bronwyn and her mechanic husband Dylan, their story takes place in the Laketown Otters Hockey Series. Laketown is a more glamorous version of Windswan Lake, but has all the same small town feels.

The Captain's Secret Baby, Book 5 in the Laketown Otters Hockey series is available [here](#). Although best read in order, each book in the series can be read as a standalone - keep reading for an excerpt of Bronwyn and Dylan's story.

xo,

A.J.

ABOUT THE CAPTAIN'S SECRET BABY

A Billionaire. A Hockey Star...and a BABY

I'm the heir to a billion dollar corporation and he's a small town mechanic.

It was supposed to be a summer fling.

And yeah, it was fun while it lasted.

But, we're from two separate worlds and it will never work.

Even though he makes my heart hammer like there's a heavy metal band in my chest; my parents and grandparents would never accept a Laketownie into our family.

He can never find out that this baby is his. Ever.

The Captain's Secret Baby can be read as a standalone, or as book 5 in the Laketown Hockey Series.

SNEAK PEEK - THE CAPTAIN'S SECRET BABY

The engine sputtered and I felt the boat surge forward before it lost power. “No. No. No.” I pulled back on the throttle and the boat settled in the still water in the middle of the bay, smoke billowing into the blue sky. “Shit,” I whispered under my breath.

Even though the engine had already quit running, I turned off the key. The waves from the wake caught up to us and rocked the boat as I made my way to the stern. Smoke seeped from the engine compartment as I fumbled with the antique hinges to open it.

“What are you doing?” My friend, Tess, stretched her tanned arms over her head and looked at me over her oversized Jackie O glasses.

“Ouch!” The hinge released and, in the process, bent my nail backward. It felt like every drop of blood in my body had rushed to my thumb. “Ow. Ow. Ow.” I shook my hand and leaned over the side of the boat to plunge my hand into the cold water of Lake Casper. I coughed as the wind shifted direction and the smoke from the engine wrapped around my entire body before blowing further across the lake. I wrapped the bottom of my silk dress around my thumb and managed to open the other clasp. I tried to lift the lid. It wouldn't budge. It

turns out that mahogany is very heavy. “Can you help me?” It was awkward trying to lift the lid to the engine compartment with one functioning hand and the other wrapped in red silk.

Tess examined her nails. “Let’s just call someone.” She reached into her Yves St. Laurent bag and pulled out her cell phone.

“What if the engine is on fire?” I pointed to the black smoke.

Tess’s eyebrows rose high above her glasses. “Fire?”

“Fire makes smoke. Help me.”

Tess rushed to the back of the classic wooden boat and together we were able to raise the cover. The smoke curled out from deep within the jumble of pipes and wires, but thankfully I didn’t see any flames. Tess turned and coughed into her arm. She lifted her glasses and wiped at her watery eyes with her pink manicured fingers.

I pointed to her phone. “It doesn’t look like we have to abandon ship. Now, we can call for help.”

Tess coughed. “Who should I call?”

I stepped to the front of the boat and took a deep breath of fresh air. “Let me think.”

“What about your house manager?”

I turned to face what was supposed to be one of my best friends. “Do you remember earlier today? The part where I told you I wasn’t supposed to take this boat to the club?”

“Riiiiiiight.” Tess nodded. “But we looked super cute pulling up in it.”

We had looked cute. Heads had definitely turned – two supermodels getting out of a classic wooden boat at the private Lake Casper Club.

The boat was a well-known fixture on the Lake Casper antique circuit and my parents had been offered half a million dollars to sell it the year before. They never would, *Calliope* had been in the Yates family since the turn of the twentieth century, purchased the same year that my great-great-grandparents had built our cottage, The Yates Estate.

I sucked my throbbing thumb as I racked my brain, trying to figure out what to do about the boat and wondering about karma. Is this what happened when I disobeyed my parents? They specifically told me not to take *Calliope* from her berth in the boathouse. Why had I let Tess convince me it was a good idea? I knew that I could return the boat without a scratch, and they'd never know the difference, but it had never crossed my mind that there might be something wrong with her. If I called the house manager, she would tell my parents and I was already in their bad books. I flopped into the captain's seat. "Why don't we call Brandon?" I suggested.

"Davenport?" Tess asked, but was already scrolling through her phone. "He was heading to the first tee when we left."

"If he wants to sleep with you, he'll waltz right off that golf course, get in his boat, and rescue us."

Tess had rejected Brandon's advances all summer and it had driven him crazy. She'd had her eyes on one of the New York Thunder pro hockey players.

Tess nodded with a slight smirk on her face and jabbed at her phone. A puzzled look came over her face as she tried again and then held her phone up into the sky. "Zero bars of

service.” She walked from one side of the boat to the other, her eyes trained on the screen.

The engine smoke had thinned, and the only sound was the lapping of the water against the hull. “What are we going to do?” Panic had quickly crept into Tess’s voice.

“Let me think.” The slight rocking of the boat and the noxious fumes were a recipe for disaster in my stomach.

“Bronwyn.” Tess’s voice rose an octave higher than usual. “We’re stuck out here.” She shielded her eyes with her hand. “It’s so hot. We’ll get dehydrated.”

I inhaled and tried to keep my salmon and mixed greens lunch from making an unwelcome appearance. “Tess. It’s Lake Casper. Not the ocean. Someone will come by and give us a tow to the marina, or...” I didn’t want to think of the alternative and the damage it would cause to *Calliope*, “We’ll drift to shore. If you’re worried about dying in the next two hours, feel free to drink the lake water.”

Tess shriveled her nose and fanned her face.

She was right though; the heat was intense. August in Laketown was either hot and humid or cool and rainy. So far this year, it had been more like the Serengeti and a rush of nausea ripped through my body like a tidal wave. “Oh no.” I clamped my hand over my mouth and threw my upper body over the starboard side of the boat, barfing my fifty-dollar salad into the lake.

“Don’t.” Tess turned away from me. “You’re going to make me puke too.”

I waited for my stomach to calm down and then scooped some water into my mouth to rinse it out.

“I can’t believe you get seasick.” Tess’s voice was muffled as she still had her hand clamped firmly on her mouth. “Don’t you spend months on a yacht?”

With shaky hands, I eased into the captain’s chair. I wasn’t seasick. I had sailed the Mediterranean every year since I was a little kid, but I wasn’t ready to tell Tess, or anyone, the truth – just yet. “I think it was the smell from the smoke and the heat.”

Tess nodded.

I pointed to the rear bench seat of the boat. “There might be a hat or a blanket or something under the cushion.”

Tess retrieved a striped cotton blanket and the two of us held it over our heads. As twenty-something, aka ancient models, neither of us could afford to have skin damage. “My arms are getting tired.” Tess dropped her end of the blanket tent into her lap.

“It’s been thirty seconds.” I shook my head. “Here. Give me your end.” I gestured with my hand, and she handed me the fringed edge of the blanket. I leaned over the windshield and tucked the side under the windshield wipers and draped the other edge over the backrests of the front seats. We huddled on the floor under the blanket, both of us with our phones in hand, eyes glued to the screen waiting for the arrival of a bar on the screen.

A boat droned by in the distance, and I crawled from the tent to wave my arms in the air, but they didn’t alter course. Five minutes later, the wake from their boat reached ours, and Tess and I rocked miserably in our tent.

“A round of golf at the club takes about four hours,” Tess mused. “Brandon and Tad have to come this way to get to their

cottages.”

I glanced at my Rolex. “That means we’ve got three and a half hours to go.”

“And that’s if they don’t stop at the club for a beer after their round.”

I couldn’t sit upright any longer and laid on the floor of the boat. “Ugggghhh,” I groaned. “I can’t believe nobody has stopped.”

Tess peeked out from under the blanket. “I can’t see any boats, anywhere.”

She leaned on her elbows and sighed. “I could go for some prosecco right about now.”

“Me too.” It wasn’t a lie. I sure could have used a cold bubbly glass of something. It had been three and a half months since a drop of alcohol had passed my lips, but not one of my friends noticed that I had offered to be the designated driver every time we went out. It was the perfect excuse not to drink and the one that I had used that day. Unfortunately, I chose to drive the half a million-dollar hunk of junk that was now drifting down the middle of Lake Casper.

Tess checked her phone. “Nothing.” She dropped it onto her flat stomach. Luckily voluminous dresses were my style and so far, my belly didn’t look any different from the outside – although it sure felt different on the inside. “When we get in range should I call Tyler?” Tess asked. Tyler was the pro hockey player Tess had been lusting after all summer.

“Aren’t you leaving in a couple of weeks?”

“Yeah.” Tess picked at an invisible piece of lint on her linen shirt. “But you can do a lot in two weeks.” She grinned conspiratorially. “What’s the latest with McManus?”

I shrugged. Six months ago, I would've given my right arm for a date with Jake McManus. He was exactly what I liked – older, sophisticated, rich, and hot. He was the perfect man for me, and I had spent the past two summers pining for him. Ever since my ex-fiancé left me, I'd been searching for the perfect man to have at my side. One that I could bring home to my parents – and more importantly, my grandparents.

“I told Jake that I would be free for dinner sometime this week.”

“Bronwyn.” Tess's voice was harsh. “Why do you keep putting him off? The guy has been trying to buy you dinner all summer.”

I shot her one of my best fake smiles. Luckily, I was an expert at them and she was really bad at reading people. “That's why he keeps calling. I keep saying no.”

Tess laid down on the floor next to me. “You're so good at that. If Tyler asked me out, I'd probably end up sleeping with him in the car on the way to the restaurant. I need to adopt some of your self-control.”

If she only knew that there was a baby in my belly. One that was put there from a one-night stand. Well, technically it was a series of one-night stands over the past two years, so she might have something different to say about my level of control.

“I forgot that you've got your little townie friend with benefits.” Tess laughed.

My cheeks burned, and I hoped that under the shelter of the red and white stripes, it wasn't obvious.

“What was his name again? Is he still around?”

I couldn't bring myself to say his name. "I don't know. I haven't seen him this summer."

It was the truth. I hadn't seen him since the spring. May to be exact.

"You're something else, Bronwyn. You could have any guy on this lake, and you chose to get down and dirty with a Laketownie."

I smacked her thigh lazily. "You and the girls are the only people who know about that." I sat up. "You haven't told anyone, have you?"

Tess's body rocked into mine as some rolling waves met the side of the boat. "Of course not. That's not something anyone would want to get out."

I exhaled. "Thanks. You know what the rumor mill is like here – and it's worse for—"

"Us?" she laughed. "I'm surprised the paparazzi haven't zoomed up beside us to take photos of the heir to the Yates Petroleum fortune, stranded in the middle of a lake."

"Nah, they're cowering on the shore somewhere with their super lenses. Not helping."

Tess laughed. "They'd let us die out here and document the whole thing, wouldn't they?"

"Yep." A sad laugh escaped because it was true.

"What makes you think that little Laketownie isn't bragging all over town that he's banged Bronwyn Yates?"

I hated that she kept calling him little but defending him would certainly throw up some red flags. "He's not like that."

“Sure. Until one of the paparazzi offers him money for the story.”

“Mmmm.” My reply was non-committal. I had been sleeping with one of the Laketown Otters on and off for the past two years and I knew him better than I’d known my ex-fiancé. My Laketownie was hot as hell, made me cry with laughter one minute, and scream in ecstasy the next. He wasn’t the full package though: he was an uneducated, small-town jock who sometimes used the word *ain’t*. But if there were a bedroom package, he had it all. He was the perfect mixture of rough and wild and sweet and giving.

The rocking of the boat must have lulled my exhausted pregnant body to sleep because I awoke to Tess shaking my arm.

“Bronwyn, there’s a boat coming.” She hopped to her feet and grabbed the blanket to wave it in the air. “They’re coming over here.” She was practically squealing and stamping her feet with excitement.

I draped my arm over my eyes to protect them from the sudden assault of the sun’s rays. Without looking, I could hear the deep throaty sound of another wooden boat approaching. “It’s a nice boat.” Tess relayed the information to me as I peeled myself from the floor. I adjusted my Ray-Bans and joined Tess in waving to the guy as he approached. Everyone knew *Calliope* and I shielded my eyes as I tried to identify the boat as it approached. It looked like the Hawthorne’s cruiser. Mr. Hawthorne was a tech billionaire and a friend of my father’s.

“Shit.” I shook my head, but I wasn’t going to complain. I could already feel the tightness in my face from being out in the elements for too long. Mr. Hawthorne was sure to tell my

father that he'd had to rescue *Calliope*, but I would rather face the wrath of my father than spend the night floating on Lake Casper.

As he approached my breath caught in my throat. It wasn't Mr. Hawthorne. It was way worse. Ten million times worse.

"I think it's a mechanic," Tess whispered.

It definitely was a mechanic. He was wearing the green mechanic shirt from the Lake Casper Marina and had a huge grin on his face.

Tess whispered, even though there was no way he could've heard us over the engine noise. "Isn't that your little townie?"

I didn't have to read the name embroidered on his uniform to know that the man rescuing us was none other than Dylan Moss. The man whose baby I was hiding beneath my silk dress.

(end excerpt)

The Captain's Secret Baby

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