

# *Tempted*

WILD WINTER NIGHTS BOOK 1

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KENDALL RYAN

Tempted

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## Synopsis

**From New York Times bestselling author Kendall Ryan and the up-and-coming dynamo Billie Bloom comes an all-new romance with sizzling heat, found-family and what it means to truly be happy.**

Being trapped all winter in a remote Alaskan off-grid town sounds horrible, until you meet the lumber-hunks that offer to share their space with us.

You wouldn't suspect a group of L.A. women are capable of hacking it here, but you'd be wrong.

Turns out, we have just what this group of former military operatives need in life, and it's so much more than any of them want to admit.

# FREE BOOK ALERT!

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# PROLOGUE

**Jameson**

FOUR YEARS AGO

“We’re really going home,” Henry sighs as the sun dips below the horizon. “I can’t wait to see Sarah.”

Henry’s the only one of our squad of eight who has a woman waiting back home for him.

We’re cramped in the back of the cargo hold, but we couldn’t care less. We’re going home.

The words are sweet to us. Bittersweet, that is. We know what’s waiting. We’ve heard the stories. We don’t talk about it, but we know. It’s going to be hard for my guys to adjust to being back home, out of survival mode.

I’ll still be in survival mode though. It comes with the territory. Quite literally. Port Providence, Alaska is a brutal place to live, which is why there’s less than a hundred of us left.

I’ve lived there my whole life. My dad has too. There are not many folks there who can say the same. It’s sort of a place for outcasts. That makes me a perfect fit. Hell, it’d make my whole squad a perfect fit.

“I can’t wait to take a hot shower and sleep in my bed,” Tucker sighs. He’s the most privileged of us all, you might say. He grew up wealthy in a well-adjusted family. Still has a room in their mansion back in Cape Cod. You’d never know that about him though. He’s not at all spoiled. Just a real genuine sweet guy. He may be the only one who can properly process his emotions.

“What about you, JP?” Tucker asks. The two have been inseparable for the past eight years. Hell, they even slept leaning back-to-back some nights, like that scene in *Forrest Gump*. We’re all close in the squad, but not like JP and Tuck.

“You know I’ve paid to keep up my ma’s old trailer. Been renting it out, but the renter left a few days ago, so we’ll see what shape it’s in.” JP shrugs it off. He doesn’t need much, that guy. He could make soup with stones, and you’d swear it was the best thing you ever tasted.

“Surely you have saved enough to get a different place?” West asks. He’s always had a lot to say about everything. If West won an award out of the eight of us, it’d be most likely for complaining about anything and everything. If he was a fish, he’d complain about water.

“Do you not know JP?” Teddie scoffs. “Ignore him, bro. It’s awesome that you’re going back to your roots. Wish I could.”

We all get quiet for a minute, because we know Teddie has no roots. He was homeless as a teenager. Never told us anything about his past. He claims he can’t remember.

“Bro, come home to my spot anytime,” JP offers. The pair share a hearty hand clasp in solidarity.

“That’s true of all of us, Ted. If you want to come to the middle of nowhere Alaska and live with me, you are welcome,” I offer. “Hell, any and all of you come. If anything gets tough or you just need a break.”

“Doesn’t it cost like thousands of dollars to charter a helicopter to your spot?” Henry asks.

“You call me if that happens, I’m good for it,” Tucker offers.

“What else you going to do with that trust fund?” West grumbles.

“Don’t listen to him. It’s awesome you got folks who set you up. Don’t you feel bad about that,” I remind Tucker, not that I need to. He knows it. “And for the record, if you split it a few ways and find the pilots on the right day, you can get the ride for a few hundred.”

“This is so weird.” JP shakes his head. “I should have re-upped.”

A chorus of agreement rings out. Not that any of us really mean it. We’re all tired and ready to move on to what’s next in life, even if next sort of feels like going backwards for most of us.

# CHAPTER 1

## Jolie

The helicopter sets us down in a clearing and we offload heavy boxes of camera equipment, securing our backpack straps firmly across our chests. The icy wind reminds me that winter is approaching quickly in Alaska, even if it's technically still fall. We say thank you and share a hug with Dale and Kate Westover, the husband-and-wife pilot crew who saw us through this last, six bumpy hours, leg of our journey. After a quick wave, our ride is gone, making their way back to civilization. Or rather, Juneau with its population around thirty thousand or so. The five of us form a unicorn... an all-female film production crew. In my years of filming around L.A., it's never been all women. It's a cool feeling. And in this moment, we are officially on the job in Port Providence, Alaska. A huge smile overtakes my face. I love the start of a new adventure.

It's mid-October and we only have a few weeks of reliable weather to shoot. This is the perfect escape at the perfect time, since my ex-fiancé is back in L.A., currently moving out of our apartment, and in with his new model girlfriend. Not that I'll let myself cry anymore over it. He wasn't worth my time. I'll just have to keep telling myself that.

We all stare a beat at our stunning surroundings. As the helicopter sound fades in the distance, the light breeze, birds chirping, and water lapping at the edge of the cliff line all register. It's one of those ethereal moments in a documentary where we'd pump some loud inhale-exhale sound effects, panning the camera in slow motion to emphasize the shocking beauty of this place. Rugged and unfriendly as hell, with a variety of ways to kill you, but stunning nonetheless.

"It's colder than a witch's titty out here," Chloe says in her loud, throaty voice, and we all laugh. She's our creative



director and we can always count on her to say something brassy.

“Friend, you are not wrong,” my little sister Evie agrees as she zips her waterproof coat up to her chin. It’s so cool having her here with me. She’s been around L.A. a few weeks now and has taken to professional filming like a duck to water.

“Move out,” Chloe shouts. Just like that, our spell is broken, and we’re on the move.

“Should we be filming this part?” Naomi asks. Ever practical Naomi. Never good for a laugh, but always good for getting the job done efficiently. Bless her.

Beth, resident-in-chief of us-not-getting-our-asses-handed-to-us when we do remote nature documentaries like this one, has the final say in our planning. “No time. We need to get to our spot by dark and it’s still a long hike.”

It doesn’t matter that this is my fourth time filming somewhere inhospitable, I never quite get used to hiking—Yosemite, Joshua Tree, Death Valley, Big Sur—they have been experiences of a lifetime. And I love nature, don’t get me wrong. I even run somewhat regularly. Heck, I can go five miles on a good day. But hiking out in nature... it’s just a definite no for me. Even more so when I’m carrying thirty pounds of gear and don’t really know where I’m going.

After an hour and half later, my feet are blistering. “Damn these new boots. Are we getting close, Beth?”

She holds out her compass and looks around. “Umm...”

“Told you not to buy new boots,” Evie harps at me. “Regular sneakers are always best for hiking. You tried to get too fancy with it.”

“Not helping, Evie. Beth?” I ask more urgently. “That *um* was not reassuring. Are we lost?”

“Course not. We’re definitely somewhere in the remote Alaskan wilderness. Only trouble is, I’m starting to wonder *where* exactly.”

“Fucking chopper landing pad. Why does it have to be so far from town?” Naomi complains, tossing her bag to the ground. “And why are there so many hills? Who lives somewhere like this?”

“It’s an inhospitable place to live, Naomi. That’s what makes it so good for TV,” Chloe clarifies.

Frustration punches through me, but at least I’m managing my reaction, unlike some of us. Not that I blame her. We definitely don’t want to be lost in the wilderness. I’m not trying to film my own version of *Naked and Afraid*.

Chloe walks over and puts her arm around Naomi in an attempt to calm our normally chill resident grump. “We got this. Just like always. Even if we’re freezing our nuts off.”

Naomi rolls her eyes. Thankfully none of us actually has nuts. Unpleasant things if you ask me.

“It’s getting dark,” Evie points out as we stand in the middle of nowhere, proverbial dicks in hand.

Beth hikes up her backpack higher on her shoulders. “Dudes, we got this. Get your headlamps on. We can’t be much farther from the town. The houses are all right along the water and I can still hear the waves hitting the rocks. We got this.” Her words are reassuring, even if her tone wobbles a bit. It’s not like we have a choice, there is no flat land here to use for tents, and we especially don’t want to be far from town in grizzly bear country. We have to keep going.

Trudging on as the sun starts to glow orange, we’re all sweaty-exhausted-stomach-rumbling, sleep-deprived messes. Finally, Evie’s little squeal puts new pep in our step. “A light!” She points ahead and sure enough, through the trees, in the not-too-distant distance is a light. Hope blooms in my chest.

“Thank fuck,” Chloe laughs and she shake’s Naomi’s backpack.

Naomi groans. “Settle, woman.”

Chloe and Evie don't settle though. Instead, they break off at a jog, despite the fact that we're all carrying about fifty pounds of gear, give or take.

Beth, Naomi, and I work to keep up to them on this way-too-long hike.

As the trees thin the salty smell of the ocean greets my nostrils. The wind out here is whipping fiercely and the cold stings my cheeks.

"Which genius picked this location again?" Chloe chuckles.

"You did," I remind her with a frown.

"Right. Right. Huge mistake," Chloe concludes. "Next year, we're filming on a tropical island. Preferably somewhere with fruity drinks and those little umbrella straws."

I snort. I do badly need a vacation, but that would require more zeroes in my bank account than I currently possess. We walk on quickly along the cliff line toward the single point of light in a sea of blackness.

"Here's our spot," Beth announces as we all stop. Finally, we drop the hundred pounds or so of gear we're each carrying.

The spotlights from our headlamps dance around taking inventory.

"It kind of feels a little exposed right here. Is it just me?" Evie looks around.

"Best not to overthink it," Chloe pats my sister's shoulder.

Beth just shrugs. "Let's get the tents set up."

We each work quickly and within a few minutes, five tents form a circle.

"Please, tell me we can start a fire," Naomi asks as she sinks to the ground and pulls out a granola bar from her pocket.

“If you have any more food, it must go in a bear box. I’ll be stringing it up soon. And, no fires. It’s too dark to be poking around for firewood. Let’s get some sleep and we’ll situate better in the morning,” Beth decides. We should be warm enough for the night, even if a fire does sound wonderful, Beth is right, we’re all too tired to deal with looking for firewood.

After a short ordeal, everyone zips themselves into their tents and I easily fall into an exhausted sleep. Thankfully, the production crew sent us with sub-zero gear made for arctic conditions.

When I blink awake it feels closer to morning, but it’s still dark out. I want to sleep more, but my bladder is protesting. I make my way far from the tents, back up the tree-covered hill, because privacy for this task is a must.

It’s quiet, but my ears perk at every little scurry sound, every little rustle and snap. When I find the perfect secluded place, I pull down my pants, ass out in the freezing morning air. The only sound I hear next is the sound of my own stream, live and unbound in Mother Nature. That, and a wolf whistle. Not an actual wolf, but like a person making a cat call to someone to get their attention. Then as my head snaps up to the sound, my headlamp hits him, a man, standing about twenty feet away, watching me pee.

“Fuck,” I shout in response, jumping up at the sight of the unexpected, effectively peeing on my own pants before I can cut off the stream. I stumble forward a few feet and then my ankle rolls and I’m on the ground, landing across a log that bangs hard into my ribs.

I groan and cough to catch my breath, and yeah, my ass is still exposed. Talk about a full white moon.

The man chuckles as he crunches over to me. “You okay?”

“Please, look away,” I groan, and tug my pants, which only makes me yelp harder. I must have fucked up my wrist

too. “Delete all the images from your brain.”

“I mean, I can walk away if you want. Or, I can help you.” His deep voice rumbles over the words, and even though he scared the pee out of me, or rather scared the pee back in me, his voice sounds friendly. “But this isn’t something I’m going to easily forget.”

“Okay. Please, help me. Just let me right myself. You work on quickly acquiring a rare form of short-term amnesia, deal?”

He laughs. “Deal. I’m Jameson, by the way.”

“Jolie.” I groan my name as I shift onto my bare ass, which is very cold on the ground, for the record.

Jameson’s eyes meet mine for the first time and I really look at him. He’s muscular and easily six feet tall. His eyes are golden brown, and he has a thick beard that matches his jet-black hair. He’s rugged A.F. Definitely not the pretty-boy type I’m used to in L.A. No overly-waxed eyebrows or Botox here. Jameson is all man. All natural. Forehead creases and rough skin. And he’s still staring at me.

I reach down to my waistband, but there’s a pain in my wrist. There’s no way I’m getting these up on my own. “I hate to ask, but um, can you pull up my pants for me?”

He shakes his head as if shaking out a thought. Hopefully, it’s the memory of me peeing on myself and mooning him. A girl can hope.

“On it.” He reaches to my hips and tugs so hard that he actually pulls me straight up off the ground, by the pants. Who knew my pants were so strong. I should write to Columbia and thank them for the top-notch stitching. My pants effectively do go up though, so there’s that. Then, he’s just holding me up by my pants...

“I’d say put me down, but I’m not sure if I can put weight on my ankle,” I tell him with a forced laugh. I sound downright deranged.

Without another word, he smoothly scoops me up in his arms. Suddenly, we're face to face, and I can smell him. He smells like mint toothpaste, and woody, and sexy mountain man, whatever the hell that means.

"Hey," I say, my breath temporarily stolen by the hot lumbersexual holding me like a baby.

"Are your pants wet?" he asks in reply.

"What?" I say, blinking at him dumbly, remembering that of course they are wet. Apparently, my wishes have only led to *me* getting amnesia. Shit.

"Your pants. They feel... wet," he says with a frown.

I close my eyes and purse my lips. "That might be pee," I admit, then I open one eye to gauge his reaction.

Thankfully, there is a smile on his face. "Sounds about right."

"What sounds right?" I protest.

He chuckles again. "Nothing. Let's get you back to my place so I can patch you up. And find you some pants to borrow."

I groan with embarrassment. My cheeks are most certainly bright red.

Jameson stalks off down the hill as if I weigh nothing.

"So... you come here often?" I ask, desperate to fill the silence, else my mind will over focus on the whole, *peed my pants in front of a hot guy* issue. Good thing I'm generally pretty adapt at rolling with weird situations. A necessity in my job. And to be honest, this isn't the strangest situation I've found myself in over the years.

The man raises an eyebrow at me. Okay, maybe he's not into my kind of humor. He steps over a large log which jostles me, and I wince as my ankle flops around.

"You okay?" he asks, pausing in his tracks.

“All good here,” I say with a tight throat. *Do not cry. Do not cry.* I chant to myself. Tripping, falling ass up in the air, I feel like I have enough going for me tonight. Or this morning. Or whatever the fuck time it is.

As we walk up to the very rustic two-story home on the edge of what looks like a dangerously high cliff, Jameson sidesteps to get us through the door. Should I be questioning going into a stranger’s house right now? Probably. And I have no idea why, but I’m rolling with it. A little help would be, well, helpful right now. And relying on helpful locals has gotten me through a couple of jams in the past.

The heat in here is *niiiice*. A sweet relief to be honest. I take stock around me. It’s funny, because it looks almost like a pottery barn catalog with the spare buoys, comically large fish hooks, old wooden boxes, hand tools, snowshoes... but I know most likely all these objects are here because they are essential for survival in remote places like this, not because he thinks they look cute.

“Charming place you got here,” I compliment him as he walks us upstairs—still carrying me by the way.

He grunts in reply and sets me down on a rustic butcher-block kitchen table, then he disappears into a back room. A few moments later, he returns with a pair of gray sweatpants.

“Ooh la. Gray sweatpants,” I say suggestively, pumping my eyebrows up and down. His face twists again in confusion. Maybe the whole gray sweatpants thing isn’t well known in a remote town of a hundred people.

“What?” he asks. “Are these not okay? I assume they are better than pee pants.” His voice is deep and there’s no humor to his words. He doesn’t sound angry either. Maybe it’s just curiosity? Unless I found a real-life tin man. That’s entirely possible, because the man has barely cracked a smile at my top-notch humor.

That has me laughing. “They are. Thank you. It’s just... gray sweatpants... *dick prints*...” I whisper those last words, not really sure it’s professional, or appropriate, for me to say as much. But hell, I’m pretty much at rock bottom here, so what do I have to lose?

He shakes his head at me, his lack of understanding would be comical if my pride wasn’t so wounded at the moment. “Do you need help changing?”

I use my good hand to tug at my waistband as I roll side to side, trying to work down the pants. Jameson looks at the floor, glancing back at me, then at the floor again.

Finally, I give up with a huff. “Yes, please. That’d be nice.”

That earns me a little smirk as he steps toward me, his big boots clomping against the wood floor. He slowly undoes my shoelaces, carefully removing each hiking boot.

“This looks bad,” he says as he inspects my offending ankle.

“It’s not great,” I admit with a nod.

Jameson frowns at my words, but sets to work slowly peeling off my pants. He carries them over to a big silver basin that must be his sink, then he puts a kettle of water in the fireplace, which has all but burnt to embers.

“What were you doing out there?” I ask as I wait awkwardly, in my white cotton briefs, legs in the air, on a strange man’s dining-room table. Ya know, just a regular Tuesday.

“Checking the snares. I heard we’re having guests tomorrow for breakfast, thought I’d see if I could get a little more to go around.”

“Ah yes. Hello. I am one of said guests. What an introduction, ay?” I ask, amusement on my face as I look down at my shame. It’s either laugh or cry, and I’m sure as shit not crying. Fuck that. I’ve already spent the last few months



crying over my ex. Yeah, I said months. We broke up but still lived together. In case anyone is ever wondering about that, it's a huge mistake.

Jameson grabs a towel and opens the lid to the kettle. Steam rises gently out of it. Apparently satisfied with his work, he carries it over to the tub and pours it over my pants. I close my eyes as a steady pang of humiliation radiates through me. I've never had a man handwash my clothes. When I open my eyes again, he's walking toward me with a steamy cloth in hand.

Without missing a beat, he reaches toward me with the rag, as if he's planning to wipe me up. I snatch his wrist and stop him. My hand barely reaches halfway around it. "Thanks, big guy, but I got it."

He shrugs and takes a few steps back, planting himself on a chair across from me.

"You going to watch?" I ask, holding the quickly cooling rag in hand.

He looks at his boots and I make quick work of wiping my legs down. Then I peel off my underwear, despite the way my wrist aches in response, and slip into his sweats. When I look up again, he's staring right at me. Excellent. Apparently, Alaskan mountain men have different manners than I'm used to.

Finally sensing his cue, about five minutes too late, Jameson stands and walks around the cabin, gathering a long strand of fabric and a few straightish scraps of wood. Then he binds my ankle and wrist.

"How are your ribs?" he asks as he finishes.

"Fine," I lie.

"Let me see," he nods at me.

I roll my eyes and lift my shirt, holding my boobs up, since my bra was abandoned before I fell asleep, and I ain't trying to give him another free show. When a man meets me,

he only sees my butt in the first five minutes. That's my new rule.

He reaches out, fingers brushing the discolored flesh. I hiss in reply.

"I don't have any ice, but I'll get a bag of water for 'ya. Straight from the Alaskan ocean, might as well be ice." He goes toward the door.

"Wait," I gasp. "Can I perhaps sit..." I nod toward his couch, which looks much more comfortable than this wooden table. I mean, I'm all for being propped up on a table by a hot guy, but this is neither the time nor place.

He nods, scooping me up swiftly again, and carries me over to the sofa. The way he sets me down is so gentle, he even lowers himself to his knees beside the couch, so as not to jostle me too much. It's incredibly tender of him. I can't say I'm used to such treatment.

"Uh, thanks," I mutter as I swallow the hard lump in my throat. It feels like he's gone for a long time, so I decide to let my weary eyes fall closed.

When I wake up again, the sun is just rising in the distance, I can see out the big picture window, straight out into the ocean. The view is incredible.

Apparently, Jameson put the cold, water bag on my ankle. It's room temperature now though, and I carefully sit on the floor. The one good thing is that while my ankle is purple and swollen so large there's no way it's going back in a shoe, my wrist feels fine. I roll it around to test it. Yup. All good. Look at me, the girl with two working wrists. That's got to bode well for me.

Easing myself onto the floor, I scootch across the rough wood toward the thin tendril of light peeking from down a hallway. Maybe there is an indoor bathroom here. *Please, let there be an indoor bathroom.* I pull with my arms like some creepy serpent, spotting what indeed looks like a gleaming

porcelain bowl at the end of the hall, just visible through a half open door. Hallelujah!

I work my way down the hall, peering through the crack of a slightly ajar door as I pass. And there he is, my mountain man, one hand on his dresser, head hanging down as he aggressively... passionately... *pleases himself*.

My chest seizes at the sight. His breathing is hard and ragged, sweat is dripping off him. Full birthday suit. Fuck those sculpted muscles. L.A. guys pay an arm and leg for that sort of body. Apparently, you need only live on the side of a cliff in the remote wilderness to obtain it.

Man, he's really going at it. I should definitely continue my quiet journey on the floor. Reaching out, I drag myself, neck craning against my will to steal more glances at Jameson as he clearly reaches his crescendo.

"Fuck," he whisper-groans as our eyes connect, and he seems to finish, simultaneously. *Gasp*. He tugs on a pair of long underwear, and I quickly drag my body from the doorway, getting a few feet further until I see the light flood from behind me, a shadow taking over the space.

"What are you doing?" Jameson asks, still slightly out of breath.

"Who me?" I pause and turn to look up at him. "Oh, just dragging myself across your floor toward the toilet," I say awkwardly.

There is the faintest blush on his cheeks as he searches my face.

"I didn't see anything," I say in my most convincing voice, which I realize a beat later only means I definitely did. The blush on his face deepens in response.

"Come on," he groans, stepping to me and lifting me from the ground, dragging me like a rag doll the short distance. He throws my arms over his shoulders and then tugs my pants right down.

“Uh, thanks,” I say, not quite sure the proper protocol here, but pretty sure asking permission before you take down a lady’s pants is in order, even if she did just drag her body across your floor like a beached whale.

Jameson stares at me expectantly.

“I can take it from here,” I salute him. I swear he holds back a smirk as he turns to leave me.

His footsteps softly fall down the hall, then he stops at what I assume must be the kitchen.

Not two seconds after the toilet flushes, Jameson is back, lifting me up and taking the sweats so high they almost hit my tits. Before I can even begin to comprehend what kind of insane situation I’ve found myself in, he carries me back to the couch, where I see my hand-washed pants are drying over a fire.

There’s a frantic banging on the door downstairs, and he gives me a quick look before rushing off to get it. I hear Evie’s voice clearly, then Beth’s. Then three sets of feet pounding up the stairs. The way they burst into the room, looking around, they must have expected me to be in little cut-up pieces.

“Morning, friends,” I say with a laugh.

“What the hell, Jolie?” Evie hisses, voice tight with worry.

“My bad, babe. Went to pee, *loooooong* story short, hurt my ankle. Jameson brought me back here,” I recap.

“She peed her pants, too,” Jameson adds, matter-of-factly.

Beth and Evie look at me, then to him, then back to me. “Is he serious?”

“As a shot. Yes,” I nod. Note to self, Jameson doesn’t know how to joke around, or how to lie.

“Whew. I was going to say... I mean... you’re wearing his pants,” Evie bites her lip.

Beth kneels down toward my purple swollen ankle and pulls up the long leg of the sweats slowly. “Golly. This thing is brutal.”

“Yuppers,” I confirm. “Definitely not getting a shoe on. Can you film without me? Hey, unless you need footage from inside the tent. I got you covered then.”

“The tent?” Jameson asks, looking bewildered.

“Oh yeah. I can’t impose any more on you, big guy. Thanks for all your help. Evie and Beth can help me back to the tent—” I start to say.

“No,” he says, cutting me off.

“No?” I ask curiously. Who is this guy anyway?

The large man, who I am very aware I just saw jacking off this morning, continues, “You’ll heal faster in here. There’s warmth, a toilet, and water...”

“The lap of luxury,” I laugh, genuinely meaning it.

He frowns. “Or go back to your tent—”

“No. She was actually being serious. But yes. Thank you. If you don’t mind...” Evie interrupts him, giving me a stern look.

I nod. “She’s right. I have a very weird sense of humor, just the way you said toilet, like it was a selling point, which again, it is in this case... Yeah. Anyway, I’m stupid. Just ignore me. Thank you.”

# CHAPTER 2

## Jameson

Jolie tells me to ignore her, as if that's possible. I live in a remote town of some hundred people, of which the majority are men. So yeah, a stunning woman with the bright aqua eyes in my midst... she's not easy to ignore.

I thought I was used to this life, but then finding Jolie in the woods, bare ass, with that little heart-shaped birthmark, in the air... it's like some sick karmic joke, reminding me of everything I'll never have here.

I'm pretty sure she caught me this morning. One minute she was snoring, loudly, on my couch... so I thought I had time... but nope. The next minute, she's dragging herself across my floor, past my door. How could she not see?

The best thing I can do now is get the hell out of my cabin for the day. Fishing. That's what I'll do today. I'm overdue anyway.

Since the tide is just starting to draw out, it's the perfect chance. I'll have about eight hours before it comes back in. Won't be able to get near the dock again until then.

First things first, morning meeting in the community greenhouse. Everyone is already here this morning. It's our favorite meeting spot, since it's the warmest and biggest community place we've got.

Miles and Nina are still in the process of introducing everyone to the camera crew. Nina was my childhood crush, a few years older than me, kind and beautiful, and the only other person around my age. Now, she's one of a handful of women in our little town, and married to a guy that moved up here ten or so years ago, named Miles.

I thought they were crazy when they applied to be a part of a new TV series, but it means an extra twenty thousand for

our town for seventeen days of being filmed for a pilot episode. We need it too. Tucker and JP's place needs plumbing, they can't keep hauling water each day from the community well.

Then there's West's cabin... he needs a new woodburning stove. That thing's a fire hazard and when it craps out, he has to hoof it to one of our places. There are plenty of snowed-in days where we can't get to each other's front door, so that's not going to work this winter. Speaking of being buried by snow, we need a new ATV with a plow, ours took the piss last winter. So, yeah, we need the money.

This town isn't like most. Most people who come here like it rough. Maybe that's why it appealed so much to my squadron. The majority of the few dozen residents have been up here for decades. They welcomed my military boys though. Although after eight years in deployment together, we were brothers in every sense of the word. It's been four years since we all got out though, and three years since they all came up here for good. My boys needed to escape from a world they no longer belonged in. So, here we all are.

Anyway, if this pilot goes well, there's talk it could get picked up for a full round of filming which means more money, so we're all eager to make it work.

"Just let Henry or West know if you need anything," Nina concludes.

West has his usual scowl on his face, arms folded across his chest. I guess he's the exception to team let's-make-it-work. He doesn't want anyone here filming. Thinks it's blasphemy.

Henry on the other hand has a long face. I swear that man is more determined than me to not let the past go. But he has better reason than me, because he lost his wife a few years ago.

JP has a goofy-ass grin as he practically eye fucks the all-female film crew. Not sure they thought this plan out.

Might as well be walking through a prison in a bikini. JP steps wide, adjusting his black tactical pants at the crotch. I give him a warning glance. He shoots back a shrug.

As the meeting wraps up, I step outside and bump into Tucker. Where JP goes, Tucker is sure to follow. They've never dropped the battle-buddy promise all these years. It's a shocker to see them apart this morning, come to think of it.

"Did you see the crew?" JP makes a show of licking his lips and rubbing his hands together.

"Careful, or an albatross might mistake your tongue for a worm," I warn him, and he pulls his tongue away, looking around. JP has a major fear of birds, which is a lot of fun for the rest of us.

"Haven't seen fertile women in as long ass time," Tucker defends, pushing up to his tiptoes to look around us.

"Fertile women?" I repeat, amusement in my tone. I'm sure they wouldn't appreciate that label, so of course, Jolie is hopping around the corner, using my walking cane as a makeshift crutch.

*Shit.* I close my eyes, certain she's heard me, based off the look on her face.

"Hello, *gentlemen*," she says with an air of properness that is out of place here.

"Guess you're not resting after all?" Beth croons as Jolie walks down the short path and joins us. "Fine by me, you can go with Jameson today. Nina says you'll be fishing, is that right?"

I nod, reluctantly. The ocean waters here are not easy to navigate, the last thing I need is an injury in the boat. *The money*, I remind myself. Giving Beth a curt nod, I look at Jolie. She's just a face bundled in a coat... and her dark black pants, which I'm sure must still be a little damp. Why does she have the pinkest fullest lips I've ever seen?



“Boat’s down there. Can you make it?” I ask, raising a speculative eye to her foot which appears to be bundled in a towel and covered with a trash bag. She’s crafty, I’ll give her that.

Beth hands Jolie a heavy-looking camera, which Jolie places under her free arm. “Definitely,” she says with a firm nod. I may have just met a woman more stubborn than me.

“All right then. See y’all for supper,” I say as I bound down the trail to the docks.

I beat her down by a long shot and look back up. She’s a damn trooper, hobbling down the steep trail, camera securely in hand. She makes it to the small vessel just as I’m ready to push back.

“Hey there, stranger. Long time no see,” I tease. I’m not sure why, but she reminds me of those tough marine chicks. Some of them loved to be treated like one of the guys, so that’s my mode for today. Jolie is one of the guys. She’s definitely not a hot-as-hell babe sent from the heavens to keep me warm at night. *Definitely not.*

Jolie takes the nearest seat on the skiff, folding her bad leg up and using her thigh as a prop to support the camera. The red light flicks on and I guess that means we’re filming.

“Just ignore me,” she instructs, training her eyes down at the digital viewfinder.

“No problem,” I lie with a shrug, as if it’s easy to ignore the sweet scent of her in my boat, dark hair peeking out from her hood, framing her face, and blowing in the breeze. She’s distracting as all-hell. The kind of distraction that will have me jumping into the sea later today just to get my body under control.

A few minutes later, we’re in deep-enough water, with no tree stumps, so I can open up the engine and really fly. We need to get to the deeper spots if I’m going to catch anything worth a buck.

It's a bumpy ride, and I feel bad for her. She looks like she's working hard to brace herself against the waves. But I can't afford to slow down. Finally, we reach my lucky spot. Cutting the engine, the look of relief on her face is palpable. I set to work to drop the lines.

"What are you fishing for? What's your strategy here?" she asks suddenly.

I look at her, having forgotten for a second she is there. "Uh, king salmon. I have a special license for them. They sell for about four thousand to eight thousand a fish. If I can catch a few a week, it goes a long way to helping the town coffers."

Her eyes go wide at the numbers, as do most people's.

"Wooo," she whistles. "That's a pretty penny. So, the town pools its money? How does that work?"

"Yeah. There's a hard rule here. We all help each other to survive. Period. We'd each die if it wasn't for our neighbors. No one can survive alone up here."

"Not even Bear Grylls?" she asks.

Ugh. I hope she's joking.

"Oh god. Haven't heard that name in years. We watched that guy back in my boot camp days. But yeah, not even him. Not for long anyway. This here is untamed land."

"So why do you all do it then? How did you come to live here?"

Her voice is all business, which I'd do well to remember is the case right now. I'm not chatting up some hot girl in the bar, like I did at the bars on leave back in my twenties. Nope. I'm talking to a camera person who's going to put whatever they want on national TV.

"I was a marine. Came home after I got out and then my squadron joined me. It made sense for us."

"And why is that?" she prods.

I pull in a line that's clearly got a snag, or a fish. Thankfully, it's a king salmon. I reel it in slowly so as not to snap the line. "When you're in a war, every day you live in sixth gear. Then, you get home and life happens in first gear..." I pause, chuckling softly to myself. "...or maybe reverse. Anyway, it didn't suit them."

"How many are here from your squadron?"

"Five out of eight. Colt and Ridge come and go. They work on commercial fishing boats most of the year, but they hang here when they can."

"And where's number eight?"

I swallow the lump in my throat and will my eyes not to well up. "Teddie didn't make it." It feels like I'm choking on the words, but I manage them. Shit. I shouldn't have even said that.

"Wh—"

"No more questions about him, please," I cut her off.

"Roger that. What about wives, girlfriends, kids?"

If my mind wasn't playing tricks on me right now, I might believe she was flirting. But I doubt that's the case. Her job is to keep me talking and get good footage. That's all this is.

"Henry had a wife. I'll let him tell you all about that. I had a girlfriend from Port Providence. She moved here as a teenager and stayed with her dad for a few years. We didn't last once I was deployed. Everyone else has been single since we got here."

She doesn't respond. She just looks at me through the camera with its blinking red light. I ignore her for a bit, pretending to check the remaining lines while we troll the water.

Eventually, she puts down the camera and folds her arms over her knee, looking out at the distance. "It's beautiful here."

I look out, trying to see it how she must be seeing it. There's a misty fog rising from the evergreens up on the cliff in the distance, endless bright water that matches her eyes, lush greenery that will die back in a few weeks.

The rumbling in my stomach brings me back to task. I have two salmon in the boat and the sun is setting. It's time to go home. "I need to use the facilities," I tell her. "Might want to look away."

I move around to the bow, where there's a modicum of privacy, and pull myself free. I'm fucking half hard already, knowing she's back there. Damn it. It'll take twice as long to piss like this. I take a breath and steady myself. As my stream hits the water, I realize just how loud this is. *That's comfortable.*

When I return, I look at her with one eyebrow cocked.

"Yes?" she draws out the word.

"I have a bucket if you need it," I offer.

"Is it a long ride back?" she twists in her seat. She definitely has to pee.

"About an hour."

A smile stretches across her face. "Why thank you, a bucket would be great."

I bring her the now-empty chum bucket and walk back to the bow. When I hear a splash in the water, I turn around. She's already seated again, as if nothing happened. Like, she's actually twiddling her thumbs with a fake look of innocence on her face. I fix my face to avoid smiling like a dope.

"You missed a real cute look on me. Bucket squatting, who knew," she laughs.

"You're not like most girls," I say, a tone of admiration clear in my voice.

"Oh, I'm sure I am. What's your dataset anyway, Nina and Opal?" she teases. She only met Opal this morning at the

greenhouse meeting, so now she's met half the women in Port Providence.

I shrug. "You might be right. I've lived here all my life, except the part where I was serving."

"How long have you been, um, without the company of women?" she asks, batting her long black lashes at me.

That's when I fully catch the meaning of her words. At least, what I think she's asking. The camera is resting next to her, so I can't be sure. "Uh... a long time."

"Months?" she questions.

I nod.

"Years?" she follows up.

I nod again.

"Huh," she concludes, then grabs her stomach. "How do you go all day without eating?"

"We've got salmon..." I grab the tail of a still-wiggling fish and pluck it from the ice bucket.

She looks with wide eyes for a beat before she shrugs. "Fresh sushi. I'm in."

My brow creases. Is she for real? I half expected her to freak out about that idea. Cara would have never. Even though she grew up here most her life like me, she wasn't that adventurous. I haven't thought about Cara in years, to be honest. Weird that she's popping up now. Although, is it weird? Faced with a woman, who maybe is single, for the first time in years... I'm definitely coming out of hibernation. *Not that it's a good thing.*

I kick the cooler lid closed and slap the fish on the table, cutting into it. I probably shouldn't, every bite is worth a lot of money, but fuck it. Something in me needs to make a show for this woman. I clean off the scales and skin a small piece of the cold pink fish from as near the tail as I can. The butcher that stops by our port once a week to collect fish to

bring to the mainland will buy it for more if it's smoked and cut from us anyway. Handing her a slice, I wait in anticipation.

She grabs it and pops it in her mouth. Closing her eyes, she moans. "Oh my god that's fresh."

"You really like it?" I ask in wonder. Is this how women are nowadays? I seem to remember girls who hung around the base, they were not into eating meat off the bone. The fish is still breathing on the cutting board for fuck's sake.

"It's so good," she says through a full mouth that does something to fiercely tighten my pants. I make my way to the bow abruptly to calm myself. I am not a caveman. I do not need to procreate. *Keep telling yourself that, dude.*

Remembering back to the time I ended up with a hook through my arm on my second-ever fishing trip, my dick softens, slightly.

I return back to Jolie where she cuts a new piece of fish and happily pops it in her mouth. *Stop looking at her mouth*, I chastise myself. "Hope that's okay," she smiles. "I can pay you for the meal."

Shaking my head, I take the piece she's holding out to me, our fingers brushing slightly. The feeling is electric, and not at all helping my situation. I step back from her and carefully eat the slice of fish. "I think for the rescue last night, lodging, laundry, and the fish, you owe me about a thousand dollars," I muse.

"Done," she nods.

"I was joking."

"You make jokes?" she says with a gasp, slapping her knee. "Well, hot damn. I'd never have guessed it. We got a mountain man comedian over here, folks," she says to no one, gesturing at me with her thumb.

It's ridiculous enough to make me laugh.

"He smiles, too. This is too much. Hold on, let me get the camera back up to capture this," she holds the camera up

on her shoulder, but I know the red light is off now, so I decide to ham it up.

I push a hand to my hip bone. “Yeah, see, we got these five girlies here, see, and we’re gonna decide who mates with each one. I got me a broken one though...”

“Wait, mate?” she pulls the camera down to her lap, giving me a weary look.

“Oh shit. B-bad joke...” I stutter. Why the fuck did I think it’d be funny to call back to what she overheard earlier. Fuck. Me. Running.

Then her angry face breaks and she holds her stomach, bellowing out. “Just fucking with you. Man, you should see the look on your face. I got you there, big guy.”

I give an uneasy laugh, reminding myself to be more guarded in the future. “Yup. You got me.”

Returning to the wheel, I press the shifter into gear and haul us home. We move so fast, the wind whips us, and we rock over the tiny waves. It makes for another long and cold bumpy ride, but at least I don’t need to talk and embarrass myself anymore. Years of solitude means I’m out of practice at small talk and especially flirting—no shocker there.

When I dock us, she hops up with a groan. “Welp. Good times were had by all. I think I have enough fishing footage to last a lifetime.”

I nod. “Day in the life...”

The girl called Evie, who looks a lot like Jolie, both with dark hair and aqua eyes, meets us at the dock.

“How was it, sis?” she asks. It makes sense if they are related. They even have the same striking bone structure.

“It was great. We snagged a few fish. Had a nice sushi lunch. How about you?”

“JP and Tucker showed me around town, and surprised me with a picnic,” she says with a blush that Jolie seems to

catch as well.

Jolie gives Evie a side eye glance. “If either of them touched you—”

“No! God,” Evie protests a little too harshly and I instantly get their drift. And knowing JP and Tucker, I wouldn’t be shocked if they had some kind of threesome with a woman. I’ve always had my suspicions about their relationship.

“Is it still okay if I come by a little later to stay? You can totally change your mind,” Jolie gives me a half smile.

“You’re welcome to, it’s your call.”

Jolie gives me a wave in reply as she hobbles away with her sister. I finish tying off the boat and unloading my haul onto the dock, then it’s off to cleaning the fish for Henry to smoke. I don’t like Jolie staying in a tent, not when her ankle is in pain. I could see the way she rubbed that ankle when she thought I wasn’t looking. But with Jolie, I’m always looking. How could I look away? The woman is mesmerizing.

Not that she’d look my way. Just as well though. She’ll be back in the real world soon enough, enjoying her life, and I’ll be back to making my peace with the higher powers and nature.

When I finish for the day, I head home and take a long shower, one in which I definitely do not masturbate a second time to thoughts of Jolie. When I finish, there is a knock at my door. I run downstairs as I towel off my long black hair. When did my hair get this long?

I pull open the door, revealing Nina. After all these years, she’s still beautiful. She came here with her family when she was fourteen and her half-sister was eleven. I was twelve at the time, and her arrival occurred at an important time in my um... sexual development.

“Hey,” I say, instantly suspicious of her presence.



“Hey, buddy.” She punches my shoulder. “We’re having a little shin-dig in honor of our new guests. You coming down?”

I pat Nina’s chestnut-brown braided head like a dog. “You’re manipulative.”

“Why aren’t you down there already?” she questions. “Avoiding a certain aqua-eyed woman with a limp?”

I make a show of rolling my eyes. “They’re here for just over two weeks. No need to blow this into something it’s not.”

“Buddy, you can have sex with a girl for two weeks, in case you forgot. That’s how hookups work.” She’s blunt, I used to appreciate that quality about her. Right now? It’s just annoying.

“Why are you trying to get me laid?” I say, a little edge to my voice.

She barks a laugh. “You need it, and that girl likes you.”

“She does not,” I argue.

“Does so,” Nina fires back and snaps her hands to her hips.

I take a step back, adjusting the towel around my shoulders. There’s just no way. Beautiful angels that can hold their own don’t just show up on your doorstep and bang you. Nina’s living in a dreamworld. She hasn’t been able to play matchmaker since she set me up with her half-sister, Cara, when we turned seventeen. Cara broke my heart into pieces though, so Nina’s zero for one, but it’s easier if I don’t argue with her.

“Fine. I’ll be down in a few hours.” It’s not like I won’t see Jolie later. She already said she’ll stay at my place, I think.

“Fifteen minutes,” she corrects.

“An hour,” I counter.

“Thirty minutes,” she challenges me.

I scrub a hand over my face. “If I agree, will you please, please, leave me alone?”

She shrugs. “Possibly. For tonight at least.”

“See. You. Later.” I give her a hearty wave and grab the door to close it behind her.

“Later,” she relents.

Back upstairs, I look at myself in the mirror. Memories of my younger days are swirling in my mind. I run my fingers through my black beard. I didn’t used to keep a beard, but out here it makes sense. And yet... how desperate is it to shave the thing? Would Jolie like that? I don’t care whether she would or wouldn’t. I just need to feel different right now. And I want a shave. A man can shave if he damn well pleases. I grab the cream from the back of the cabinet and scrounge up a razor.

How long has it been since I even trimmed? I pull open my waistband and peek down. Jesus. Yeah, not really manscaped. More like the rugged Alaskan wild down there. All right then. I park myself in the bathroom with a pair of scissors and go to work, finishing off by hopping back in the shower to rinse away the strays. Then, I shave my face for the first time in years... and instantly regret it. I look *weird*. The guys are going to rip into me. Might as well just not go...

There’s another knock at my door. It’s Nina, *again*. She waves me out and I follow. When I step outside she gives a loud whistle.

“Nice.”

“Fuck off,” I grumble.

We walk in silence. Well, I’m silent. Nina on the other hand snickers the whole way to the big fire ring in the clearing just outside the greenhouse.

I see everyone has already gathered. Thankfully it’s getting dark out, so less focus will be on my beard.

The fire crackles in the distance and I smell the squirrels on the spit roast before I see them.

“Blackbeard, why?” JP laments the second I near the crowd.

“Oh no, what happened? Are you okay? Is this a midlife crisis?” Tucker shouts amid the snickering.

*Assholes.*

My eyes connect with Jolie’s like a homing beacon. I divert my gaze and find a seat next to her, which is better than sitting across from her where she can look right at me.

“You get some lice in your beard, bro?” West smirks.

“More like crabs,” JP says under his breath and all the squad chuckles.

I shouldn’t have shaved. I shouldn’t have come down here, or gotten my hopes up. I’m better off alone. I’ve always known that.

Yeah. Nothing’s going to happen. That’s fine. I have no expectations.

“I think he looks hot,” Jolie’s smooth voice says, shutting down the incessant talk about my face.

My eyes find hers, and suddenly I don’t give a damn what the guys think.

# CHAPTER 3

## Jolie

I can't take my eyes off Jameson. For one, he's fucking *haute*. Beards can be misleading. He was hot with a beard, but without it... Girl. Bye. He has that whole square jaw thing going on and I want to nibble him. He's all dark brooding energy too. So different from what I'm used to, and I think I like that most.

Nothing wrong with a little fling while on location, is there? Beth and Chloe wouldn't care. I think it's fine if I want to find out what it's like to kiss him.

"How's your ankle?" he leans over as the group returns to some lower-key get-to-know-you banter.

I lift it up, examining it. It's throbbing, but I don't admit as much. It'll heal. "Fine."

"It's badly swollen and purple. What is your definition of fine, woman?" The deep rumble of his voice makes my belly tighten.

"No bones sticking out, no gushing blood, nothing turning black... things could be worse." I shrug, trying to play it cool. Trying to pretend like this man I just met doesn't affect me.

Jameson stands, walking away suddenly, and then returns with what looks to be a good fifty-pound stump slung over his shoulder. He sets it down in front of me.

"For your ankle," he nods and takes his seat, tugging the thighs of his jeans to adjust.

My mouth waters at thoughts of what's under those pants. Despite the frigid temperature, I'm getting hot thinking about it. That's a nice change of pace from being pissed about my ex-boyfriend, Heath. Heck, I'm a modern gal, I can embrace a hookup.

Not that I'm quite sure he'll want to close the deal with me, especially after how we met. I mean, I did have pee on my pants. Not a lot, in my defense, but enough to matter.

Fuck it though. He'll either bite or not, no harm no foul.

Jameson seems done waiting for me to use his footrest, leaning down and pulling my leg up onto it.

*Okay then.*

As the group roars with a tale of Evie catching a mouse in her hand in a hoarded house on her first-time filming with me for that particular show, I lean in to Jameson, "Hey. Question..."

He eyes me.

"And you can totally say no... I'd get it. It's a huge reach. Shit, I probably shouldn't ask. It's definitely out of line..." Okay, now I'm mumbling nonsensically.

"Yes," he says matter-of-factly, eyes on fire with want. I know that look.

"Really?" I ask.

"When?" he asks.

"Now?" I say, looking around, wondering if we could get away with disappearing.

"Well, I already smoked them," he tells me, brows lowering a bit.

I shake my head. "Wait, what are we talking about?"

"The salmon we caught?" he questions. Why on earth would his mind go there?

I snort a rather ungrateful laugh. "Uh... no. I'm trying to suggest we sneak away and... get to know one another?" I croak the words slowly, gritting my teeth and shrugging my shoulders.

"Oh," his mouth forms a little circle.

I lick my lips, wondering if I've read all this completely wrong.

His eyes close and he takes a breath. I'm pretty sure he's going to say no, but instead, he seems to abandon our conversation.

He turns to Beth, nudging her shoulder. My stomach sinks. Oh balls. He's not going to tell our team leader that I'm perving on him, is he? Fuck. Me. Or don't. Whatever doesn't get me fired.

"I think Jolie should get some rest. Her ankle needs elevation. I'm going to take her back to kick her feet up on a couch."

Beth puts her hand on his thick bicep. "That's so nice of you." Then she leans around him and looks at me. "See you in the morning?" She winks.

If he thinks his words slyly went over Beth's head, he is dead-ass wrong. But that doesn't matter right, because, holy shit! Am I really about to find out what it's like to smooch on this hot-as-hell mountain man?

I smirk at her, cheeks pressing into my eyes I'm smiling so awkwardly. Beth tries not to laugh.

"Shall we go now?" Jameson casually suggests, or so he thinks. I peep that little crack in his voice. Good. I'm not the only awkward one here.

"By all means," I say, using the borrowed walking stick as I hobble from the light of the fire. It's instantly getting colder as I move away from that wonderful heat.

"That's my dead grandfather's walking stick, by the way." Jameson nods, eyes shiny.

I pause in my tracks. "Oh shit, really?" I look at him with wide guilty eyes.

A smile takes over his face. "Nope," he laughs.

“Good one,” I fake chuckle as we continue on a few steps. “You gonna offer to carry a lady, or what? I mean, why be a giant and not haul people here and there.” I tease after a few beats of silence.

Without a word, Jameson dips around and then ducks behind me, scooping me up in one smooth motion until I’m high up in his arms and he’s hugging me to his chest.

“Whoa, okay then. I was only kidding,” I laugh.

“No, you weren’t,” he says, his broad chest rumbling against me.

“I know,” I admit, biting my lip as our eyes connect again. “Golden,” I whisper.

“What?” he asks as we approach his cabin.

My voice breaks with nerves. “Y-your eyes.”

“Yours are aqua,” he says in a low rasp.

I blink at him, drunk on the feeling of being in his big warm arms, hauled around like a fucking princess. My ex wasn’t built enough to be able to haul my ass uphill, I’ll say that much.

He stops just shy of his cabin door and looks into my eyes. “I’m probably going to regret this. Does that bother you?”

My brow gives the slightest crease before I correct it. I think over his words, and they are music to my ears. That last thing in the world I want is for anything lasting. I’ll be gone in two shakes. Hell, even if he regrets it tomorrow, I’m cool with that. I don’t need every hot hookup to become a boyfriend. I’m evolved beyond that, I think.

“Do you, boo,” I lift my finger and boop his nose.

His chest bubbles with a laugh that comes out as a scoff. “Weirdo.”

“Ey, you like it,” I tease, hoping it’s true.

As he brings me inside, and up the stairs, I point as he passes the chair. “Sit me down here, please.”

He backs us up a few steps and complies. “Do you want a tea? We should get ice on that ankle. What have you eaten since the salmon?”

His assault of questions sends my eyes wide. “Umm...”

He pauses and huffs a breath, waiting for my reply.

“I had some stew Nina made. I hate tea. And I don’t need any ice,” I reply, leaning back in my chair. The pulsing heat between my legs is very distracting. I’m trying to be smooth, when all I want to do is shout, *take your shirt off and let’s see those biceps!* Or something smooth and mature like that.

He nods, looking around, uncertain. A hand scrubs down his face.

“Everything okay?” I ask.

“I don’t know what I’m doing,” he looks around.

“Like, in life? In this conversation?” I offer, rising out of the chair, hopping toward him like a pirate missing her peg leg. AKA, smooth as heck.

The sight makes him pause, a smile blooming on his face.

“Your ankle,” he starts.

I shake my head, pressing a finger to his lips, which is quickly replaced by my lips. I can smell him this close, his lips are so soft and the kiss.. Well, the kiss is... not magical.

It’s awkward.

Tentative.

Like, he’s not really kissing back. I pull away and look at the man in front of me.

“Did I read that wrong or something?” I ask, gracefully hopping back a step. I cock my head and study him.



He's silent, eyes staring me down with an intensity I don't understand.

"Regret this already? I can hop back to my tent," I conclude, because this is quickly getting awkward as fuck.

When he doesn't reply still, I take a breath and set off at a hop around him toward the stairs. Grabbing the banister, I maneuver down a step at a time. This is definitely not my smoothest exit. It's taking forever. It's loud. And I'm quickly developing a bruise on my ego, not to mention the lady equivalent of blue balls. Blue boobs? Blue labia? I don't know, something is blue though.

As I reach the bottom of the stairs, I feel arms wrapping around my belly, hoisting me up. Jameson's dragging me back upstairs.

"Um... What is happening?"

"You need proper rest. Port Providence is unforgiving. You can take my bed, I'll sleep on the couch." He says this all as he carries me like a sack a potatoes, a tone of minor annoyance in his voice.

"I'm really fine. You don't have to do anything you're not comfortable with."

"We protect our neighbors here. You are, for now, my neighbor, so I will offer you proper shelter."

He sets me back on the kitchen chair. "I can just sleep on your couch," I try for a compromise.

"It's uncomfortable, has a wonky spring in it."

"Or... you can share your bed with me. I promise, no funny business," I say with a wink. I don't know what happened to kill the vibe between the campfire and his living room. I was sure he wanted to at least do a little kissing, but whatever. I'm not going to push anything on the guy.

His eyes fall closed slowly and then flutter before he leans down to untie the long laces of his boots. Still not

replying to my suggestion, he peels off his coat, hanging it on a lone hook.

He comes to me and unzips my coat. I watch him in fascination as he moves to untie my single boot.

It falls to the floor with a clatter, his big hands wrap around my cold toes, warming me instantly. This man is all sorts of confusing.

Frowning, he scolds me. “Your boots are not insulated enough.”

I repeat what is clearly becoming my mantra with Jameson. “I’m fine. It’s not like they’re going to fall off. I didn’t even notice they were cold.” But damn, his hands around my toes, it feels... real nice.

Mourning the loss of his heat when he pulls his hands away, I watch in fascination as he stands and heads to the kitchen area. He unbuttons his flannel and rolls the sleeves up over his large forearms. There is some kind of tattoo, maybe something related to his military service. It’s hard to tell in the low light of his cabin. He heats some water in the kettle, throwing glances my direction. I watch him and calm washes over me. He’s somehow relaxing to study. The sure way he moves... he knows his place in the world, knows what he wants to do. At least, that’s the vibe I get from him.

“It must be nice, being out in nature, away from all the people and traffic and bullshit,” I say absently as I imagine myself in his shoes.

He pours the now steaming water into a large tub and brings it over to me, placing it at the floor by my feet. “That’s what most people like about it.” He peels off my sock. It feels shockingly intimate having a man peel off my sock. Why is that so sexy? I need to calm the eff down.

I take a breath. “Thank you,” I sigh as my toes slip into the warm water. They tingle with life as they reheat. Maybe they were pretty cold out there. It’s just that my ankle throbs so bad, it’s hard to feel much else.

Without another word, Jameson disappears for a while, returning with the cold bladder of water he used before for my ankle.

“What do you like about Port Providence?” I ask as he sits across from me in the spare chair, propping my other leg up in his lap, peeling off the plastic bag and towel wrap concoction I created this morning to protect it from the elements. He lays the cold-water bag over the swollen part carefully.

“I don’t belong anywhere else. My dogs don’t either. We’re wild. Here, we can be wild, like nature intended.”

I study his handsome face, which looks rather soft without his beard. I want to reach out and stroke that freshly shaved cheek. I mean, he’s absently feeling my injured foot right now. Or assessing the damage, but dammit, he’s touching me. What an odd and confusing man. But, no, hands to myself.

“Your dogs?” I say, amusement clear in my tone.

He shakes his head. “My squadron, crew, men... we’re ride or die. We learned that quickly, pretty much from the time when we were formed into a unit and that was it. We’re brothers to the death. Maybe even beyond that too.”

*Except the one who didn’t make it, Teddie.* I want to ask about him, because I have a nosey mind, but I have no right.

He closes his eyes, shaking his head.

Feeling a little guilty for trying again, and hearing dramatic *awooga* noises in my head, I switch topics. “What did you mean by *wild*? I have a feeling your definition is different from mine.”

A sad look crosses his face. “We learned to live on the edge of comfort and chaos, between life and death in this cruel world,” he says thoughtfully.

“Damn,” I remark, pausing to soak in the haunting beauty in his words. Letting out a whoosh of a breath, I slap

my knee. “Wish I was filming that. That’s quotable. Maybe say that again in front of a camera this week.”

He shakes his head, seeming to come back to reality. “Television is trash. It’s watching people live life. Why not just go out and live it yourself?”

My eyes go wide. “I guess you’re not the one who filled out the application to be a part of a TV show, I take it?” I say with a laugh. “Maybe don’t mention *that* sentiment on camera, come to think of it.”

“You like TV?” he asks.

I nod. “It’s fine. I like reading, too. It’s like living a thousand different lives. You get to see new places, new cultures, new ideas, especially in documentary film-making. I swear, behind the camera, I don’t see as much, but in the editing room, they take hours of footage, and they pull this tendril of a story from it, a story you would otherwise miss watching it live firsthand. It’s brilliant.”

“And what story will they pull here, do you think?” he asks.

“Maybe the neighbor support angle, if I had to guess. Most places I’ve been too... you don’t talk to your neighbors, don’t know their names.”

He nods, stroking the arch of my foot slowly. “I’ve heard.”

“So, you can appreciate how special it is, what you people have here.”

“We are fighting to survive everyday here. It’s brutal. That forces us together.”

“Pretty powerful stuff,” I nod, my mind somewhere far off processing his words, *and his touch*.

With one foot now freezing from the cold pack and another happily warm, I wiggle my toes. “Maybe I could dip these guys in the warm bucket, for a second.” I retract my foot

from his deliciously muscular thigh and sink it into the water. Heat isn't good for this type of injury, but fuck it.

"I'll prepare the bed for you." He stands suddenly.

"No. Please. If one of us is sleeping on the couch, it's me. I did it last night, didn't I? Wasn't so bad," I lie. It was bad, but it's better than the tent and I don't want to put him out. He's too tall for the couch.

He pauses in his tracks for a beat, but he must decide to give up trying to argue with me, because he continues on down the hall. The light in his room cuts on and floods out into the hallway. I can just make out his form in the shadow, moving around his room, grabbing a change of clothes from his drawers.

"Aww, are those for me?" I say, leaning on his doorframe.

He jumps at my words, spinning to look at me. "How'd you get over here so quietly?"

"Magic," I say, wiggling my fingers like I'm on stage presenting an amazing feat of sorcery. In reality, I hopped over here, which was loud. Maybe his hearing is fucked from too many loud bangs in the military. Is that a thing?

Jameson snort-laughs and shuffles past me, handing me the shirt and pants, our warm bodies very close as he squeezes out the door. When he closes himself in the bathroom, I hop toward the living room, changing quickly into clothes that smell a heck of a lot like fresh pine.

"Sleep well, Jolie," he says, voice almost sad.

"You too."

I toss the old fleece blanket over my legs and situate the best I can around the offensive broken spring. In the distance, I hear the toilet flush. A light cuts off. The creak of a bed dips under two hundred pounds of hunky man meat.

Okay, none of that hunky man-meat talk, especially not when I have his scent in my nose, wrapped up in his damn

clothes. I have to remember to grab my bag tomorrow from the tent if I'm staying here another night.

Closing my eyes, I toss and turn, working my way around the spring, balancing my ankle on the armrest... I try every position over the course of an hour, but I can't get comfortable.

Tired, desperate, and not all are driven by the throbbing between my legs, *I swear*, I get up with a sigh and hop to his room.

He's left the door open. There's a little flickering candle by his bed, and he's reading... *Little Women*.

"Jo's my favorite," I say, startling him for the second time tonight.

He snaps the book closed.

"Can't sleep?" I ask, head cocking to the side in question.

He eyes me curiously. "Not usually. Reading helps."

I nod. "You were not wrong about that couch. Any room for me in there? Again, I completely swear upon my Nana's grave that I will keep my hands to myself." I hold up two fingers in the boy scout's salute. Little does he know, Nana was a badass woman who got it on during her years in the retirement community in Arizona and would totally approve of me breaking such a promise.

"Fine, but you should know I sleep in the nude." His words shock me, but I'm too eager for a warm comfy spot to sleep to think too long on it. I hop around to the free side of the bed without another word, lift the covers and quickly slide in.

"It's so warm," I hum. Much better than the chilly couch.

Jameson blows out the candle and the darkness engulfs us.

Now, it's no longer a rogue spring keeping me up, but instead, it's rogue thoughts of the sexy warm man next to me, and the reality that when I lifted the blankets to crawl in, it was proven to me that he was not kidding about being one hundred percent naked.

*Lord, help me.*

# CHAPTER 4

## Jameson

I can go without sleep, and thank fuck for that. Being in my birthday suit next to Jolie means I'm not getting a wink. She seems to have no trouble though, falling into a deep breathing pattern not too long after I cut the light.

Finally, the clock hits four in the morning, which means it's time to rise and shine. There are traps to be checked.

I dress quickly and lace up my boots in the dark before setting off. The air smells like the most magnificent cedar and JP is already leaning against a lamppost. He's chewing his nails and spitting the pieces into the wind.

"There's our man," he claps enthusiastically as I approach.

"What are you rambling about?" I bark, grabbing the back of his neck, pulling him down into a headlock. He struggles against me, hitting my inner arm in just the right spot to send me recoiling.

We break away, panting. "Jolie," he draws out her name, waggling his brows at me. "She's fine. And her sister, Evie. *Woo. Boy.* What a pair."

It annoys me to hear him say Jolie's name, but I let it go. "Nina says I should go for her. Seems wrong though."

We make our way up the narrow game trail, and I fall in step behind JP. "Fuck that. I'm so horny, Tuck's even started looking good."

I belt a laugh, steam swirling in the dark morning air. "I'm honestly surprised if you haven't already."

JP goes quiet for a beat. He snatches a twig and break it into pieces, throwing it back at me like confetti. "Give us something to celebrate around here."



“Are we that hard up?” I question. We pause, looking over at the first two traps. Both are still set in position. Damn.

JP turns back and forth, looking to me and then at the trail ahead, as he talks. “Come on. You saw the way everyone was looking at the crew. All female. I still can’t believe it.”

I kick at his calf with my muddy boot. “Women do all the things men do.”

“And vice versa,” he mutters under his breath as he kicks back at me like a donkey.

Honestly, we joke about it maybe too much. We’d be fine if our bros got together.

“I hope we got some minks, these boots are waterlogged. I need to oil them bad,” I say to fill the silence.

JP ignores me, blurting out what was apparently his thought at the time. “You should do it. Your body needs that shit, man.”

“We’re back to that?” I groan as we look over the next set of traps.

“Thank fuck,” JP rejoices as we spot our catch. “Would be nice though, having new women move here.”

I clap a hand on his shoulder. “No one will blame you for moving away, for moving on with your life.”

“Semper fidelis, motherfucker,” he says softly.

“Oorah,” I whisper, our feet crunching over the leaves. A few more weeks and it will be winter. The long darkness. The infinite cold. *And Jolie warm in my bed...* No, not that part. I don’t get to keep her.

“Shit,” JP shouts, breaking off at a run. Without another thought, I follow him the short distance to the final set of traps. Then I see why he ran. It’s blood bath, pieces of fur scattered around, footprints in the snow telling a gruesome story.

“Wolves,” I conclude, looking closer at the tracks.

JP nods. “A fuck load of them. I’m seeing more distinct tracks that I can count.”

“Let’s follow them for a bit, see what we see,” I decide. We’ve heard rumors from other towns about a super pack that can get pretty aggressive. They cross the ice bridges in the winters that connect the islands. Or if desperate enough, they swim. Could they have been thriving here all summer undetected? Maybe.

Pulling the rifle from around my back, it arcs around on its sling and falls into place. I hold it up as we high step it down their trail. JP does the same. My heartbeat thumps steadily as adrenaline works its way through my veins. Just like old times. Two predators on the prowl.

The pack’s trail leads right back to the shoreline and as we get close, JP stops dead, throwing his arm out like a clothesline to halt me. “You hear that?” he whispers, pointing in the direction of a faint growling sound.

I nod and gesture forward with two fingers. We move quick, but quietly, to keep our advantage. It’s still dark out, the only light is a small beam from our red headlamps.

“The tents,” JP whispers right as I see it... our guests, the camera crew... with more than a dozen wolves are surrounding their tents, growling, poised at the ready, closing in. It’s quiet, but I imagine the women are still in there, at this hour. *Fuck.*

JP and I know just what to do. With a little nod of agreement, we silently break away from each other, moving around the outside until the pack is between us. Then we step forward and make our presence known.

“Not today, fuckers,” JP barks, gun in position, pointed at the wolf closest to the tents. We’ll give them a few chances to scatter before we light them up.

They’d look beautiful, if it wasn’t for their bloody coats and snarling expression, posted up and ready.

“Get on, now,” I say, belting a loud whistle that gets their attention. I really don’t want to have to kill a bunch of overgrown dogs, but I absolutely will if it’s to protect someone in need. The wolves slowly look back and forth from us to their apparent leader. A silent communication that would be awe worthy, utterly majestic, in another circumstance.

We both step in closer, picking our targets.

“Last chance,” JP booms, and follows it with a series of aggressive dog barks, then we all pause a beat. The dogs versus the wolves. There’s got to be irony in there somewhere.

“Have it your way, then,” I say calmly as I squeeze the trigger and a loud blast fires out into the silence. I aim right next to the big wolf, because I cannot stress enough how much I don’t want to have to kill one. I’ve killed enough for a lifetime. Only what I need to eat, or to trade to survive. That’s my rule.

The sound rips out, the gun roughly smashing into my shoulder with the force of the shot. I hit an inch to the left of the wolf’s right foot. Exactly where I aimed, because I’m a marine-trained sniper.

The wolf jumps up and back in shock before spinning faster than a heartbeat and bolting off, the pack just as hastily following.

I flip the safety back on and spin the gun in its sling so it’s hanging over my back, taking a half breath of relief before calling out, “Is everyone okay?”

The sound of four zippers fills the air and the crew peek out of their respective tents at me and JP. Their eyes are wide, and their expressions scared. Rightly so.

“You didn’t kill it, did you?” Evie gasps, looking right to JP.

He rushes over to her in two steps, taking a knee in front of her. “It was trying to kill you,” he argues, while the woman looks around him for clues.

“It was just a warning shot,” I assure them all. “But it’s a big pack. That probably wasn’t all of them. We need to visit the idea of getting you all indoors for the rest of your stay.”

“Pack me right the fuck up,” Chloe says with a nervous laugh.

“Do we really need to impose like that?” Naomi grimaces.

Beth steps out of the tent and stretches. “Wouldn’t be a bad idea, just to be on the safe side.” She adjusts the gun on her hip. “If they’re offering.” She leans back in the tent and grabs a black bag and a camera. “Maybe we should take our morning bathroom break together.”

“Good lord, why did I say yes to this assignment?” Naomi groans as she stumbles out of her tent, foot catching on the lip of the entrance.

“That’s the million-dollar question,” Chloe beams.

“We can come with you, for extra protection. Or, you are welcome to use my bathroom,” I offer.

“If I had a bathroom I’d offer it up, but I’m happy to stand guard,” JP adds, reaching a hand out for Evie. She takes it and he pulls her from her tent.

“Beth’s got us. Thank you, though,” Evie looks at their joined hands and blushes as she pulls away.

“We need to talk to Nina, get this figured out. I have to bring her these mink anyway.”

JP watches Evie walk away with the film crew toward the woods. “I hate them out there alone.” He frowns.

*Interesting.*

“They seem okay. They’re professionals, after all,” I reason.

“What if your woman was out there?” He gives me a *got you* look.

A deranged sound like a strangled laugh bursts from my throat. "I don't have a woman."

"Keep telling yourself that." JP nudges me.

By the time we get to Nina's, the sun is rising and my stomach's growling. "Smells like heaven in here," I say as she opens the door.

At the blast of cool air, she pulls the blue apron strings tighter around her stomach, as if that will help. "Come on, beggars. I got egg sandwiches ready for everyone." She steps aside, letting us pass.

I hook up our cache outside the door. "Any chance you can render these today?"

She gives me the universal *are you shitting me* look, just as Miles rounds the corner, mid-way through closing his belt. "Morning."

JP nods, having already stuffed an egg sandwich into his mouth.

"How's the log mover coming along?" I ask. He has this somewhat insane system of slides that will supposedly move wood down the hill to his front door. I might try making one myself if it works.

Miles's face lights up. "I'm so close..." he groans. Meanwhile Nina stands behind him, making a neck chopping motion, presumably to threaten me for getting him started talking about it again. He is a man obsessed with no longer moving logs the hard way.

"Hey, we should talk about that wolf pack. We saw them this morning... surrounding the tents." I pause and let the information sink in. The room goes quiet as Miles and Nina process the information.

"Then it's true," Miles's face sinks as he instinctively puts a hand on Nina's belly. I feel a little twinge of something at the sight of it. It's not my old crush on Nina, which fizzled out the moment she introduced me to her half-sister, and I fell

head over heels for a girl my own age. No. I think it's something else. Something I don't want to admit.

"Mean little fuckers," JP adds as he takes a second sandwich off the top of the pile.

"The film crew should stay indoors. If we each take one, it won't be much trouble. Of course, I know which one you'll volunteer to shelter." Nina grabs a sandwich and shoves it into my hand before I can protest. "I'll talk to them this morning. We're meeting in... shit, five minutes."

"We'll head over to the greenhouse and meet you two there," I say conclusively, grabbing JP by the neck, before he can swipe a third sandwich, and steer him out the door.

"I think little aqua-eyed one should stay with me and Tuck," JP muses as the door closes behind us.

"Her name is Evie." I shoot him a warning look. "How is it that I'm a gentleman, yet I grew up feral in the woods, and you are a slimeball, and you grew up in normal civilization?"

"There's probably a correlation somewhere." JP laughs, just as he trips over a little root in the ground. He takes a stutter step and recovers. "All I know is I'm going to hook up if the opportunity presents itself."

I think over his words, over my own missed opportunity. I could have just said yes. Kept kissing Jolie. Fuck, it felt so goddamn good to have her mouth on mine. Not sure I've been that hard in a long fucking time, and just from kissing her. I couldn't even get into it, do it properly. She was immediately unsatisfied with me, and who could blame her? It must have been like kissing a dead fish for her. I thought I wanted to go for it. I told myself I did. I brought her home with me, mind fully set on it, but then the second our lips touched, all these memories and thoughts came rushing into my mind. Doubt and regret and fear took over.

That's what pisses me off most. I'm a marine. I shouldn't have doubt or fear. At all. Ever.

Fucking hell. If I just could be more like JP and not care as much... fuck anything that walks. I remember that from back in the day, when there were women around, before my whole squad moved to the remote island of Port Providence for me. He was the most successful with women, and we always marveled at it.

Maybe my shot isn't lost though. There could still be a chance Jolie will be interested. And even when her ankle heals, because of the wolves, I'll have her around a little while longer. That last thought makes me smile wide. It's not even because of the possibility that she might give me a second chance. Just her presence, the way the sweet scent of her fills my space... it feels like a reward.

Though some sex wouldn't hurt. I can just see her now on the back of my eye lids, that smooth olive skin that stretched for miles... hell. I need to settle down or a stiff breeze is going to send me over the edge. My pants are getting too tight as my mind wanders. I have to dig my fingernails into my palm to keep myself under control as we approach the greenhouse.

JP and I shuffle through the door and find a big group waiting. The five women from the film crew are already in attendance, eating bowls of instant oatmeal and drinking coffee.

Nina and Miles manage to pop in just behind us. Tucker is behind them, and he quickly falls in place next to JP, per usual.

When JP and I retell our morning run in with the wolf pack, my boys are quick to agree with our recommendations that the film crew stays indoors.

JP steps forward without missing a beat. "Me and Tucker will make a spot. Evie, would you like to stay with us?"

I watch Jolie's eyes go wide as she stares down JP. Evie shrugs, unfazed. "Okay, thanks."

Beth interjects, “We’ll talk about it, as a group, and get back with you. Thank you for the offer.”

Once everyone else has a place to consider, and thankfully no one tries to take Jolie from me, the leader of the film crew explains their goals for the day, based on what she’s heard folks are planning to do. Unfortunately, that means their crew will be staying with us while we do some logging. It’s dangerous, hard work, so I get why it will look good on film, even if I wish we could work sans audience today.

But at least I’ll have Jolie with me, where I can keep an eye on her, so that’s good.

I can’t shake this feeling that she’s in danger. She wasn’t even in the tents this morning, but still. It’s stupid, and I will regret it when she leaves, but for now... for now maybe I’ll just be a fool and let myself pretend she’s mine.



# CHAPTER 5

## Jolie

“Okay, so what do we *really* think about these sleeping arrangements?” Naomi asks in a tone that tells us she doesn’t approve.

“I’m already staying at Jameson’s, and I can tell you, it’s a hell of a lot better than sleeping in a tent. But, Evie, you should stay with me and Jameson. I don’t like you with those two guys. They look like they’re going to eat you alive.”

“I’m going to politely refuse your offer, sis.” Evie pats my forearm. “Besides, they’re cute enough. It’s an adventure.”

Beth backs her up. “She’s an adult, Jo. And I’m down to stay with West, even if he is the human equivalent of a pinecone.”

“Fine,” I relent, folding my arms across my chest.

“Mine’s about as cuddly as a cactus,” Chloe adds about her partner, Henry, who was voluntold by Jameson to take her in.

Naomi groans in defeat. “I guess that means I’m on my own. I’ll move my tent near Miles and Nina’s, but I’m not staying with any of the *dogs*.”

“The dogs? Did we wake up in 1995 or something?” Evie laughs.

“That’s what they call themselves. They’re former marines from the same squad. Didn’t anyone actually talk to the guys they filmed so far?” Naomi shakes her head.

We all nod in agreement. Evie uses a drone, and we hold cameras. It makes sense she might not have caught that detail, because she’s not supposed to be interviewing. She takes it on the chin and shrugs.

Chloe passes a handwritten page to each of us. “I was thinking that actually might be the most interesting angle to take, so I wrote out some questions you can ask the guys, to get them talking. That way, we can see from their different perspectives why they came out here. Did you know only Jameson is from here? His friends all came here a while after they were discharged. There’s got to be a good story there, and that’s what you’ll all find out.”

With our plan in place, we situate our gear and hurry to meet the guys before they head up to the logging site.

Evie and I fall into step as we make the hike up the hill. “Are you sure you’re good?”

“Stop asking.” She shuts me down. “Speaking of whether we’re good... what’s happening with you and Jameson?” she pumps her brows at me.

I nudge her shoulder, hard. “Nothing. Not a damn thing.” *Unfortunately.*

“JP and Tucker are hot though. Kind of feral...”

The look on her face as she reflects on her new housemates tells me I should worry, but I’ll try to respect that she’s an adult. Even if it takes everything I’ve got.

We walk in silence for a few beats until a thought occurs to me. “Oh, I submitted our applications for that other nature show.”

“Thank fuck for that. I can’t do another episode of the hoarder show.” Evie’s shoulders give a little shake with the memory.

She’s not wrong though. It really is the worst job. We both stripped down before we got back in our car that day, threw our clothes in the nearest bin, and drove home in our underwear. “Never again,” I agree, even though I can’t make that promise, because I’ll do what I have to when it comes to making rent.

“What about that offer from the bounty-hunter people?” Evie asks.

“Over my dead left ovary,” I scoff. She knows better. There’s no way in hell I’m letting Evie film criminals on the run from the law. It’s illogical because I’d be totally willing, but I want us to try to do all our gigs together, so I won’t work with them unless things get really desperate.

“Don’t joke about that,” she scolds me with a stern look. I happen to find it funny that my OBGYN said I’m missing an ovary, but whatever.

“I missed this. I can’t wait for you to move in with me when we get back home,” I try for a subject change.

“Me too. Thankfully that mannequin of a ex will be moved out by then. Took him long enough.”

Taking a breath, I throw my arm around her shoulder. “Thankfully.”

“He wasn’t right for you,” Evie adds.

“So you’ve said.”

“Too prissy,” she continues.

“And Jameson is...?” I question, guessing where’s she’s going with this.

She giggles. “Haven’t you ever wanted to be with a rugged alpha guy? You’ve always dated such fussy men.”

“I live in L.A., it can’t be helped.” We both laugh at that, even though we know there are plenty of macho bros in town too, the odds were not in their favor.

“What’s so funny?” a deep voice asks, and we jump simultaneously. Tucker is jogging up the path behind us, chainsaw the size of my entire body under his arm as if it’s weightless.

The blush on Evie’s face spreads as she takes him in, no doubt wondering how long he’s been behind us and whether he heard our conversation.

“Uh, nothing,” she recovers, voice a little uncertain.

Tucker smirks, a grin that confirms my suspicions... he probably was listening in which means he knows my sister’s into him. *Great.* Being a protective big sister is hard to turn off, but I’m going to have to learn if Evie and I are going to live together. I know I’m not allowed to have double standards about dating now that she’s a full-grown adult. Or I should say, now that she has been an adult for at least four years now. When we last lived together, she was just seventeen. It’s going to take me a minute to catch up.

The sound of chainsaws revving tells us we’ve arrived, and we drop our heavy gear bags in a heap to set up. Evie’s working the drone as usual while Naomi and I work cameras. Beth and Chloe have cameras too, but they’re mainly responsible for getting ancillary shots to use bolster scenes.

It doesn’t take long for my eyes to find Jameson. He’s like a sex beacon calling my ship to shore. And he sleeps in the nude... just wanted to remind myself of that. But let’s be honest. How many nights can I get away with sleeping next to him before he gives into his urges? Not that I’m irresistible. My ego isn’t that big. I just know men at this point in my life, and I doubt he has super-human restraint. It’s something with the testosterone, which I have seen firsthand when my first roommate Calvin transitioned... as a girl, he didn’t have much of a sex drive, but as a guy... watch out world.

Since the weather is mild, Jameson rolls up the sleeves on his flannel. Whether he knows it or not, those bulgy veiny forearms are a treat for the eyes. The trick today will be to avoid giving him too much camera time.

“Make sure not to interrupt them while they’re doing anything dangerous,” Beth reminds us, before we all break away to begin.

“But be sure to get them talking. Jolie, you go with Jameson, since you already have good rapport,” Chloe tells me.

“Is that what you young kids are calling it these days?”  
Evie snarks, and I shove into her for the second time today.

Hauling my camera high on my shoulder, I set off for Jameson. It’s awkward hobbling around with a walking stick, but I manage. When I reach Jameson, he’s already yanking hard at the pull start of the chainsaw and when it fires up, my ears drown in the sound. I’m starting to doubt there’s going to be much conversation today.

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It turns out I am right. No one gets a word in during the logging portion of our day, but we have captured some shocking shots... animals making a mad dash from the fell trees, a heart-racing moment when Tucker takes down a widow-maker as they call it, which is apparently two trees tangled together or something... good stuff.

Now that we’ve all packed up our respective tents, we’re forced to go our separate ways for the night. Since it’s Alaska, it’s still light out for way longer than it should be, but that doesn’t matter. We’re all exhausted and ready to sleep... except I’m hoping that I won’t be getting much sleep tonight, if I can help it.

“Ever had a squirrel stew?” Jameson asks me as he turns the tiny creature inside out.

I trace the grooves in his wood table mindlessly while I watch him in action. Something about a man in the kitchen really does it for me. He even does the thing where he slings a rag over his shoulder. *Perfection.*

“Can’t say that I have, but I’m looking forward to it,” I lie through my teeth. “You mind if I hit the shower while you cook?”

“Be my guest. Unless you want a bath,” he offers, turning his head from the cutting board to look at me. Fuck that jawline.

“I didn’t see a tub.” I glance around.

“It’s in the living room.”

My face twists in confusion as I look over and realize that the coffee table is actually just a galvanized metal tub, the kind you’d use on a farm to hold water for animals, but with a hunk of wood set over top.

“How do you get water in and out of that thing?” I ask, a bit baffled. “And why do you have a tub?”

Jameson gives me a mischievous look. “Don’t pass it around, but I like to take hot baths from time to time.”

I hold in a snicker. “You are a downright metrosexual, Jameson,” I tease.

His brow creases in confusion. “A what-tro-sexual?”

“Outdated term, never mind. Bad joke. It’s just guys in L.A., they get manicured, plucked, tanned, and generally primed up. You on the other hand...” I trail off.

“Am feral?” he asks.

I’m taken aback a beat, but then I realize Tucker might have told him what Evie and I said earlier. Or it’s a crazy coincidence.

“Maybe,” I shrug. “So back to filling up this living-room bathtub...”

“Right.” Jameson rinses his hands in the sink and wipes them on his shoulder rag before slapping it down on the counter. “There’s a hose in that cupboard. We’ll hook it up the sink and drain it out the window when you’re done.”

“Seems like a lot of trouble,” I say, second guessing accepting the offer now that I realize what a fuss it is.

Jameson’s already holding the hose though. “No trouble. Trust me, it’s heaven.”

“If you insist,” I decide, and not at all because it means I will be naked in his living room. Definitely not that.

Ten minutes later, Jameson's got the stew boiling away in a Dutch oven in the fireplace and my bath is ready. I cut the water from the sink and cross over to it, peeling away my shirt. As if on cue, Jameson almost runs from the room, muttering about something he wants to check on downstairs. *Darn*. That's okay. Even though *the naked lady* is usually a guaranteed move to get a man, I'm quickly losing hope that he'll crumble eventually.

So, despite a deep irony that both me and a squirrel are boiling away in his house, I know he's only going to eat one of us tonight. Unfortunately, it's not going to be me. But since I'm thinking of it... and since I'm alone... I let my hand trail down between my legs as I soak in the heat of the surprisingly comfortable tub. My eyes fall shut, cutting off the darkening view of the ocean out his big picture window.

The quiet is peaceful. There's just a soft crackling of the fire in the background, and little noises from the floor below when Jameson is moving around. My breathing picks up and the water sloshes gently as I speed up the pace, giving myself much-needed relief after a day of staring at mister sex on two legs.

"Oh fuck," I groan as I fall over the edge and my body clenches with my orgasm. That was faster than usual.

Of course, that's when I hear a dish drop to the ground and smash to pieces. Sitting up straight out of the water, my head snaps in the direction of the kitchen where Jameson is standing... a hardon plainly visible in his pants... he's frozen in place, pieces of a mug at his feet.

I'm not going to let myself be embarrassed, so I just snicker at him. "Sorry, didn't hear you come back. Hope you enjoyed the show," I joke, swallowing any self-doubt.

He swallows hard and takes a shaky breath. "I... uh... no... uh... sorry."

Apparently, the sight of me has him in full on panic mode. Good.

“It’s fine,” I offer again, because he does look a bit ashamed of himself, and I really don’t mind. It’s his house after all. If anything, I was being a bit creepy. Not that I think he minds. “My offer’s still on the table, for the record.”

Jameson has a pained look in his eyes at my words.

“Or not. Should I stay somewhere else?” I say, losing all composure and covering my breasts with my arm, because this is getting a bit weird. Maybe we’re a few stops past weird on this crazy train.

“No!” he says without missing a beat and I can’t help the smile that stretches across my face.

The water splashes as I reach over the side of the tub to grab my towel. I don’t watch Jameson to see if he’s looking as I wrap myself, but he’s looking when I turn back to face him. “Thanks for the bath. Dinner almost ready?”

“Yeah. Shouldn’t be long now. I’m just going to uh, clean this up,” he nods to the mess on the floor.

“Sure. Yup,” I grab up my bag and limp past him to the bathroom, careful not to step on any shards of the smashed mug.

I manage two French braids, which means my hair will look decently wavy tomorrow, and then I join Jameson back out in the kitchen. “Something smells amazing,” I sing the words, determined to keep things casual.

“Ready for a bowl?” he asks as he ladles one for himself.

“Yes please,” I say as I tuck into the dining room chair. He sets the steaming stew in front of me, and I immediately scoop up a big bite, which it turns out, is eight thousand degrees. I immediately spit it right back into the bowl, like a classy lady. *Of course.*

Jameson holds back a smile. “Forgot to warn you, it’s hot.” He blows carefully on the bite perched on his spoon.



“Well now that my tastebuds are gone, the good news is, I’m sure to love it no matter what it tastes like.”

He chuckles at that. “Well, that’s a shame, because I’m a really good cook.”

I hold back on asking him what else he’s good at. “I don’t doubt it.” I take a sip of cool water.

“I’m probably going to hit the hay after this. Are we sticking with last night’s arrangements?” he asks me as I blow on a bite of soup.

“If you really don’t mind. I’m not trying to creep on you.”

“It’s a plan,” he confirms, ignoring my remark.

When we’ve made it through the solid bits, Jameson lifts his bowl to his lips, and takes a long drink of the broth. I copy him, because this broth is heavenly.

This moment is peaceful, domestic, something I want to savor. So, of course, my brain starts judging me for enjoying it. I should be using this time to work on my assignment, to learn more about how the marines all came to live in Port Providence.

“Do you think I could film a little?” I feel like I’m breaking a spell by asking, but I need to be professional. What am I if I let some guy charm me out of getting my job done? Weak. That’s what.

When Jameson nods, I hop up to grab a camera.

“Can I wash dishes while I talk?” he asks.

“I think that’s something America wouldn’t mind seeing.” A flash of an argument with my ex enters my mind, one where I asked him to rinse his dishes before leaving them in the sink. Apparently, that wasn’t an unreasonable request as he’d suggested. Apparently, men are capable of doing the dishes. *Interesting.*

Jameson fills the sink with soap and warm water until bubbles rise up into puffy clouds. I pull a chair around to get a good side angle shot of him, perching the camera on my shoulder.

“Tell me, how did a crew of marines end up living together in Port Providence?”

“They were supposed to just be coming for the summer to help me build this house. We had all been home for a while, spread across the country. We had stayed in regular contact though, and they were happy to help me. But when the summer started to wind down and the house was finished, the guys started to understand why I loved it here.”

Jameson pauses, as if he’s remembering something as he rinses out a bowl. I stay quiet, waiting.

When he doesn’t start again, I probe him. “So, that’s it, they just fell in love with the place? Or is there more to the story?”

He studies me for a moment, cocking an eyebrow. “Can we turn off the camera? Then I’ll tell *you*, Jolie, the real reason they’re here. I just don’t think I’m ready for all of the world to know.”

Letting out a sigh, I set the camera down in my lap. This has to be breaking some sort of code of the camera person, I’m supposed to get all the good stuff on film. But it also feels like Jameson genuinely wants to connect with me right now. And, dammit, I want to connect with him too. Especially because my crush is raging out of control right now. *Oopsy*.

Satisfied, Jameson returns to washing dishes as he starts with a deep inhale. “When I was in the marines, I killed a lot of people.”

His words hang heavy in the air. These aren’t words I’ve ever heard someone say before. Sure, I know intellectually that if you’re in the military during a war, there

is a chance this is true of you. It's not always the case, but for some, it is.

I stay quiet, holding my breath for his next words.

Jameson swirls a rag around in a bowl. "It's not something I personally feel proud of. It's not something I liked doing. I know why I did it. And I feel it needed to be done. But I'll never be okay with it. That's just me."

My chest aches for him.

He drops the bowl in the basin of clear water and grabs a spoon. I set the camera on the floor and clasp my hands in my lap, resisting the urge to hug this man who is opening his heart to me.

"Returning to Port Providence made sense to me. It was my hometown, but it was also a way to punish myself, because living here is hard work. Living here was also a way to live as naturally as possible, one with nature, using only the bits of the earth that I truly needed to survive, taking nothing more from than essential. Maybe that doesn't make sense. I don't know. The politics of the world, the wars, killing people who believe one thing because it goes against what we believe... that isn't my understanding of the balance of things. In nature, you don't kill a bear just because a bear is a threat. Sure, you protect yourself, and if the bear comes at you in attack, you have to kill it. But you don't go out looking to kill all bears just because bears attack people. Sometimes, that feels like what we were doing in the war. I know it's bigger than that, and impossibly complex, so I'll never really be able to make sense of all of it."

It's the most words I've heard him say and now I'm the one who's speechless. Jameson pulls the plug on the drain then, and the soapy pillows collapse down into the sink. He dries his hands on the towel, then turns around to face me, leaning on the counter behind him.

"My squad all have their own feelings about what we did over there. They all had their own demons to face when we

came back to the States. Being in the headspace of war though, seeing the enemy all around you, knowing you needed to shoot them down. Kill or be killed. All the time. Survival mode twenty-four seven. No rests, no breaks. No grabbing a burger and escaping into a TV show after a hard day. Not everyone can just turn that off when they get home from it all. They were struggling when they got back to their own reasons. Bringing them here, working together again to survive, it was the first time things felt right for all of us. The first time we all had a little slice of peace again.” I’m still speechless as Jameson crosses over to me. He grabs my hands in his, pulling me up to face him. “It’s real life here.”

“Real life.” I repeat, completely drunk on his powerful words. I thought I had it tough in life, growing up with absent parents figuring out how to navigate the world, how to take care of myself and my sister, how to make it on my own... my problems suddenly seem trivial in light of what Jameson and his friends have lived through.

He nods, looking deep into my eyes. “Real living. How people are meant to live. I don’t think we’re meant to drive around in cars and order pizzas to our front door.”

“I don’t even like pizza,” I mimic him, transfixed, eyes doe-wide at this magnificent man who has shown me his soul.

Jameson gives a soft chuckle that breaks the spell.

“Thanks for telling me all that,” I manage.

He nods once, his expression going serious. “Shall we hit the hay?”

Our eyes lock at the mention of going to bed together, the fiery heat obvious in his stare.

# CHAPTER 6

## Jameson

I crawl under sheets, this time in boxers and a t-shirt, wondering if I can really hold out on Jolie. She's not only willing, it's like she's actively trying to wear me down. And somehow, it's hot as fuck knowing that she wants it.

Maybe I'm that hard up. I mean, I know I am, look where in I live. The last time I slept with a woman... the last time any of us did... it's been years. I thought I was used to it, but the urge to reach out and touch Jolie is *almost* unbearable.

Case in point, I could hammer a nail with the rager I'm sporting while she breathes softly next to me under my sheets. Why am I turning her down again? I'm suddenly no longer clear on that score.

What would be so bad about turning over and letting her know I'm interested? *Shit*. If I don't get myself under control soon, I'm fucked. Literally.

Jolie lets out a soft sigh as she shifts over from her back and rolls to face me. Her breathing has been steady for a while now, and I'm pretty sure she's asleep. *Fuck she smells good*.

"Can't sleep?" she asks, and I startle in surprise.

"Something like that," I croak through a raw throat.

"What's on your mind?" her voice is soft and low, tone genuine.

I take a breath, stalling for time as I rack my brain with anything else I could say in this moment besides what I'm thinking. "Not used to sharing a bed," I blurt, and then immediately regret my choice as her body tenses.

"I can haul it to the couch. Just say the word." She starts to shift as if she'll leave.

“No—” I reach out and grab her, my hand making contact with her hip. It’s tiny in my hand and I might be gripping her too hard, but I can’t focus on any of that, because this touch sends ten thousand volts of desire racing through my blood.

Even though I’m someone who can control my emotions in high stress life-and-death situations, my resolve is presently out the window. Instead, my pulse quickens, and my breath catches as I rub my thumb over the spot I’m holding. Her shirt has ridden up slightly, so I’m stroking bare, soft, warm skin... and I can’t stop.

“Jameson?” she says my name on an exhale, like she’s asking me a question.

I don’t mean to, but I shift closer to her in reply. Or maybe I pull her nearer. Or both. It’s hard to be sure right now, because my head feels fuzzy with desire.

“Whoa,” she gasps, sounding pleasantly surprised and I shake at the feeling, because, yeah, my cock... it’s pressing against her thigh.

I throb in reply to the feeling, knowing full well that this is happening. Whatever *this* is. I need some contact, to touch her... I don’t care what it looks like.

“Is this okay?” I manage to ask as I let my hand wander around to her plump cheek, palming the small globe in my hand.

She doesn’t answer with words, opting to hitch her leg over my hip, dragging herself closer until she’s lined up with me. I try to get my breathing under control, huffing out rapid breaths as my arm clamps around her like a vice, holding her in place.

“Yes,” she sighs in content, rocking her hips into me. There’s far too much fabric between us, but I manage to not completely rip her clothes off her body. Maybe that’s for the best... this layer of fabric is all that’s stopping me right now.

Guess living out here alone all these years has ruined my manners.

Pressing her forehead against mine, she swipes her tongue across my lips and I'm a goner.

The next second happens in an instant. Our mouths connect in a searing kiss, tongues swirling and lapping as I try to inhale her. Meanwhile, I've got her in a tight grip, her leg still hooked over me, I'm pressed up right at her entrance. Hell, I might just rip through these layers of cotton...

My cock leaks at the heat of her core as she writhes up against me. Needy, eager, forbidden thrusts. Her breath shudders... breasts heaving as she presses them into me. Her free hand grips onto me as she works to keep me close.

And like a pair of horny teenagers, we dry hump into each other. Only it's not staying very dry. Between the sweat from our exertion, my precum and her arousal... the fabric is soaked.

*Fuck.* It's about to be a lot more soaked too.

If she was in sleep shorts, I'd have pulled them to the side... but she's in long pants and as much as I want her, I'm grateful for the added protection.

That, and I'm about to explode. Maybe I should hold back... try to take this further, but that's not going to happen. It's been too damn long. I have zero stamina.

"Fuck, Jameson," she moans, and her body jerks. I think that means she's reached her climax, and, hell yes... that's so goddam hot and I'm following her there.

The searing heat rolling up and down my spine... the urge to let go that I've been fighting... we grind each other like a fucking peppermill under the sheets... it's time to let go.

Pulling her impossibly tight up against me, my body arches into her, pushing closer into her despite the fabric, which equates to a fraction of an inch, but it's enough for me.

The knowledge that this is her core sends me there and I groan loud enough to wake the dead.

I'm not sure how long I pant and hold her tight like that, but eventually, I float back to reality.

"Shit, sorry," I groan, releasing her and rolling away, our pants both soaked.

"It's... ah... fine," she says tentatively, then chuckles lightly. "That was actually pretty hot."

I snort a laugh through my nose. "Understatement of the year—" I start to say, then realize she's unlikely to be as sex-starved as me. Maybe I'm just some awkward, fumbling, broken man to her. "We better clean up before this dries," I manage.

The bed dips heavier under my weight as Jolie stands in reply and heads to the bathroom. I quickly strip out of my clothes and change, but not before I note the smell of her arousal on them, and fuck, it's sweet. My cock stirs again, but I will myself to ignore it.

By the time Jolie returns to bed, I'm tucked away in the covers.

"That was fun," she says brightly when she returns.

"Yeah," I agree, unsure what else to say as feelings of regret start to consume me.

"I'm going to sleep good now." She yawns as if to prove her point. Then she turns away from me, but scootches a little closer so we're just barely touching. I'm lying on my back, thankful for the darkness that is hiding the rebounding tent in my boxers.

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I wake up so early that Jolie is still softly snoring, and I beeline it out of there. Facing her sounds like a terrifying prospect, so I'm determined to make myself scarce today. It's either that, or lock her in my bedroom all day and bury myself in her delicious body... which in the light of day does not



seem like a good idea. Not that I can think of any reasons not to do it, except the obvious: she will leave before I know it, and then I'll *really* know what I'm missing.

Knocking on JP and Tucker's rickety wooden door with a bucket of tools in hand is the first step getting through today.

JP answers in his boxers. "So early," he complains, rubbing sleep from his eyes, hair strewn to one side.

"Let's get to work," I say, pushing past him. Their place is essentially one giant room, but we've been adding on a space for a bathroom. Now that the walls are up, it's time to add the plumbing. JP and Tucker don't mind living ultra-rustic, but the winters get so bad, it's hard to get outside to do your business. Unless you don't mind freezing your balls off in a very literal way.

"This looks cozy," I say tentatively as I scan the room and notice Tucker and Evie spooning on the large mattress on the floor.

Tucker sits up with a stretch and Evie stirs. "Morning," they say simultaneously. I wonder what Jolie would think of this scene.

*Not my monkeys, not my circus.* "Might be the last day you have to bury your shit for a while, if you lazy fuckers get up and help me."

"Is he always this sweet with words?" Evie asks as she slips a pair of sweats over her base layer.

JP slaps my back, then grabs the bucket of tools from my hand. "Usually. But we still love him."

"Quite the brotherhood. I like that," she decides with a sleepy smile. She really does look so much like Jolie, it's startling.

Ignoring the trio, I take back my bucket and set to work. At least I'll be alone in here today.

A few moments later there's a knock at the door and a familiar voice seeping through it. "Evie?" Jolie calls out as she

enters. “You okay in there?”

“I wish I had time to mix some fake blood up, and pretend you’d murdered me in my sleep,” Evie tells the guys who exchange a mischievous look. This might have been a bad pairing if Evie’s going to spur on their immaturity. But if they’re having fun...

“There you are,” Jolie says, hugging her sister as if they didn’t see each other just last night. “How was your first night indoors?”

Evie blushes. “Fine.”

JP and Tucker give each other a knowing look that Jolie misses, which is probably for the best.

“Perhaps as good as your night?” JP says like it’s a question and dammit if Jolie and I don’t fall for the trap, eyeing one another briefly. My eyes snap back to floor.

“Slept like a log,” she answers for us, though it just causes JP and Tucker to snicker like children.

I clap my hands together. “All right, enough of the immaturity. Can you all get to work please?”

“You’re working in here today?” Jolie asks, sounding a little crestfallen.

I nod, hiding the pleasant little feeling that gives me in my chest. “Yeah, not much to film in here, just a toilet going in. Guess I’ll be riding solo.” I don’t mean to sound as disappointed as I do.

Jolie leans against the wall near me while Tucker, JP, and Evie head out to the woods, aka, the current bathroom.

As I get started measuring the hole for the water line, I peek over at Jolie as she studies the single room. “Where do you think my sister slept?” she asks, spotting the mattress.

“Probably best not to think on that too much.”

Jolie makes a grumbly sound of disapproval that has me laughing. “It’s not like they’d be doing anything we aren’t

doing. A little hypocritical, don't you think?" I tease, and though I instantly regret bringing up memories of last night, my cock doesn't mind the reminder.

Her eyes are wide. "There are two guys here."

"Don't approve of that?" I question her, but I can't hear her answer, because I turn on the drill to cut my first hole in the wall. When I finish, the trio is back, talking loudly and laughing.

"Ready to head down, sis?" Jolie asks, taking Evie by the shoulders and steering her toward the door.

"Ah, sure," Evie says tentatively, looking back at the guys.

A few minutes later, JP and Tucker follow, and I'm left to my work, getting lost in time.

A few hours later Nina surprises me around lunchtime with a sandwich. "Looking good," she assesses. I flush the newly installed toilet for emphasis, at which she makes an approving *ooh-la-la* sound.

"Wish Miles was this handy?" I rib her.

"He is... in his own way," she gives me a scorning look. "Speaking of our awkward past..."

I roll my eyes as she pauses. "What about it?"

"My sister's coming to visit today. Not sure how dad convinced her, but she's going to be here soon."

My heart races at the information, but I keep my cool. "And you decided to spring it on me last minute?" Seeing Cara sounds awful to me, and Nina knows this.

"Did you really want to have this information sooner?"

I scowl at her. "No. I didn't want the information at all actually. What's it to me?"

Nina pushes her hands on her hips. "Let me get this straight. One minute I didn't tell you soon enough and now I

shouldn't have told you at all? Yeah. You seem fine with the information. But hopefully, it *is* nothing to you. I just didn't want you taken off guard."

Processing the reality that my ex will soon be here, I really consider whether I give a fuck. Deciding I don't, I turn to Nina. "Is that all? I wanted to finish their shower today too, if I can."

"Actually..." Nina draws out the word with a guilty tone in her voice.

I close my eyes and rub my hand over my face. "Actually what?" I snap, braving a look at her.

"I have some really good news I'm announcing tonight, and I want you to hear it from me first."

"Fuck, Nina. Do we really have to do this?" I have a feeling I already know what it is.

She closes the distance between us and plants her hands on my shoulders. "We do. I'm pregnant."

"And I'm happy for you and Miles," I say automatically. I knew this day would come eventually and I really am happy for them. They've wanted this a long time. I'm just a little shocked they waited this long to mention it. Nina's a thick woman, so I really didn't notice any changes this summer, and it's been chilly a few weeks, so she's been layered in a poncho. But still, I thought I'd seen a growing bump.

Nina's mouth forms a tight line, no doubt in pity. "You okay?"

"Yes," I scoff. "Of course. Congratulations. You're going to be a great mom."

Nina pulls me into a hug, and I wrap my arms around her. I really am happy for her, even if the news stretches that little hole in my heart.

"I'm sorry about Cara."

“It’s not your place to apologize for her,” I pull away and look at my long-time friend. “This is amazing news. Now give me that sandwich, I’m famished.”

She chuckles and heads for the basket she brought, but pauses in place. “Holy shit—” she starts.

I freeze, feeling the same thing she’s feeling. “Is that—” I get out before the sensation amplifies and the walls rattle. I run to her, grab her arm, and drag her outside in an instant. The loud rumbling builds briefly before a distant splash rings out. Then it’s silence.

“Come on,” I shout, and we both take off to the town center at a run to investigate.

# CHAPTER 7

## Jolie

“What the fuck was that?” someone shouts.

I’m standing frozen in place, camera perched on my shoulder, looking around in a panic for my sister. Evie lands her drone and I drop my camera to the side as we run to each other.

“Was that an earthquake?” Evie asks, voice shaken.

We grab each other and hug, as if that will protect us. “Sure felt like it.” Since I’ve lived in California for a few years, I already know the feeling. Though this was a little different.

“Camera’s up,” Chloe yells at me, a wild look of excitement on her face. I groan, but do as she says. I know this is part of the job, capturing the action, even against my better judgement.

A loud bell rings out and everyone starts to head back to town. No doubt we’re all eager to get some information about what in the hell just shook the ground like that.

Evie and I clasp our free hands as we follow the crowd to the greenhouse, where the entire town seems to be gathering and chattering. The volume is loud, but we fall silent when someone rips off a loud whistle. All eyes move to a grizzled old man with a scruffy gray beard who is standing on a wooden box. He drops two fingers from his lips and looks out over the waiting crowd.

Staying on the edge, I pan the camera over the crowd and back to the man.

I notice a beautiful woman around my age standing off to his side. I didn’t think there were any other younger women in town, aside from Nina.

“What was that, Don?” someone shouts in the silence.

The man up front, who I presume is Don, raises up his hands. “We’ve suffered a serious loss this morning. The Westover’s were not available for the drop off today and they had to send another pilot. When his helicopter came for a drop off, he landed too close to the edge of the clearing, and you all know we’ve had a wet summer... half the landing pad slipped off. Luckily, the chopper took off just in time. That was the rumble and splash you heard. The pilot made it out safely, but the landing pad is ruined.”

Everyone looks around, making meaning of Don’s words. Beth, Chloe, and Naomi shuffle closer to me and Evie.

“What does this mean?” I whisper to Beth, my mind whirring from the information.

She shakes her head, a serious look on her face that says she’s thinking what I’m thinking... we’re effectively trapped here without that landing pad.

I have no time to panic because Chloe gestures for me to get the camera back on Don, as he continues, “We need a team of volunteers to head up and assess the damage so we can start planning. We had one more drop of critical supplies we needed this winter. And course, we have our visitors to consider.”

“I don’t like the sound of that,” Naomi groans, no doubt realizing as well that this means we’re stuck here, at least temporarily. I mean, they have boats don’t they? Surely we can pay someone to bring us to another landing site via boat.

“Yeah, no shit,” Beth whispers.

Chloe wraps an arm around Naomi. “We’ll figure it out, like we always do.”

A group of people move to the front toward Don.

“We should go with them, right?” Evie asks, tone brave and confident. “I might be able to help them assess the damage with my drone.”

“Hell yes. We may be fucked right now, but this footage could win us an Emmy,” Chloe rejoices, and we all follow the crowd, ready to capture the fallout from this disaster.

The crowd breaks apart swiftly, anxious energy everywhere. I stay close to Don, half jogging to keep up, as Jameson falls in step next to the man.

“How much of it is gone, Pops?” Jameson asks the man.

Don glances back at me, aware of the camera perched on my shoulder. “Almost all of it,” he answers in a clipped tone.

Jameson’s brows shoot up and he too looks back at me, lips forming into a tight line.

When we arrive at the scene, the damage is obvious. Where a flat landing pad once stood, the earth is ripped away, having fallen into the ocean below. I stay close to Don as he discusses options with the others.

“These trees can be removed,” someone suggests.

Don shakes his head. “Working so close to this site might be a waste of our time. The earth is soft here. We need to consider finding a completely new area to clear.”

“There’s no other flat land large enough, not unless we want to bushwhack five miles inland,” another person argues.

It’s taking everything in me to remain professional right now, when I all want to do is figure out how in the fuck we’ll be getting home.

After an hour of arguing, the party makes its way back to the town center for more planning and discussion, and a bite of dinner.

Chloe and Beth call our crew together for our own private discussion.

“This trip’s turning out shit. First, we get lost on the way in, then we get attacked by wolves, and now we’re



trapped,” Naomi laments.

“That’s the wild for you,” Beth states plainly. “The question is, what can we do about it?”

Chloe frowns. “I spoke to the producers on the satellite phone, and they didn’t seem to appreciate the gravity of the situation. When I told them the residents were expecting crucial supplies, they felt confident that meant we’d be able to hitch a ride somehow.”

“Is that going to be an option?” Naomi questions.

Beth shakes her head. “If I’m remembering correctly, the towns we can reach by boat are several days trip each. To bring the fuel they’d need to go the distance, *and* all of us... it might be unrealistic. We are very dependent on being able to get out by sky. We need to be creative here. Maybe we can help them get a new clearing established and a new trail cut, even if the site is more remote. We need to get off this island before winter sets in.”

I’ve never seen Beth look nervous before, but the twitch in her cheek worries me. “Beth, what aren’t you telling us?”

She pulls her lip between her teeth, eyes casting downward. “We were cutting the season close. I tried to get the producers to send us three weeks ago, to build in a cushion. The snowy season is just three weeks away, on average. Once that first few feet of snow falls, there’s no getting out of here.”

Naomi’s hands fly to her head, fingers weaving through her hair as her face turns red. “We might really be stuck here for months!”

That’s not possible. The rational side of my brain just refuses to accept that as an answer. There *has* to be a way.

Chloe throws an arm over her shoulder to calm her. “Let’s not panic just yet. Beth, can we realistically help the effort to get a new landing site established?”

“If we’re all okay with getting fired for stopping our film work early, then it’s a possibility. The bigger issue is how many folks from the town can stop their normal chores to tackle this. They obviously have supplies they needed to be delivered, but they will have to weigh the risks.”

“What risks?” Evie asks in the pause.

Beth straightens. “If they stop preparing wood and food for winter, they may not make it all winter. Whatever supplies they were expecting may be have to be sacrificed. They have to prioritize heat and sustenance.”

“Who told you that?” Naomi snaps, panic clear in her voice.

“Nina,” Beth frowns.

“Fucking hell. I thought that Don guy said the supplies were vital though,” Naomi challenges as she starts to pace.

No one replies to her question though, each of us is a little lost in our own worries.

Finally, Chloe calls it. “Let’s all head back and rest, get some food... see what our hosts are saying. Then, meet up first thing and see what we’ve got.”

We all nod in agreement.

“Don’t despair yet. We need more information, and then we’ll make a plan,” Beth assures us, although she doesn’t look too sure herself. My stomach has tied itself into an intricate knot, but I try not to panic just yet.

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When I get back to Jameson’s place, he’s nowhere to be found. I’m not totally surprised, since I’m sure he has a lot of people to talk to tonight. My stomach is rumbling angrily though, and I debate whether he’d be offended or relieved if I try to cook something. My hunger comes in a sickening wave though, so I’m forced to choke down a granola bar that’s crunched up in my pocket, having no energy left to prepare an entire meal. Then, a deep tiredness takes over and I shuffle my

way to his bed, curling up fully clothed under the covers that smell like him, trying not to think about what it means to be possibly trapped here, or how much the thought that I'd have Jameson to keep me safe and fed is oddly comforting.

I startle when the bed dips with Jameson's weight.

"You asleep?" he asks.

"Yes," I grumble and roll over to face him in the darkness. "What time is it?"

"Late. Sorry I woke you up."

I scootch closer, curling myself up against him. "It's okay. Any updates on the situation?"

"What would you do if you were stuck here all winter?" His tone is serious and I'm suddenly wide awake.

Searching for his eyes in the darkness, I see the sincerity in his expression. I'm not exactly terrified at his words, if I'm being honest.

"Hopefully find someone very generous to take us in." I brave thinking about the reality of the situation. Maybe Jameson wouldn't want to host me all season.

"Stay here," he says on an exhale.

"But that's crazy. You barely know me. I could be a serial killer for all you know." I chuckle in reply as his arms reach out and snake around me, his wide palms stroking over the dip in my sides, then he closes the distance between us, taking my mouth in reply, pressing his tongue past my lips in a slow, deep kiss.

"As long as you promise to only serial kill animals for us to eat, I think that would work out just fine."

I snort a laugh, half-worried that if I really were to stay, he'd get sick of me quickly, and I'd be begging a neighbor for a couch to crash on. It's not a comfortable feeling, to have to rely on someone else like that. I'm used to having my own

place, or rather, being the one that lets a boyfriend stay until he leaves me for someone better.

“Don’t stress,” Jameson says softly as he rubs his thumb at the crease in my brow. “You’re clearly a survivor. I know that much about you.”

“True,” I sigh, letting myself relax for the first time all day. My brain feels hazy as we lie in the silent darkness and my mind wanders over the immense number of *what-ifs* in my future.

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Hooking my legs over his hip, I pull myself into him, pressing my heat against his hard length. The feeling makes my breath catch in my chest, and in an instant I’m panting, pulling myself on top of him as he rolls over to accept me. His hands clutch onto my ass, holding me down on him as I say a silent prayer, wishing his boxers would magically dissolve. Since when does he wear clothes to bed anyway?

It doesn’t matter though, as we grind and kiss, the friction soaking and shifting the fabric, he springs free, and I waste no time shifting onto him. Bare and grinding, slipping around on him easily, it takes all my willpower to not spear myself on him.

Apparently, he doesn’t have the same qualms... with a desperate growl, he reaches down and aims himself in a smooth motion, pushing me down with the other hand until his slick tip pushes inside me. At that feeling, all bets are off, and I drop down on him. We both freeze then, eyes wide and trained on each other, chests rising and falling in rapid succession as we have a silent conversation, for two very long seconds, before I lose it completely and start rocking my hips, taking what I want from him.

The sound that leaves his lips is utterly filthy as I keep him trapped inside me. Or rather, as he traps me, holding me down so tightly onto him that I can’t get up if I want to. Rocking and cantering on him, his tip hits deep inside me, in

just that right spot as I grip his biceps for leverage. Fleeting questions on whether this is a good idea are quickly washed away as I study Jameson's face, the pure desire obvious, the way his eyes stare a hole right through me. All I can think is that I'm so fucking close. So close...

"Jolie?" he says my name like it's a question, then I feel his hand on my shoulder, shaking me. "Are you okay?"

Suddenly, like a puff of smoke, the room changes and I blink awake. My panties are utterly soaked between my legs, and Jameson is next to me, leaning over me, looking very concerned.

"You were moaning in your sleep," he informs me.

Rubbing my eyes, I turn over. Did I really have *that* vivid a dream of him? Wow.

"Uh, yeah. Nightmare. Sorry." I quickly recover, swallowing the lump in my throat.

# CHAPTER 8

## Jameson

Did I just witness what I think I witnessed? Is it possible she was dreaming about me? It's probably too much to hope for. But if I'm right, I bet her panties are soaked after that dream. Did I watch longer than I should have? Fuck yes. Do I now have a raging hardon? Double fuck yes.

"Nightmare, huh?" I challenge her with a nervous chuckle. "That's not what I would have guessed."

"And what would you have guessed?" she tosses back, her voice throaty and broken.

"Sex dream," I brave the response.

She lets a little puff of breath from her nose that tells me I'm right on the money.

"Anyone I know?" I push in this unofficial game of sex chicken as I silently pray she says my name.

When she doesn't reply, I reach out for her, firmly grabbing her hip bone. Her breath catches. "It was me," I state hopefully, as if saying it will make it true.

She stays silent, but her breathing is picking up, and that's the confirmation I need. Letting my hand wander down over her ass, then back over her thigh, I move my palm up between her legs until I confirm my earlier suspicions.

"Fuck," I groan. "All that for me?" Where this composure is coming from, I have no idea. My heart is pounding overtime as nerves rake through me.

"Jameson," she whispers my name, maybe to stop me, or maybe to encourage me. My hand remains still between her legs, until I decide her saying my name is a way to encourage me. Pushing the fabric aside, I run two fingers over her, then pull them away to my lips. *Holy sweetness.*

She shudders at the sight as I slide my tongue across fingers. Going back for more, she opens her legs a little wider to give me better access. This time, I press them inside her just a little. Her hips move automatically at my touch, aching her forward, taking me a little deeper. The world shrinks to the size of this bed and the edges of my consciousness go fuzzy.

My cock is practically throbbing for attention, so I pull my hand back and free him, coating my tip in her sweetness as she watches me.

“What are we doing?” she whispers.

“Whatever you want.” My own bravado is shocking to me.

I say a silent prayer that she wants more. Wants everything. This has to be her show, because if it was mine, I’d pin her down right now and claim her. I have to squeeze hard on my tip at my reverie to bring myself back down to reality.

She doesn’t reply right away, so I keep stroking myself slowly, using her as my lubricant. “Tell me about your dream.”

Her lips close tightly, eyes falling shut on a heavy exhale as her hand drops down between her legs. She shifts the fabric further the side to reveal herself to me. I want so badly to dive between her legs and suck down every drop of her... another hearty squeeze to my shaft calms me.

I reach back between her thighs, pressing inside her again with two fingers, stretching her open a bit. She’ll need it if she’s going to take me. Not tonight though. I make myself swear it won’t be tonight. Instead, I take her hand and place it around my cock. Her fingers don’t completely close around it. She grips me firmly and starts to stroke, giving a pleasant little twist to her wrist at the tip. *Fuuuck*. I realize in this moment how utterly inadequate my own hand has been all these years.

I return to gently stroking my fingers into her in rhythm with her fist. I want so much more than this, but I also want to savor every step with this girl. And maybe my prayers have

been answered, maybe fate will keep us together for the winter.

It's becoming more difficult to keep myself under control, I'm practically fucking her fist as she writhes on my fingers. "You feel, so good," she groans before giving my bottom lip a hefty suck.

I can't risk opening my mouth, because I can't trust what I might say next, so I lean into her neck and suck on her warm flesh. Then I feel it, she clenches around my fingers, and her muscles pulse around me as her breath hitches.

"Holy fuck," I gasp, slowing my pace as her hips slow.

Unable to think straight, I shift over her, pinning her down. I tug her panties down to her thighs as I hover over her. Her chest heaves as she watches me with wide eyes. I grip myself and in a few more strokes, bringing myself over the edge. Every muscle in my body tightens as I mark her.

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A pounding on the door wakes me. It's way too late for a visitor, and the alarms ringing in my head tug me from the bed. Slipping into my long johns as I barrel down the stairs, I see Miles knocking at the door. He looks like hell.

"Is Nina okay?" I gasp as I throw open the door, my heart sinking into my stomach.

Miles gives a little shake of his head, eyes wide, sweat on his brow. "The baby," he pants.

I don't wait for another word, shoving my boots on and racing after him, bare-chested, into the cool night.

We cover the distance in record time, puffing from running at top speed. I hear Nina's screams before we even reach the door.

"Nina!" I shout as I whip through the house to their bedroom. Then the sight of her has me pausing in the doorway. She's laid out on the bed in a puddle of blood. I've seen worse overseas, but this is *Nina*. I can't even care that Cara is leaning



over her, cleaning Nina with a warm towel. I haven't seen Cara in years, but thankfully I have tunnel vision right now.

"What's happening?" I ask I suck up my fear and step to Nina, kneeling beside her bed.

"Something's wrong with the baby," Cara answers.

I shoot at a glance at Miles, who looks like he's about to faint. "Sit him down," I tell Cara. "Maybe in the living room, he's white as a sheet."

Cara nods and puts an arm around Miles' shoulders, steering him from the room. He doesn't fight it.

I take Nina's hand in mine. "Hey, look at me. Breathe."

The fear in her eyes breaks my heart.

"We're going to get through this," I promise her, though I'm not sure how. Nina is bleeding out on the bed. From what little training on the subject that I remember, that's a very bad sign.

"Listen, if I don't make it..." she starts.

"Hush. No talking like that. We're going to take care of you. We need to talk about your options though."

Nina shakes her head. "I know what this means, Jameson. I haven't felt the baby move in a week. This is bad. Very bad."

"We don't know anything yet. This is just some bleeding. It's not that uncommon. This will all be okay."

"Knock-knock," a voice calls at the door. I turn to see Jolie with Beth, the survival expert from the film crew.

"Come in," Nina winces.

Beth crosses the room with a handful of leaves clutched in her palm. "Jolie woke me up, said something about Nina's baby. I wondered if you might want to try some strawberry leaf tea. It could help."

Nina nods weakly.

“Brew some,” I confirm.

“It’d work best with some moon plant. Do you know it?” Beth asks me.

“Artemisia?” I confirm and she nods. “There’s some out by my wood pile,” I say as the image of the plant focuses in my mind.

“Get it. It will help even more than this.” Beth’s running her hands over Nina’s belly, assessing, while whispering soothing words in Nina’s ear.

I plant a kiss on Nina’s hand before bolting out of the room, passing Cara fanning a faint-looking Miles on the couch.

Grabbing a jacket from the front door, I sprint into the night, arms pumping, a man on a mission. I can barely process the feeling of seeing Cara again, or of the addictive woman sharing my bed... or how much I wish she’d stay. At the same time, she should leave. It’s not safe here. Look at what Nina’s going through now. There are just some things that are made better by living near civilization, and childbirth is top of the list. And now we’re all trapped here. No real way in or out. We couldn’t even get an emergency chopper if we needed to. Unless they hovered and lifted Nina out on a board. It may come to that. Would it even be safe to airlift her in this condition?

By the time I get back with the moon plant, Miles is sitting beside a cleaned-up Nina. Apparently, the blood has stopped, so that’s something. Beth leans down over Nina’s belly, listening for a heartbeat, while Cara brews up the moon plant tea.

“What do you hear?” Miles asks through clenched teeth.

Nina pats his hand reassuringly.

“Shush,” Beth whispers, concentrating. “I definitely hear something. Does anyone in town have a stethoscope?”

“Not that I can think of, but we can definitely ask around. Should we go knock on some doors?”

Beth looks at Nina. “Your blood pressure is steady. The bleeding has stopped, and I think I hear a heartbeat. It’s your call. I can’t give you medical advice.”

“But you think it’s good for now?” Nina urges. “As my friend, not as a medical professional.”

Beth’s face relaxes. “I do. Bleeding can happen. Sometimes a baby stays stiller than usual. This probably does not mean disaster, but I could also be wrong. I’m not a doctor.”

Nina rubs her belly, a soft smile tugging the corners of her lips. “I’m tired. We’re all tired.” She looks around at the faces in the room. “Let’s rest and regroup in the morning.”

Everyone stands up at her instruction, Miles gives me a consuming hug. “Thank you,” he whispers through a tight throat.

“Anytime, brother.” I pat his shoulder as we part, taking one glance at a confused-looking Cara before heading out.

When I get back home, Jolie is already sitting at the kitchen table, holding a mug of tea. The chair squeaks across the floor as she pushes it back to stand. “Is everything okay now?” she asks, a deep look of sympathy on her face. I’m not even sure when she left Nina’s, but I’m grateful she overheard Miles at my front door and thought to bring Beth.

My eyes fall shut, not sure how to answer. “Hopefully,” I manage to answer. I can’t let myself think of how broken Nina will be if she loses her baby. It’s all she’s wanted for so long.

“Thank you for going to get Beth.”

Jolie nods, looking unsure of what to do with herself... which is fair, because I’m unsure what to do with myself. It feels like the world took a moment that was meant to be a pleasurable reward for me\_ holding Jolie after we finally let

ourselves go\_ and burned it to the ground. Maybe I'm not supposed to get that kind of joy. Jolie's leaving eventually anyway, and I'll be alone again. The more I enjoy her now, the more it will hurt when she leaves.

"I'm bushed. Let's get some rest," I say over my shoulder as I peel away my long johns and crawl into the sheets. The bed dips as Jolie comes in next to me, and it takes everything I have inside not to break down into ugly sobs. I'm not supposed to cry though. I was raised not to show my emotions. So, I swallow them down, and eventually, drift off.

# CHAPTER 9

## Jolie

The details of last night are quickly swirled around the rumor mill in the morning. Even though Beth keeps her mouth shut on the subject, we overhear a lot of chatter in the morning about Nina's close call and Beth's heroic save. Some people are even starting to suggest we're useful to have around, not a nuisance like they thought at first. It's funny how people think our ears don't work from a distance, then again, maybe we're meant to hear.

Jameson is going to be gone all day. I have to film away from him. That's the dark spot on my day, but I'll make do.

We've been warned several times to be careful not to get in the way with the cameras while people work. They're the ones that applied to be on this show, you'd think they'd realize that means being filmed up close. I'm used to the snark though, so I don't let it bother me.

Our motivation to film is at an all-time low anyway, given the gravity of our situation and the fact that our producers don't think it's worth it to figure out a way to get us out of here. Being stuck with no homes, a burden to our hosts... this is total shit.

The only saving grace is that Naomi grew up with a mechanic for a dad and she used to practically live at his shop as a kid. That means she knows a lot about how to fix engines, big engines... so she heads up the mountain with some of the guys who are working on bringing their old excavator back to life. If they can get it running in the next few days, there may be enough time to clear and flatten the earth for a new landing pad before the ground is totally frozen. If not... well, I don't want to think about the alternative yet.

Meanwhile, I have the assignment of interviewing the newcomer, Cara. Since she doesn't live here and wasn't

planning on staying, she doesn't have a job, per se. Instead, Beth says she's helping with some chores for her sister, Nina.

Cara is tall and slender, and uncommonly pretty. A real-life Marilyn Monroe look-a-like. She's got long acrylic nails, and if I didn't know any better, lips plumped with filler. She sticks out here like a sore thumb. I try my best to hate her instantly for being so typically sexy. Though it's hard, since I've always been a bit average looking, and I was bullied by pretty girls like her in high school.

"Hey there," I wave as I approach her. She's got a big basket-backpack on, which tells me we're gathering something today.

She doesn't wave back, opting for a slight head nod of acknowledgment. I purse my lips in reply and give my own, 'yeah, I'd rather be somewhere else too' nod.

"So, you're the one staying up with Jameson?" she asks, a biting edge to her tone.

My brows crease at the odd description of me. "Uh, yeah," I offer carefully.

She puffs a little snort through her nose. "Convenient how you all pushed your way in."

"He insisted, actually," I correct her, even though I should know better than to take the bait.

"He's a stand-up guy like that," she says as she stalks away, and I'm left to hoist up my camera and follow behind her.

"Sounds like you know him pretty well. Were you close before you moved away?" I start a line of interview questioning, which is only half motivated by a sudden new curiosity about the nature of their relationship.

She pauses, turning to give me a coy smile. "We were engaged."

Her answer guts me and I do my best not to react, holding my expression still as I hide behind the camera lens.

When I don't respond, she turns and walks on, elaborating. Even though silence is an interview technique I learned early on\_ people like to talk about themselves, if you just stay quiet and give them room\_ I really don't want to hear more.

“We met when I moved here to live with my dad. Just teenagers at the time. He was madly in love with my older sister, but she never looked twice at him. Anyway, when he saw me, he fell instantly for me. I wasn't interested for a while, then I heard he signed up for the marines, and I knew he'd be leaving forever. I'd lose my chance with him. We got engaged and I followed him to basic training, but we didn't last long, since he was sent overseas. First one assignment, then another... I couldn't wait around forever.”

Cara pauses her story as we reach the woods, and she brushes away some fallen leaves to reveal a little pile of mushrooms. Ripping them at the root, she tosses them in her basket. I move around her with the camera, keeping her face out of the shots as much as possible, because apparently, I'm letting my immature jealousy run the show today.

“I wanted to have a life of my own... not just be a woman waiting around for a man I never got to see.”

Normally, I might ask a probing question as she seems to conclude her story, but I don't want to know anymore.

“What will you do if you have to stay through the winter here?” I change gears.

Cara sighs, walking to a fallen log, clearing more leaves to reveal more of the edible fungi. “Who knows. Maybe rekindle with Jameson. I've tried men in the outside world, and they're all shit. Though I do hate the idea of living here full time again. I might be able to convince him to leave with me.”

I stop in my tracks, shocked by her admission. “Is that why you came for a visit, to win him back?” I know the question crosses the line... I'll catch shit later from Chloe for this one.

“And to see my pregnant sister. She’s cute with her belly. I hadn’t thought I wanted kids before... but Jameson would make a good father. He always wanted them, *real* bad.”

My guts twists in a way it shouldn’t. I have no claim to this man, and I’ll be leaving forever as soon as I can... so this jealousy is completely unfounded. Unprofessional too. So why do I feel like I want to push this woman down the hill? I take a breath to steady myself. Since when have I become so territorial? I swear, the wilderness has brought something wild out in me.

“Anyway, I’m glad we had a chance to talk today... since I was hoping you’d consider staying somewhere else for a bit, so I can have some time alone with Jameson.”

I drop the camera to my side in surprise, fighting the urge to shout ‘fuck no’. Swallowing the lump in my throat, I keep my voice as steady as I can. “Yeah, sure. I’ll talk to my supervisor and see what we can do.”

After all, who am I to interfere in this man’s life? If his ex wants him back, he should have that chance. I’m temporary. A fling. Just some pre-winter fun. I’m nothing to him. He’s nothing to me. And maybe, if I keep repeating that in my head, the sick feeling in my stomach will subside.

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When my day of torture is complete, I head back to find Chloe, with every intention in the world of telling her about Cara’s request to find me a new place to stay, but I run into Jameson near the docks before I can get to her.

“Hey, you,” I say shyly. He looks tired as hell after last night, and his long day today. “How you holding up?”

His eyes lock onto mine. “I need a vacation from my life.”

“You deserve one,” I agree, stepping closer, instantly wishing I could grab onto him, kiss him. That’d be wildly inappropriate though. Private hookups are one thing, but this is his hometown... his turf, his rules.



“How’s your ankle? You’ve been doing too much,” he informs me with a look of worry.

“It’s feeling fine.” For the first time, it’s not a lie. Now the only ache I have is in the pit of my stomach.

He wets his lips, and I hope he’s feeling the same way, but the next words out of his mouth catch me completely off guard. “Listen, I was speaking with Nina, and she felt like it might be best if Cara stays at my place tonight, since her couch is so lumpy, and Cara’s running low on sleep...” he trails off.

My stomach flips around, threatening to spill my lunch. I swallow the hard lump in my throat, breathing out carefully, processing. Finally, I fix a nonchalant look on my face. “Of course, I’ll just go grab my stuff.”

He shakes his head. “That doesn’t mean you have to go. She can take my couch.”

“Yours is lumpy too,” I point out, against my better judgement.

“That’s her problem,” he counters.

“She might tell people I’m sharing your bed.”

Jameson shakes his head, stepping closer to me. “So what?”

I take a measured step back. “Jameson, I was with her all day. I know you two were engaged.”

He nods, confirming what I already knew. “That’s weird, right? I should find her another place... but everywhere else is taken by your crew.”

I debate my options. Should I tell him about her plans to win him back. Was that said to me in confidence? Or, did she want me to tell him, to play matchmaker, so to speak?

“Truthfully, I’m not comfortable with that arrangement. It’s just... weird. Please don’t worry though. I’m totally fine. I’ll find another place, or I can set up my tent just outside

someone's spot so I can holler if I need help. We're not a thing. I'm just passing through town. I'm not willing to disrupt your life. We had some fun, but it didn't mean anything. This is your ex... and maybe she's here for a reason. I'm not going to be here longer than I have to... I'm going to grab my stuff and get out of your hair... that's all there is to it," I finish my rant, turning quickly on my heel before he can protest.

I'm practically shaking as I speed walk to his house, climbing the steps to find Cara already in his kitchen, my bags packed for me at the top of the stairs. I want to shout at her for touching my shit, but what do I really care? She's saved me the trouble.

Without another word, I snatch up my duffel and stomp back down the stairs, resisting the urge to slam the door on my way out. I'm on the job, for fuck's sake. I need to buck up and be a professional, no matter what sort of shitstorm I've created for myself.

# CHAPTER 10

## Jameson

“I heard they got the excavator running for a few minutes today, so you should be set to head out before too long,” I say to Cara as she reluctantly makes up the couch. I’m sure as fuck not sharing a bed with that snake. Not after how she used me for an escape, for my money, cheating on me for the four years I was deployed, just to leave me high and dry when she got sick of the arrangement.

“Are you sure you don’t want any company tonight? When was the last time anyway...” she starts, but I cut her off promptly.

“Don’t, Cara. Just don’t. Nothing is ever happening between us again. Ever. You’re only staying here as a favor to Nina.”

“You always loved her more than me,” she pouts.

I shake my head as she stomps away. I should never have agreed to this... but Nina’s in a fragile state and I know she probably needed a break from her high maintenance sister already. Even though Beth found the baby’s heartbeat this afternoon when she got her hands on a stethoscope... the bleeding was scary.

Sitting on the edge of my empty bed, face in my palms, I breathe out slowly, trying to get a handle on the swirl of unsteady thoughts that plague me. Having Jolie around has been such a pleasant change of pace, and I know it can’t last, she is only here for a little while... but then the hope of her having to stay has made me unreasonably happy. How fucked up is that? I’m like some evil captor... not that I personally caused the helipad to wash away in a landslide. I just wasn’t mad about the prospect of a winter companion, especially one as charming and gorgeous as Jolie.

Later that night, a light pattering plays out on my metal roof. It's raining, and Jolie is in a tent somewhere. In the cold rain. *Shit.*

As the sound picks up, my guilt builds until my throat is tight. What the fuck have I done?

I stand up as Cara knocks on my bedroom door.

"What," I snap as she pushes her way in.

"That couch is awful," she reminds me once again.

"Then go back to your sister's," I hiss the words, crossing over and grabbing the door. She takes a cautious step back at my tone, brow creasing.

"Rude."

"I think what you did is pretty rude, too. Pushing my guest out into the rain." I mean, Jolie is the one who offered to leave, but still. I need somewhere to direct this anger.

"You're worried about her," she accuses me.

"Of course, I am. There's been an aggressive wolf pack stalking the town, and now it's forty degrees and pouring rain," I say with accusation in my tone, as I realize the rain has picked up pace.

"You used to care about me like that," Cara reminds me.

I take a breath, deciding just how to blunt to be. "Well, I don't anymore," I say as I push the bedroom door closed in her face. Racking my hands through my hair, I turn to get dressed. I can't sleep knowing Jolie is out in some tent, cold and soaked, and threatened. I have to go find her. Tell her how much I fucked up by allowing Cara to stay with me. I might sound crazy, but what do I have to lose, except the funniest, coolest woman I've met in a decade?

When I come flying out of my room, Cara watches me as I stuff a sleeping bag in a rucksack, throwing my raincoat over me.

"You're going to her?" she scoffs, tone incredulous.

“Yes,” I confirm, before I stomp away down the stairs into the night, to find the woman I can’t take my mind from.

The wind is whipping the rain sideways, so hard that it stings my cheeks as I run through the town, squinting into the darkness for sight of her bright-yellow tent. Finally, I spot it near JP and Tucker’s place. Makes sense she’d stay near her sister.

I sprint the last few yards and call her name, not even ashamed of the desperation in my voice.

The tent unzips and she pokes her head out. “Jameson?” she says, obviously surprised at my arrival. “What’s happened?”

“Nothing. I just didn’t like you out here alone,” I pant as I step inside her small space, shedding my boots and covering them with my raincoat to keep the tent as dry as I can.

I toss my sleeping bag down.

Her face looks amused. “What’s that?” she nods.

“My sleeping bag,” I admit, cheeks heating at the implication.

We both chuckle nervously, silent conversation between us, untangling the meaning, but both clearly relieved.

“You’re ridiculous,” she accuses.

“No argument there.” I smile back at her, eager to grab her in my arms, to finish what we started last night.

I don’t have to wait long.

Jolie jumps into my lap like a spider monkey, practically knocking me over, and our mouths slot together. In seconds, I lower her to the sleeping bag and her hips are writhing on me as our tongues stroke eagerly. I peel her sweater off, and goosebumps rise over her flesh in the cold night air. She tugs at my shirt, and I oblige, our skin warming one another instantly.

As I lean down, taking her breast in my mouth, licking slowly over her pink bud, her moans spur me on. I lift her up, laying her on her back, and tug at her sweats. She shimmies, helping me strip her, then pushes at my long johns and frees me.

I fall between her legs, kissing her deeply, kissing her like I won't get to kiss her again. My cock aiming at her heat. She bucks her hips, forcing my tip into her. I let out a heavy breath as I fight to keep control of myself.

"We don't have protection," I whisper the warning. I'm not sure how much longer I can hold back from pressing inside her.

"We'll be careful," she says on an exhale.

I nod, though I'm not entirely sure I can be careful with her. I already feel close to busting and I'm not even inside her yet. Fuck. That thought makes it even harder to have any chill. Holding myself up, I pause, tip lined perfectly, ready to slide home.

"Are you sure?" I ask once more, hoping to hell she gives me the go ahead.

She's silent as her legs snake around my hips, and she tightens her grip, forcing me down into her. My eyes slam shut as I savor the sensation of her slick heat. I will them open to see her gorgeous face, eyes wide staring into mine.

When I'm fully seated inside her, I hold myself completely still, gaining my composure. I bring my mouth to hers, and I take my time kissing her. Finally, I feel a reasonable level of calmness, so I start to pump my hips in tiny micro thrusts, keeping myself buried as deep as she can take me.

Her chest heaves with her breathing, the cold from the night completely gone, as we heat the tent. Sweat breaks out on her brow. Her legs stay locked around my waist, and she matches my tiny thrusts with eager rocks of her own, her throaty moans escaping each time my crown hits deeps inside

her. I look down between us, almost losing it at the sight of her belly moving as my cock fills her completely.

“Fuck, Jolie,” I gasp, trying to hold it together. I’m not going to last long like this, so I scoop her up in my arms, rocking back on my ass, letting her straddle me once more. Her legs stay hooked as she rides me, deep, slow and grinding against me. Her full tits gently bouncing as she arches back, no doubt getting the best angle for herself. The sight is heavenly and my mind tingles in response... I’m practically dizzy from the imagery, the smell of her is absolutely intoxicating.

I plant a hand behind myself, getting a little more leverage to work my hips into her, hooking my free arm tight around her back, holding her down on me. I don’t ever want to let this woman go... that’s the thought my mind stays obsessed with... I want her here with me, not just because fucking her is goddam amazing, but she is awesome... strong, confident, humble.

She strokes the stubble on my jaw and our eyes meet.

“I want to keep you,” I blurt the words out, involuntarily, pausing my thrusts as I realize what I’ve just said.

Jolie doesn’t miss a beat though, leaning forward into me, embracing me as she slows her grind, muscles shaking she’s taking me so deep. I inhale the smell of our sex filling the small space, and fight the urge to propose on the spot little a total chump. I take her mouth in mine to keep myself from scaring her away completely. I’ve definitely lost my mind.

Shaky heavy breathing is all I can hear as I let my eyes fall shut, let myself really feel every slick inch of her silky warmth. It’s heaven. Nothing, no one, has ever felt so good.

Her breathing picks up suddenly, getting even more uneven, then I feel it... her muscles rippling and clenching around me as she rides out an orgasm that tugs on me.

“Fuck, Jolie, stop,” I groan while her legs hold me in their impossibly tight grip. My face twists up as I try to hold

back, but she's not relenting, and it all feels way too fucking good. The heat rolls through my spine and I feel myself spilling inside her as I shake and fight it. Her body replies to my release with even more convulsions, her hips still writhing on me in their deep grind.

"Fuck, I'm coming, shit," I gasp finally, even though my release is over. It's too late to pull out now. But she doesn't jump away from me, though she slows her pace, riding out her final waves of pleasure with me still buried deep inside her.

Finally, she shudders to a stop, leaning over my shoulder, holding the embrace, holding me inside her.

I wrap my arm once more around her, keeping us connected, and lay her on her back. The truth is, I don't want to end our connection. I stay buried inside her, even as I start to soften, as we work our tongues over each other. I inhale her breath, tasting her, memorizing her. Stroking her hair back off her sweat-slicked forehead.

The sound of the rain eventually comes back into focus. It's absolutely pouring outside now. I'm surprised it hasn't soaked through the tent. But I couldn't care less if it does. Being here in this moment, I'll endure any amount of discomfort for the unexplainable connection we have right now.

"That wasn't very careful," I say, fully appreciating our idiocy. "We're crazy." I release a heavy breath through my nose at the implication.

She nods, pulling up her pants. "I think Alaska has made me a little feral."

"Feral like me?" I growl, reaching for her underarms to give her a little tickle.

"Don't." She swats at my hands. "I'll pee my pants if you tickle me."

"Wouldn't be the first time."

"Shut it." She pinches at my nipple.



“You’re abusive. Were you like that as a big sister?”

“Oh yeah, I was a downright menace to Evie, but in my defense, I had to take care of her growing up cause our parents didn’t really give a crap about being parents, so it was necessary.”

“Shit, that’s harsh. My dad isn’t the cuddliest guy, but he is always there for me.”

“I got that vibe from him,” Jolie raises an eyebrow at me. “What about your mom?”

I shrug. “Never knew my mom. She was sort of passing through town, just long enough to have me and leave me with my dad.” Then it hits me. The reason I was really holding back. Am I just playing out the same story my dad lived? Would Jolie be some woman to give me a baby and then fuck off out of town.

“Hey.” Her hand interrupts my thoughts as she strokes my cheek. “What are you thinking about?”

“Nothing. Just maybe we should have been more careful is all. Wouldn’t want to trap you in this town.”

“To be honest, I feel a little trapped in L.A. I just have been surviving for so long. I know surviving means something different up here, but down there, I took the first job that paid decent that I could get, thanks to a friend with connections. Now Evie fell into that line of work too. I never bothered having a dream of what my life could be, and being up here, I’m seeing a whole different life...”

As Jolie pauses on an inhale, I feel like she’s holding back from me, like there’s something she wants to say. Instead, she just tugs me down around her like I’m a blanket.

# CHAPTER 11

## Jolie

“Great news!” Naomi smiles wide and jogs up to our crew as we have a way-too-late-in-my-opinion dinner slash group meeting in the greenhouse.

“You fixed it?” Chloe beams.

Naomi nods. “I effing fixed it! The guys are pretty much finished leveling the new site. We’ll be out of here in no time. I’ll remember to thank my dad now for all those hours spent in the garage growing up. I did not want to be trapped in butt-feck Alaska all winter.”

My stomach sinks at the words.

Everyone cheers, hugging Naomi. I manage to fix a smile on my face. I should be happy. For one, I have an apartment and job waiting for me back home. Evie and I are looking forward to living together again for the first time in years. I also know this means I can get myself to a much-needed plan-B pill, because I was insanely reckless last night. So why do I feel sick to my stomach over the good news?

I mean, maybe I’m rebounding from my ex... enjoying the fantasy of getting away from the toxic hustle of L.A., of reveling in the bounty of goodness that is Jameson and this wild landscape. But that’s ridiculous. Most likely, he only said such sweet words because he was getting some much-needed sex. I’m sure that’s it. Two people cannot fall for each other that fast. That would be bananas.

He’s known me a handful of days. Not enough time to really know each other. Plus, his ex is back in the picture, staying with him at his house... that must be some subconscious thought on his part. Letting her stay means opening the door for her, but then why come to me last night?

I'm all sorts of confused, but I don't have time to be. I need to get on with the job I'm paid for, because in all reality, we'll be leaving early I'm sure, just to be sure we can actually make it home without any more mishaps. It'd be crazy to expect to stay on with Jameson. It's been a fling. That's all.

Chloe's phone rings and she bounds away to take the call, Evie slides a plate of food in front of me. "I'm kind of bummed to be leaving, I sorta love it here."

A smile tugs my lips. "Me too, sis. Who would have guessed? But maybe someday we'll move somewhere like this."

"The guys though, they really are something special..." she trails off as she fills her mouth with a forkful of spinach.

I stab my fork into the salad on her plate to stop her taking another bite. "Is something happening between you and one of the guys you're staying with?"

She stops mid-chew and her cheeks blush, telling me I'm right.

"I wouldn't quite put it that way," she says cryptically, shoving my fork away in a sort of mini fork-sword-fight.

I keep my hold on her. "Then, how *would* you put it?"

Her hands plunge to her hips. "You guys were loud last night, you know that? We could hear you inside, and that was over the pounding of the rain on the tin roof."

Now it's my turn to blush. "You're fucking with me," I test her.

She smiles, nodding. "Yeah, but those red cheeks tell me I'm right. JP said he saw Jameson leaving your tent this morning though."

"So, we're both keeping this close to the chest?"

"I'll spill if you spill. But you can't judge," she offers.

I think it over, not sure if I want to know. I'm also not sure if I am ready to admit how risky I was last night. I decide

against it, hooking my arm over her shoulders. “Let’s get to work. We need to send the video files via the satellite connection before bed.”

Before we part ways for the night, Chloe pulls us aside to tell us about our arrangements for getting home.

“The producers and I have reviewed our footage so far, and we agreed it’s enough to make the pilot. Maybe a stretch it into a mini-series if there’s interest. So that’s that. They are sending a chopper tomorrow since the platform will be ready by then.”

“Thank fuck for that,” Naomi sighs in relief.

“I don’t see how you want to leave. It’s like paradise up here,” Evie says wistfully.

“Ha!” Naomi barks. “Pretty soon, these guys will be buried under a dozen feet of snow, not leaving their homes for weeks, eating the same old food from a can all winter. Hard pass.”

Beth pats Evie on the shoulder. “I’m with you, girl, I love the wilderness.”

“Love it or hate it, we need to be ready to go tomorrow. When you wake up, make sure you pack first thing. We’ll grab a bite, say our thanks and goodbyes, and hike to the spot,” Chloe concludes.

I can’t help the pang in my chest at her words though. I should be stoked, but I’m dreading my return. Sure, a perfect seventy-two degrees and sunny days year-round was my dream, but I didn’t realize it came with traffic, smog, and self-centered people. But I need to let my fantasy of being trapped on this island with Jameson die. Tomorrow, we head out. It’s over.

I hoof it to my tent, trying not to hope too much that he comes by again tonight. I’m all sorts of fucked-up about this. I know there’s no such thing as soul mates, but there is just something about Jameson that feels different.

I have to pinch myself to get my mind off of him, which isn't easy, because of course, there he is, walking toward us, Cara in tow. My stomach does a little flip at the sight. Jameson is so classically handsome; they are a perfect match by anyone's standards.

"I heard you're all heading out tomorrow?" Jameson says casually as he approaches.

All eyes steal a glance in my direction. "That's right. Out of your hair for good," I say, faking a smile. "No more pee pants to wash, sorry, big guy." I manage to reach out and softly punch his shoulder, just to prove how friendly and casual I am.

The frown on Jameson's lips shouldn't bring me as much satisfaction as it does. "That's a shame. We've grown used to having you all around."

"Underfoot is more like it," Cara adds with a huff, leaning on Jameson's shoulder.

He shifts away from her, just as Nina strolls up to us, looking tired. She should be in bed resting by now, but today has been quite the frenzy of activity. "I can't believe you're really leaving," she sighs, leaning down to give Beth a half-hug. "If any of you ever want to move here, we'll set you all up."

Beth laughs lightly. "Honestly, I might take you up on that someday. This place is heaven on earth."

"I agree completely. You all have something so special up here," Evie adds.

Chloe chimes in, "Once everyone sees on TV what a strong community you have up here, you may have to fight the newcomers off with a stick."

"That's a double-edged sword for sure. We can't afford to take care of anyone who isn't handy, but we could sure use some more skills in our corner. Naomi, what you did with that engine was amazing," Nina compliments.

Naomi chokes on a sip of water at the words. “No offense, but I know a life of hard labor isn’t the life for me.”

We all laugh at that as Cara adds, “Girl, same. This place is brutal. I’m so glad you got the landing pad sorted out, so I can get home.”

I narrow my eyes at the woman, who not one day ago told me she hoped to win back her ex. What is she playing at? My protective drive kicks in, and I want to snap at her, tell her to leave this good man alone, to back off. Somehow though, I manage to keep my mouth shut.

“Can I come by to say goodbye tonight?” Jameson asks me suddenly, the whole table going quiet and wide-eyed. Definitely one of those *you could cut the tension with a knife* moments.

“Uh, sure,” I mumble, looking down at my lap. Of course, I want him to stop by, but I’m also unreasonably burnt that his ex has staked her claim over him. It’s obvious now that Alaska brings out the territorial animalistic side of me. For better or worse.

# CHAPTER 12

## Jameson

“If you’re all set here, I’m going to head out for the night,” I tell Cara. Fuck did I mess all this up. Wasted two days I could have been having with Jolie by being a nice guy. What. An. Idiot.

“Wait, baby, please don’t go to her. She’s leaving tomorrow anyway. I’m staying on.”

“What do you mean? You just said earlier you were leaving,” I question her.

She tilts her head, searching my face. “Only if you want me to.”

“I want you to,” I say plainly.

“Don’t say that, Jamie. I’m sorry for the past, okay? I was immature then. I made a mistake. I’ve realized that it’s not so bad up here. There are no guys better than you,” she pleads.

My stomach churns, because I hate to hurt anyone, but I’m going to have to shut her down. I’m not leaving any room for confusion on her part. “See that’s just it though. There are better girls than you. Jolie is an example of one. I barely know her, and I can tell you she has more honor in her left pinky than you have in your whole body. I will never, ever, take you back. You’re wasting your time. If that’s why you’ve weaseled your way into my house, then you can see yourself out.”

“Fine!” Cara shouts, face quickly turning a bright shade of red as she stomps past me, scooping up her bag in one swift motion. Stopping at the top of the stairs, she looks back at the large pot of maple syrup cooling on the counter, and swats it. As if in slow motion, it flies across the room, spilling a gallon of hard won sticky sweet goo all over the wood floors.

I hold back a growl. I needed that stock for the winter. And now my floors are going to attract endless pests and

rodents. There's only so much you can do to clean off syrup from the grooves of an unfinished wood floor.

With steam coming from my ears, I'm already mopping up the mess as she slams the door.

This is what I get for letting a snake into the hen house. I should have known. As much as I desperately want to run to Jolie, I need to at least get the cleanup started before it seeps too deeply into the porous wood.

By the time I finally get it under control, I debate just letting Jolie alone. She's leaving tomorrow, forever, anyway.

I don't even know what she wants out of life. How selfish that I never asked her. Does she want to be a camera person forever? Does she have other goals and dreams? Does she want kids and a husband someday? I should have asked her all those things and more. Whatever her answers are, I want to give it all to her. Maybe I would leave Port Providence for her. I think the guys are ready, they need to move on with their lives too and I've just been holding them back here. That's crazy though. I don't even know if she feels the same way.

I'm being a fool chasing after an unobtainable woman. Maybe this syrupy mess is a blessing in disguise. Another night with Jolie will just remind me of everything I can't have.



# CHAPTER 13

## Jolie

As we lift off from the freshly stamped clearing in the helicopter, it feels like I'm leaving my left lung behind, like I can't breathe properly knowing that I never got to say goodbye to Jameson.

I had lain awake half the night last night hoping he would come stay with me, but he didn't. Maybe he made up with Cara after all. Or maybe he came to his senses and realized there was no point to it all. I will be home in my bed later tonight, so what good will it do us to keep crushing on each other? No good. I never expected to go home with a broken heart, but it feels like I'm leaving a little piece of myself behind. How could I let myself rebound so damn hard?

All I can do is decide that it has been amazing to get to know a little more about the guy. To know there are men like him in the world. It gives me a shred of hope for my future.

Evie looks equally as unhappy as me, while Beth and Naomi look a little relieved. Chloe as usual is beaming, because she's always beaming. I look down at the little sparse town of Port Providence as we fly away. It gets smaller and smaller in the distance until it's gone.

The best thing about the whole experience though is that for the first time in my life, I'm questioning what I want my life to be like. Do I even like being a camera person? Do I even want to keep living in L.A.?

I would never want to leave Evie behind, but she's an independent woman, and someday we may go our own ways. For now, I reach out and squeeze her hand. Our eyes meet and hers are filled with tears. We seem to have a silent conversation that says we're both sad to be leaving, but maybe it's just in my head.

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The cab drops Evie and me off at the apartment. It looks like a concrete jungle made mostly of garbage. I already miss the wild landscape in Port Providence. The towering pine trees, the endless blue sky, the sweet scent of fresh air...the billions of tiny stars. Crazy thoughts of uprooting my entire life for a guy I barely know tease my brain. But that's not a good idea. That's how I ended up in L.A. in the first place. Jameson was definitely a nice fling for a few weeks though. I won't be mad at myself for enjoying him.

"Is it just me, or is this place a dump?" Evie nudges me in the ribs while I turn in the key in the lock.

I stifle my frustration, seeing that there is still a stack of boxes that my ex hasn't got to yet. I didn't want to have to see him again. Maybe this was some sort of purposeful torture for me.

Shaking off the negative energy, I try for a light tone. "Compared to the shack you were just staying in... this place is luxury. It has air conditioning, a semi-reliable air conditioner, a WIFI signal..."

Evie pushes past me as I swing open the door. It's largely empty inside, because most of the furniture belonged to my ex. "We'll get stuff eventually," I say preemptively, because I know what Evie's thinking.

She gives me a look that calls my bullshit. "There's not even a couch, sis."

"Let's just wash the plane off of us and get ready to battle the traffic in a few hours. We have to be on time to this pre-screening, or so Chloe says. You shower first," I tell my little sister as I head into my bedroom, which is now just a mattress on the floor with no sheets. How kind of him to leave it for me. I guess this is what I get for never caring about decorating. But then again, how much does a woman need in her life? I have Evie, and a decent job, a grocery store that's stocked all year round...

“You haven’t unpacked yet? What have you been doing the last twenty minutes?” Evie’s voice startles me. Her hair is wrapped up in a towel, steam billowing from the bathroom. How long was I daydreaming?

“I thought I’d let you pick a side of the closet first. We should see if we can find some bunk beds at a thrift store later. It’ll be like when we were little.”

Evie rolls her eyes, walking around me to a stack of boxes labeled ‘Evie’s Clothes’.

“For the record, I loved it in Port Providence. I could totally see myself moving there.”

“It was something special...” I sigh as I head to the bathroom, though I bet like me, she’s missing a guy... but it’s hard to say.

Maybe the warm shower with good water pressure, unlike Jameson’s place with the little trickle of warm water that came from the shower spout, will wash away this yucky feeling I have, like I’ve forgotten something really important.

When I’m finally showered with mostly dry hair, Evie and I start the frustrating battle with L.A. traffic that will take more than an hour, since everyone needs to inch their way around town at the same time. The blaring car horns seem to echo out in my ears today, bouncing around my head like sirens warning me away.

“Was there always this much noise in L.A.?” I laugh, turning up the radio to drown some of it out.

“Hey, we have an email from Chloe,” Evie says as she studies her phone.

“And?”

“It’s about the meeting today. She’s giving us a heads up. They loved the early footage, and they already want to expand it into a full series.”

“Shit!” I slam on my brakes just in time, stopping just inches from the car in front of me.

Evie stares at me, worry in her eyes. “Did you forget how to drive?”

“Sorry, that’s good news,” I say as I adjust my grip on the wheel and inch forward once more.

“I bet the thought of returning to the guy you like has a certain appeal. And before you can argue, know that I only know this because I feel the same way. I know it might sound crazy, but I loved being around Tucker and JP. I miss them, if I’m being honest. I want to go back and spend more time with them.”

I work to fix my face, keeping my expression neutral because I’m still not totally sure what she’s talking about. Are they good friends? Are they all lovers? In either case, I need to say the big sister things right now. Show my unconditional support. “That’s awesome, sis. I think they’re both great guys. And if I’m being honest, I wish there was a way to see where things go with Jameson, but for starters, he didn’t even show up to say goodbye to me. And right now, I can’t date long distance when the guy doesn’t even have a cell phone. And you do you, but you know I’ve already made that mistake once before, stepping into a guy’s life, moving across the country for someone... it made it that much harder to get out of the relationship, because I couldn’t easily break up. I depended on him for so much. Jameson would be too much like that for me. I’d depend on him in an even more intense way, for water and food and shelter... that’s just not who I am.”

Now that I’m saying these things out loud, I realize how true they are. I’ve dodged a bullet. That’s going to be my new mantra.

Evie pats my arm reassuringly. “I think you got that story a little mixed up, but I won’t argue with you. Anyway, you’ll go back with me, right? If we get offered more filming time up there?”

“I should say no...” I warn her.

She laughs. “Yeah, but we both know since I asked, you’ll say yes.”

When we get to the office part of the studio, we rush in just as Chloe is lowering the lights to start the screening. We’ll finally get to see our work, organized into a logical story. This is always my favorite part. And, it’s a huge help having some sense of what shots were used and the overall arc of the story, so that we can help out as we film in the future.

A beautiful scene of the Alaskan wilderness pans over the screen as Jameson’s words boom out, “In nature, you don’t kill a bear just because a bear is a threat. Sure, you protect yourself, and if the bear comes at you in attack, you have to kill it, but you don’t go out looking to kill all bears just because bears attack people.”

A moment of confusion clouds my brain as I suddenly realize something... these words, this conversation, this was supposed to be the part where I turned off my camera. I could have sworn I did. Right? Maybe. I think so.

As I watch the scenes unfold, my stomach flips in anticipation, mind racing with plans to beg for them to cut the dialogue, my fears are only solidified.

“Returning to Port Providence made sense to me. It was my hometown, but it was also a way to punish myself, because living here is hard work.” My vision goes fuzzy as I process what this means. They have the intimate words Jameson meant for only me to hear. *Shit*.

Each line of dialog, cut by the editors to suit their needs, is like a knife to the chest. I’m sure now that I’ve already betrayed Jameson more deeply than is forgivable. I’ve captured his deepest darkest private thoughts and shown them to the world. I’ve made him believe this conversation would stay between us.

The room suddenly feels too hot. And too small.

I feel sick.

By the time the episode draws to a close, and his words ring out, “When I was in the marines, I killed a lot of people,” I jump from my seat and run to the toilet.

# CHAPTER 14

## Jameson

Of all the regrets I've had in my life, knowing that I didn't go to Jolie to say goodbye is up there.

"Stop sulking already." JP slaps my back as we check our traps. "Anyway, I have some news on that front from Evie last night."

"Oh yeah?" I ask, holding myself back from getting too hopeful. "Wait, how are you talking to Evie?"

"She left me and Tucker her satellite phone, so we've kept in touch."

A pang of jealousy tears into my chest, wishing I could speak with Jolie.

"And?"

JP gives me a devilish grin. "The show was picked up. They're coming back in spring to film again."

His words are the ones I've longed to hear since the moment I woke up to the sound of the chopper flying overhead, taking Jolie away from me. I fight the smile that tugs at my lips.

"That's cool."

JP scoffs and heaves his shoulder into mine. "Don't play coy. You fell for that girl, and now this is your chance to play for keeps."

"Can you tell her I'm sorry for not stopping by to say goodbye?"

"You left her hanging?" JP gasps, eyes popping wide.

I give a curt tilt of my head. "Yeah, long story."

"You didn't hook up with Cara, did you?"

“Hell no,” I bark the words. “She spilled a gallon of syrup on my wood floors.”

“And that couldn’t wait?” he scoffs.

“Not unless I wanted to live with bugs and critters all winter. I had to get it cleaned up and it took me half the night.”

JP punches my shoulder. “And the other half of the night?”

I rake my hand through my hair. “I don’t know. I got in my head. Didn’t want to bother her. I fucked up.”

“You’re an idiot.”

“I know,” I admit as we collect our haul of critters and stomp through the freshly fallen snow.

I can’t stay too distracted throughout the day though. I need to focus so I don’t get myself killed out here. One stupid mistake could mean my life. Not that it’s easy to stop fantasizing about Jolie, wrapped up in my arms again. Damn, it’s going to be a brutally long winter while I wait for her return.

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Even though this is one of the shortest winters on record in Port Providence, it feels long as hell. I swear I pretty much wear myself raw thinking of Jolie. I wonder all winter how much she thinks about me. Maybe she is dating someone new by now. It has been three and half long months.

As every foot of snow melts, I torture myself equally between fantasies of asking Jolie to marry me, and finding out she’s over me. Or maybe worse still, that she’s found another job and won’t be back in spring to film. How could I let her slip through my fingers? That’s the thought I play through my mind every few hours.

It certainly doesn’t help that Evie never seems to mention Jolie to JP and Tucker when they have their weekly phone call. It is radio silence.



That is until today, when the first mail delivery of the spring season comes with a letter from Jolie addressed to me.

My heart instantly pounds in my chest with anticipation as I race home to read it.

Sitting down on the edge of my bed, I carefully peel open the envelope as if it's something sacred. It'd be cheesy to smell the letter, right? After all the distance it's traveled, it can't possibly smell like her, can it? I give it a sniff anyway and it may be my mind playing tricks on me, but I swear it does, somehow.

I notice then that the envelope is stamped December 12th. It's an old letter. I wonder if she realized it won't reach me for months. I wonder why there aren't more letters. Maybe it's a break-up letter. Maybe she felt burnt that I hadn't shown up to say goodbye?

Or, maybe she thought I didn't write back? No, she's smarter than that. She would surely realize mail can't be delivered if the chopper can't land all winter.

Unfolding the paper, I hold my breath, mind racing over all the things this letter might say. Here goes nothing.

*Dear Jameson,*

*I don't even know how to begin writing this letter.*

I pause on those words, looking away, steeling myself. This is clearly a bad letter. I can do this though. I've been through worse. And finally putting her to rest will surely take the sting out of my chest.

*I want to start by telling you that our short time together meant a lot to me. Maybe I should have just treated it like a fling, but the truth is, I caught feelings for you. That's what makes all of this so much harder, because there is something I found out that I have to tell you. I hope that you'll forgive me, but I completely understand if you won't.*

*I also need you to know that what happened was completely unintentional. The moment I realized what had happened, I*

*was literally sick to my stomach. Anyway, as I always told Evie, it's best to just rip the band-aid right off, so here goes.*

*That night when you opened up to me, I thought I had turned off the camera, but it turns out that I didn't. I accidentally captured our conversation, and the editors used that conversation heavily in the pilot episode. I begged them not to, up to the point that they threatened to fire me. I even hired an attorney to see if there was any way to stop them, but I couldn't fix it. I'm so sorry for the pain this will cause you. I completely understand that you won't want to see me again. I will stay out of your way should I ever return to Port Providence.*

*Jolie*

What. The. Fuck. My adrenaline starts beating widely in my chest as I crumple the letter in my hands. I whip the paper at the ground, hot air shooting from my nostrils. I asked her for one thing, not to film that conversation. I don't open up to people—ever. But with her? I felt comfortable. That was my mistake.

I'm so fiery mad, I barely register the sounds of someone in my house, until Miles is standing in my doorway, looking panicked. Shoving Jolie from my thoughts, I shoot up from the bed.

“What's wrong?”

“Baby's coming.” His lips pulls up in an uneasy smile.

I grab him up in a hug, clapping my hand maybe a little too hard on his back. “Let's go, brother.”

Taking only a second to grab my medical bag, a major perk of my military training in this very moment, especially for the residents of Port Providence who lack any medical center, I follow Miles to his house.

Nina's deep breaths are loud as I enter, but she pauses to smile warmly at me. “There you are. Are you ready for this?”

I snort a chuckle from my nose. “Of course, I am. We’ve got this.”

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It may be weird to some people, to deliver the baby of your best friend, but for me, it is magical. It is just the beautiful and miraculous thing I need to get my mind off of Jolie, but as I hold the baby in my arms while Nina and Miles sleep, the moment is bittersweet. How many times that winter have I imagined holding my and Jolie’s imaginary child in my arms, beautiful aqua eyes staring up at me.

That’s what we’re here for, at least, that’s how I see it playing out with the nature of things. The circle of life. Building a family and teaching your kids the skills you want them to have as they move through the world, trying to make it a better place as they go along. Doing it with Jolie was my fantasy all winter. Until now. Now my hopes of that are just a pile of ash.

Looking down at the sweet face of this baby, I wonder if maybe I am thinking too harshly about Jolie. She could have just not mentioned it to me, it’s not like I would’ve seen the show. She knows how I feel about TV. But it seems like she fought for me when she realized her mistake. Come to think of it, maybe it wasn’t intentional. Maybe she really is torn up about it.

“What’s this crease about?”

My head snaps up at the sound of Nina’s voice. I realize how tightly my brow is furrowed and relax it.

“It’s Jolie,” I whisper.

Nina smiles softly. “You want to make beautiful aqua-eyed babies with her?”

“No.” I whisper sharply. “Well, yes. But no. She betrayed me. Even though I sort of think it was an accident.”

“I saw the footage,” Nina admits. “Yesterday. A copy came in the mail. I was wondering why you’d say all that on

camera, but then I realized it was only voice over. I was hoping it was an accident. Jolie seems like a really genuine person.”

I purse my lips, thinking it over. “You know me well.”

“I do,” Nina agrees, a proud look on her face.

“What do I do?” I ask her as I stroke the baby’s little chubby cheek with my thumb.

“I can’t tell you how to feel, Jamie. This is your life, and you have to live it. Just make sure you live it, don’t just survive it.”

“Stop being wise,” I groan as Nina lifts her baby from my arms.

She plants a kiss on my forehead. “Go get some sleep, Uncle Jamie.”

With a nod, I tuck my hands in my pockets and slip out into the cold night.

# CHAPTER 15

## Jolie

“I can’t believe we’re here,” I clench my jaw through the nausea as the chopper sets us down in Port Providence.

“You’ll be fine. You got this, sis,” Evie says into the headset. Her words are cryptic, only she and I know my truth right now. The rest of the crew has no idea how involved we are with the guys we met last fall.

I snarl my lip at her in reply as we unbuckle our seat belts and slide from the aircraft. I’m scared, because Evie has told me she plans on staying in Port Providence after we finish filming, if all goes as planned, with JP and Tucker. They’ve been talking about the possibility all winter.

Admittedly, I have a little pang of jealousy over her plans. I do wish I could say that I’ve fallen in love here and am staying here forever with Jameson. But I know that’s not possible.

After I wrote to him, I knew he wouldn’t get the letter for a long time, but it has been a few weeks since Evie confirmed to me that the mail had started again, that JP suspects Jameson in fact got the letter and is mad. Jameson didn’t try to call or write back, so I know where we stand. Things are over. I can’t blame him. I’m the actual worst human for letting our private conversation end up on national TV.

But it doesn’t matter for me. I finally know what’s next in my life and I can’t wait. Just a few more details to shake out, like finding a job in Colorado. I already have a place to stay, at least. Not despairing yet though, I have faith in myself and a plan. I’ve done harder things before, like raise a fourteen-year-old sister when I was just eighteen.

At least it will be a fun four weeks with Chloe, Beth, and Evie. Naomi got herself reassigned to a local production

as soon as we returned, which is no surprise, since she hated it here.

“Arriving in the morning is the way to go,” Beth rejoices as we follow her down the new trail to town. There’s a lot of daylight left, which is a much better way to arrive than last time, right before dusk in a place we’d never been before.

“It’s so beautiful in the spring,” Chloe chirps excitedly, adjusting the camera on her shoulder as she gets some extra footage of the hike in.

“Do you hear that?” I ask the group, stopping in my tracks. “Something’s in the woods.”

The crew pauses to listen as another snapping branch cracks in the silence.

We all share a look of worry as Beth’s grip tightens on her holstered gun.

“*Rarrrr!*” we hear a shout and spin to see Tucker running from the woods, arms up in the air, like a crazy jackass. Of course, Evie is in stitches as he buries her in a hug. They rock side to side in their embrace before breaking apart.

“That’s a good way to get yourself shot,” Beth scorns, half-joking, half-warning.

“I’ve been shot already, and it hurts like a bitch,” Tucker says proudly.

Chloe, Beth, and I walk ahead as the pair chat excitedly behind us. Soon enough, the little structures of the town are visible, and my nerves start swimming.

I’m not sure I should have come back here, but I have unfinished business. I need to talk to Jameson one more time, and it’s not going to be easy. I can’t live with this hanging over my head. I have to make things right and apologize in person.

“There you are!” A familiar voice calls out. It’s Nina, with a baby wrapped tightly across her chest. The sight makes my throat tight. She’s close to Jameson, so I expect her to slice me in half any minute.

“Nina!” Beth embraces them both. “And baby Bethany. I can’t believe you picked that name.”

“Well, you did save her life, so it felt only fitting.” Nina kisses the knitted hat on the baby’s head.

Beth shakes a hand dismissively. “It was just a cup of tea, I’m sure you were going to be fine either way.”

“Stop, you’re a miracle worker as far as I’m concerned. Oh, and you should know that West has been complaining nonstop about making room for you to stay with him again, which is a miracle as well, because we all told him it wasn’t necessary, and we all know his complaints mean he obviously loves your company.”

Beth gives a skeptical look as Nina turns to me, tone changing from friendly to guarded. “And how have you been, Jolie?”

“All good here. Happy as a clam. Bethany is beautiful.” I plaster the best smile I can muster on my face, but truthfully, I feel like I’m walking on hot coals.

“Cute, and a handful,” Nina chuckles as she brushes a finger across the baby’s rosy cheeks. I hope she won’t keep you up all night, but I have to warn you, she likes to cry a bit.”

“No worries here. I appreciate you letting me crash.” I was honestly shocked when Chloe told me of Nina’s invite. I would have assumed she hated me. Heck, maybe she does, and just wants to keep an eye on me.

“Of course. But um, I’m not sure how to say this, so I’ll just come out with it. Jameson doesn’t want to be around for filming, so he’s on an extended hunting trip for a few weeks. Not that I think you care either way, but I just felt like I should tell you up front.” Nina looks down as she tells me this, and I keep my eyes fixed on her face, as if I might be able to read some useful detail.

“Thanks,” I manage to say, holding my expression as steady as I can while my heart sinks to my gut. I’d really hoped I’d get a chance to talk to him about everything, but it’s

just as well. I have to respect that he doesn't want to see me—  
no matter how much it twists my insides into mush.



# CHAPTER 16

## Jameson

It isn't a total lie, I was on a long hunting trip, scheduled to come back a few days after the film crew arrives. Instead, I come back a day early and hide at home. I just don't know if I can face Jolie. If I see her, I might forgive her, and I don't think I should. My mom was someone I couldn't count on, Cara was someone I couldn't count on. Jolie is now in that camp too. As Opal says, when someone shows you who you are, you best believe them.

Of course, I can't keep away though. I'm weak. Or a glutton for pain. I make my way high onto the hill where I can use my binoculars like a total creep and peek at Jolie as she heads to the greenhouse. It looks like she's assigned to film Tucker as he works with Opal in the greenhouse today. There is a lot of soil and compost to be turned over, and Opal contributes her knowledge, not her muscle.

When Jolie disappears into the greenhouse, I lower my binoculars, and jump with a startle.

"Get a good look?" JP laughs, slapping my back.

"Remember what happened last time you snuck up on me?" I grab JP into a headlock while the red in my cheeks clears. He struggles against me, whacking my thigh with his fist until I give.

He coughs to clear his throat from my tight grip as he straightens. "Yeah, I remember. You told us to go west and then you forgot which way was west. That one was on you bud. Still stings sometimes." JP makes a show of rubbing the scar from where my bullet grazed his hip. "You're a shit shot by the way."

"I could have gotten a second in if I needed to." I wink at him. It was an embarrassing moment I wish we could forget,

but I have to own it. I hurt my guy, and as the leader, that's on me.

"Why don't you just talk to her, you big baby." JP kneels next to the deer I nabbed a few miles back. With a quick motion, he pulls my arrow free, wiping the blood on the hem of his shirt before placing it back in my quiver.

I squat to join him with a sigh. "Just let it be."

"Why didn't you gut this thing where you got it?" he questions.

"You sure have a lot of opinions for a guy I just had in a headlock," I warn him.

He rolls his eyes before plunging the knife into the deer's belly, making a slit for cleaning.

"I'm just saying—"

I shoot him a look that stops him midsentence.

"You totally are in love with her," he accuses me.

"What part of *leave it be* didn't you get?"

"Yup. That confirms it. You'd only be this bitchy if you loved her. Come to dinner tonight at Nina and Miles's place. The whole crew is going to be there."

"Maybe," I give in, if only to get him off my back so we can work in peace.

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By six o'clock, I'm exhausted. I dry off in front of the big picture window in the living room as I watch a woodpecker try to a drill hole into my home.

Am I really going to this dinner? I sigh, knowing I probably am. Maybe it won't be as awkward as I think. I'll either feel like a soft warm bag of goo when I see her, my anger melting away, or I'll stab a fork into the dining room table at the sight of her. Definitely one or the other. I'm not sure I even have a middle ground anymore.

As I get close to Miles and Nina's place, I sort of start to feel like an ass. Like my anger was unjustified. I'm not being a very level-headed man. Shit, so we're going soft and gooey. It's stupid, but I'm good at holding a grudge, the anger felt normal to me. I wasn't ready to let it end.

The chatter is loud as I approach the door, but when I swing it open, there are ten sets of eyes silently staring at me for a beat, before Nina beelines for me to grab my coat. The room returns to its raucous conversation. Tucker, JP, Evie, and Jolie chat on one side of the room, while Beth holds baby Bethany, West is close by her, looking agitated as usual. Chloe has a big smile on her face as she describes something in deep detail to a frowning Henry. Miles bounces around the groups offering fresh drinks as Nina leans her arm up on my shoulder, which makes for an awkward stretch, because I'm at least a foot taller than her.

"Glad you could make it." She winks. "What can I get you to drink?"

I watch Jolie move a piece of hair from her shoulder as she steals a glance in my direction. God, she's beautiful. Seeing her in person after all this time is like a sucker punch. The binoculars didn't do her justice. Tonight she's wearing soft looking black pants and a big cream-colored sweater. She looks so damn cuddly I just want to scoop her up and... *shit*, no. Stop that.

"Just water," I hear myself grumble, which sparks an eye roll from Nina. Apparently around me today, eye rolling is going to be a thing.

"You missed dinner." Nina glances over her shoulder. "Fix you a plate?"

"I already ate," I call after her as she disappears into the kitchen.

Evie stalks over to me then with Jolie in tow and claps me on the back. "Miles and Nina promised us a bonfire,

maybe you and Jolie should head outside and get it started for us.”

Jolie gives me a soft and hopeful look with her deep aqua eyes. Damn those eyes. She sucks her ruby lips into her mouth and a little bit of her tongue pokes out as she wets them. I feel my body heat in response. That’s it then. I’m definitely not mad. And worse still, I probably need to apologize for being such an ass about her confession.

“All right,” I agree, turning on my heel quickly before I say something stupid. Opening the cabin door, I hold it for Jolie. She shuffles past me, and I pick up on her intoxicating aroma. It’s the smell of floral and citrus and everything unexplainable that’s so uniquely her.

“So, how have you been?” I say like a total idiot as I grab up an armload of wood from the stockpile.

“I’ve been good actually. I just want to say, I’m really, *really* sorry, Jameson.” She places a hand on my forearm as I drop the load of logs into the fire pit. I freeze like a caught animal at her touch.

“Jolie\_” I start and then trail off, unsure of what to say. Finally, I find the words. “I was wrong to be mad at you for even one second. I’m sorry.”

“You have every right to hate me forever. I would completely understand,” she says as the corner of her perfect lips lift into a little half smirk.

I turn to face her fully, unable to stop myself from rubbing my knuckles over her soft cheek, stealing this little touch that I probably don’t deserve. She leans into my hand, sending a fresh waft of her scent into my nostrils. “God, you smell good,” I say, half-growling as I grit my teeth.

She flutters her lashes at me as our eyes meet again.

“Come stay with me tonight,” I hear myself say, in a tone more begging than I mean it to be.

A serious look crosses her face that sends my heart into my stomach.

“Nothing has to happen, I just... I just need you in my space, if that makes any sense.”

Jolie’s face softens and she gives me a little nod of agreement. “I can do that.”

I want to ask her so many more questions, to find out where we stand. Hell, I want to do more than that. I want to haul her off over my shoulder and claim her. To kiss every inch of her until dawn, until we’re starved and have to stop. So much for the chill I promised myself I’d have.

“They haven’t even started the fire!” Henry complains loudly as the cacophony of voices spill out from the cabin.

JP gives me a look that says he tried to hold back the masses. I shrug in reply and crouch down to light the fire. I wonder how long we have to stay here before I can steal Jolie away. I know if I do it too soon, everyone will complain. And after all, I want her to enjoy her night back with the good company. But I’m definitely being more quiet than usual as I watch her chat easily with the group.

Our two worlds fit so nicely together... my marines, her L.A. film crew... who would have guessed how good we all look together? It’s clear to me now that we were all missing out up here. Not just in terms of sex, because that’s a given, but just in the beauty that is the company of light-hearted people who don’t take anything too seriously. Who know how to have a good time. Jolie, Evie, Chloe, Beth... they all balance us out. I do wish they were here to stay, but at least we get them for four more weeks.

# CHAPTER 17

## Jolie

It feels so good to be in Jameson's bed again. So right. Except that nagging guilt I feel lying here with him not knowing the truth.

That I'm just over three months' pregnant.

So, yeah. That's happening.

However, I can't tell him yet, I need to see where this goes, to know if there is a real relationship, untainted. Just his true feelings for *me* alone. That's what I need to see. That's my assurance that I'll be doing the right thing if he invites me stay. Not out of some obligation that he'll come to regret.

If he doesn't, I have a plan. I'm moving back to my hometown in Colorado where my best friend lives with her two kids, freshly divorced from her husband. As soon as I told her my news, she invited me out, and it just makes sense to go. We get along great, and we'll be able to help each other out for a while. I don't have a job yet, but I have a job prospect lined up with a film company that specializes in selling generic nature shots. So there's hope.

"I can practically see the thoughts swimming in your eyes," Jameson hums softly at me as we face each other in bed. I think it's best to keep our hands off each other for a bit, to see where this thing goes, if there's more than just a physical connection. He easily honored that request. Hell, he was the one who suggested it earlier tonight. "Wish I knew what they were."

"There's a lot on my mind," I admit. "I'm actually planning to leave L.A. soon."

His eyes widen in clear surprise. "Where to?"

I swear there's a shake in his voice that makes me feel wanted.

“I haven’t fully decided yet, but I know I’m over that city. My experience here definitely shaped me. I want to live somewhere more like this...” I trail off to keep myself from saying what I really want to say.

“Good to know,” Jameson says carefully, keeping his true feelings under his hat too.

“What about you? Anything new to report over the winter?”

He chuckles softly. “There isn’t a lot new in Port Providence, but there are sometimes calamities to report. Thankfully, it was an uneventful winter, other than me delivering Bethany.”

My eyes pop wide. “Holy smokes. You actually delivered a baby? That’s incredible.”

“It was a lot grosser than I expected,” he admits, and we both laugh at the mental images as our hands clasp together between us.

“Holding hands is such a simple pleasure. I really took it for granted. This feels amazing,” I tell him as I give his hands a squeeze.

“Don’t ever tell anyone I said this, but it really does.”

“I hope you aren’t too shocked to hear that I’ve held my fair share of hands, but I like yours best. They’re like sandpaper.” I stroke over the rough pads.

“You’re really good at making insults sound like compliments,” he scoffs, pulling his hands away and swatting me as I reach for them.

“Hey, that *was* a compliment. Give them back!” I protest.

He holds his arms up, keeping his hands out of my reach. “I will, if you tell me a secret.”

“A secret?” I parrot.

He nods. “Yup. One secret. Something deep, dark, and humiliating.”

I search my brain for ideas, laughing as I think of one. “All right. I have the perfect humiliation story. Can you handle a story about a period?”

“You heard me say earlier how I delivered a whole human baby, right?”

*Fair enough.*

“All right. But you asked for it.”

I pause to give him a chance to back out before breaking into the tale. “I was hanging with some friends swimming all day, and I didn’t realize I had gotten my period. So, we’re riding home from the lake in my friend’s golf cart, and the seats are white pleather and when I stood up out of the seat, the wet from my bathing suit plus the blood made it look like I had spilled fruit punch all over the white seats. I tried quickly to mop it up with my towel, but I was just spreading it around...” I trail off with a shudder, watching as Jameson’s eyes fill with pity.

“Teenage years were just weird,” he shakes his head. “When I had my first kiss, I went in so fast that I knocked a tooth loose. Who still has baby teeth at sixteen you ask? I did. And yeah, she got my blood in her mouth...”

“Golly that’s nastier than my story. You trying to outdo me?” I scrunch my nose at him, trying my best not to tackle his handsome ass down on this bed and ride him. My hormones are going all sorts of crazy right now, and this hunk of man meat has me going, hard.

“Are we going to compare gory stories all night? Because, remember, I was once a teenage boy *and* a soldier in the barracks. I think I might win.”

“I’m not sure I want to know all those details.” I scrunch my nose. “How about tell me more about growing up here. What was it like? Where did you go to school?”



“Don taught me at home actually. I passed the GED when I was fifteen. Never went to school a day in my life.”

*Damn.* “Is that what kids around here do?”

Jameson raises his shoulder in a shrug. “I guess. There’s only ever been a few kids. What about you? I bet you went to college.”

I shake my head. “Does two classes at a community college count?”

“What were the two classes?”

“Just the intro math and English. I thought I might be giving college a go, but my family had other plans.”

He waits for me finish and strokes my hand. The touch is wholly distracting, but I keep my composure. “My parents had split when I was twelve or so, and Evie and I had been staying with my dad. When I turned eighteen he decided to leave town. That was right after I graduated and started the classes. So that was it, I had to get a job and take care of Evie. She’s a lot younger than me, so I basically raised her since she was fourteen.”

Jameson traces the dip in my side. “That’s amazing of you. Where did this all go down? L.A.?”

“We actually grew up in Denver, in the suburbs.”

“I went to the area once for a special training. It was beautiful. A lot like Alaska I thought.”

I stifle a laugh. “If you take away all the people and buildings, maybe I could see it.”

“What about your parents now. Are you still in touch with them?”

“Whoa, right for the hard questions. I feel like this earns me one hard question in return.”

“Deal,” Jameson grabs my hand and gives it a shake.

“Haven’t heard from my dad since he left. When Evie turned eighteen, she went and found my mom, lived with her for the past four years. I think she was trying to give me a break. And I took it. I moved with a boyfriend to L.A. Evie claimed Mom was different and for a few years they enjoyed reconnecting, but my mom robbed Evie of her meager savings this summer, when Evie turned twenty-two, then Evie came out to live and work with me in L.A., just this past summer actually.”

Jameson is temporarily speechless. “That’s horrible.”

“Pretty different from the *love your neighbor* vibes from Port Providence, huh?” I say with a laugh at the contrast.

“So, we both had moms with other priorities.”

“Have you ever tried to find your mom?”

He shakes his head. “I don’t even know her name. I asked Pops a few times, but he wouldn’t tell me. Said it didn’t matter, I’d never see her again anyway. But I don’t care to find her. I’ve seen the world, made my own family with my squad, and I have everyone here in Port Providence. That’s enough of a family for me.”

I bite my lip, wanting to ask about what Cara’s told me. My pulse quickens as I gather the courage to ask, worried about what the answer might be. I steel myself as the words flow from my lips. “What about having kids yourself someday?”

I study Jameson’s face as he prepares to answer. The moment seems to stretch out as my heartbeat bangs in my ears. I need to know the answer to this question more than I need my next breath.

“Yeah. More than anything, though I gave up on thinking it was possible a long time ago.” His words are a sigh.

My throat instantly feels tight, and it takes every ounce of my strength not to tell him right this second. But my resolve is even stronger now that I shouldn’t. I don’t want our

relationship swayed by this information. He either wants me for me, or he doesn't. I need to know what we'd be building is based on us, not the baby he's wanted for years.

"You never know," I manage to say in a casual tone.

"You want kids someday?" The hope is apparent in his voice.

"Despite my dramatic upbringing, I do."

He nods. "What are we doing here, Jolie?"

"Talking?" I ask innocently. "Getting to know each other?"

"And seeing where it goes?" he challenges me.

I give a curt nod. "Yes. Seeing where it goes. I definitely like you, but until tonight, I didn't even know you never went to school. I don't even know how old you are! There's so much to learn about each other."

"I'm thirty-two. And if my math is right, you're twenty-six. I'm practically an old man to you."

Reaching out, I smooth my fingers through his short beard, tracing it up to his hair, which has grown out quite a bit over the past few months.

"True." He laughs abruptly at my mock insult. "I'll tell you one thing, Jolie. I don't need to learn anything else about you to know I want to be with you. I hope that doesn't scare you. But it's just like my squad for me. We were randomly assigned to work as a unit, to have each other's backs through thick and thin. Sure, it took time to develop the deep bonds, but I saw something in each of them I respected, and as we grew closer, I saw who they were, and caring for them as brothers became second nature. I didn't need to get to know them to see if I liked them enough to protect them with my life. It was just fated the day we walked into each other's lives."

"I, uh. Wow." I'm not sure what to say back to that. I wish I had the same conviction, but my failed relationships

always seem to start out great. I don't see any flaws until down the road. "I've been socialized to think dating is a vetting process, a test run. My experience has shown me that people show you who they really are once they get comfortable around you, and drop the act."

"Are you acting? Cause I'm not. I don't know how to be anyone but myself."

I think over his words. "I definitely have always been myself."

"Me too. But I get your point. Cara was hiding her true self from me. I don't think you are though. I think peeing on your pants, dragging yourself across my floor like a worm, you're just yourself all the time."

That memory makes me laugh, then flush, as I think back to what I saw him doing that night.

"Here's to us, just enjoying life together, being ourselves for the next four weeks?" he holds out a pinky to me.

I loop mine around his. "Deal. Here's to being our true selves."

He leans forward and kisses my forehead. "Good. Now get some rest, beautiful."

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The next few days race by. Before we arrived, Jameson revoked his agreement to be filmed further, based on what happened. Needless to say, I don't get to see him most of the day. He wakes up at four in the morning and heads out to work, arriving home around six or seven in the evening. There is so much to do around here, but it's all stuff he says he loves. He says it doesn't feel like work. I can see that to some extent. Holding a camera all day feels like work, but fishing with Jameson, seeing the beauty all around us, eating fresh salmon, that is different from the type of work I'm used to.

We've managed to keep our hands off of each other, using what little time we have to get to know each other on a deeper level. But that's going to be a lot harder tonight, because when I get home from filming, Jameson has a warm bath drawn for me in the living room, candles lit all around the room, towel slung low on his hips. Damn, those abs are enticing.

"You putting the moves on me?" I laugh as I shift out of my coat.

"This is a totally nonsexual bath together, if that's okay?" He drops his head, eyes coyly looking my way in humble invitation.

Shit. This is going to be nearly impossible, because my mouth is already watering at the sight of him. Should I really say yes though? My belly is definitely not as flat as it used to be. In fact, it's actually starting to look a little rounded, but only slightly, so maybe he won't notice?

The other trouble is that I need to make sure this bath isn't too hot. I steal myself and undress, slowly, trying to stall, all the while watching his expression carefully as he studies me.

"Remember, you did this to yourself," I say in a low teasing tone as he clearly enjoys the sight of my body.

He squares off in front of me, and drops his towel dramatically. He's half hard already, and I'm obviously eating my words already, because I'm the one who's going to have a hard time controlling myself.

# CHAPTER 18

## Jameson

Jolie leans on the edge of the tub, her feet in the warm steaming water. I can tell that she's just as bothered by me as I am her. I swear her breasts grew two sizes. She looks good with the extra weight on her, but I've promised myself I won't push sex. I know this isn't the best way to achieve that goal. I want intimacy with her though, and a bath together sounds incredible.

"You are gorgeous," I breathe the words.

"Thank you. Your body does nothing for me though, sorry," she laughs.

"Liar." I make a point of flexing my muscles to underscore my point as her nipples practically perk in response. Okay, not really, but a guy can dream.

As I step over the tub, I slide down into the water, parting my legs so she has space to join me. I try my best to keep my cock from stabbing her in the back, though this is definitely more of a challenge than I've expected. I've even taken care of myself in advance to make sure I can keep my cool, but I'm weak where she is concerned.

"Come here," I pat the water between my legs. "I won't bite."

"Unless I ask nicely?" she teases.

I shake my head. "Nope. Not even then. Even if you beg. I'm going to hold out on you."

"Are we playing a game of sex chicken?" she says, only half joking. "You know women tend to win that game, right?"

"Bring it, girl," I challenge her as she sinks down between my legs, her skin smooth against me, but just to stack the deck in my favor, because looking down over her shoulder

at her body is going to potentially kill me, I grab a rag, dip it into the warm water and drape it over her breasts. “There, so you don’t get cold.”

“So helpful,” she practically purrs the words.

“That’s me, Mister Helpful.” I stroke my rough hands down her arms, pulling water up and over the goose-bumped flesh. “You’re not cold, are you?”

She inhales sharply and release a shaky breath.  
“Definitely not cold.”

“Is this too much?” I ask, feeling a bit guilty for how far I’ve pushed it.

“Maybe, but I’m not complaining.” She leans her weight back into me, seemingly giving in.

We soak in silence, mindlessly stroking each other while the water cools. After a while, we talk about mundane things—like the weather this spring and about how Nina’s blueberry muffins are Jolie’s favorite. It’s anything but mundane though. I’m captivated by her every thought.

“Your toes are pruned,” she says finally breaking the silence as she grabs at my feet. I instantly pull them from her hand, stifling a laugh.

“Don’t, I’m super ticklish there.” I realize my fuckup instantly as I say the words.

“Really?” she asks, twisting around to face me.

“Pretty please. I’ll give you anything you want, just don’t tickle me.”

“This is really testing my strength. It’s in my big sister DNA to harass your weaknesses.”

“Rise above, Jolie.”

She stands then, water dripping off her body. “This tub gets cold fast.”

“True, it’s not exactly insulated. Let’s dry off.”

“Towels?” she asks, looking around.

“Shit, I knew I forgot something. They’re on my bed.”

“That’s convenient,” she calls over her shoulder as she makes for the bedroom.

“The subconscious is a powerful thing,” I say, only half-sure I’m joking, as I stand to follow the little trail of wet footprints that she leaves on the wood floor.

My jaw drops at the sight of a soaking wet Jolie lying in my bed, towels still folded where I left them.

A sinister smile stretches across my face. “Does this mean I won sex chicken?”

She shakes her head. “You didn’t win, I just decided to forfeit.”

At her words, my dick instantly perks up. “Are you fucking with me?”

“Not yet,” she lowers her eyes at me.

“Damn. You are perfect, woman.”

“Come here.” She curls her finger at me in a beckoning motion.

I obey without another thought, my repressed desires unleashing, taking over control of me. Grabbing her ankles, I drop to my knees on the floor, kissing the bottoms of her feet. “So, you’re not ticklish.”

“Nope,” she confirms on a sigh. “Not on my feet. But that feels amazing.”

“How about this?” I ask as I kiss up her ankle.

“*Gooood*,” she draws out the word.

“And this?” I ask, moving up to her inner thigh.

She spreads her legs in reply, making a strangled sound in her throat. Her head drops back as I work my way to the upper part of her inner thigh, before moving to the other side.



I move my mouth just a centimeter above her center, breathing out a warm breath as I pass over the spot I know she most wants me to touch. She whimpers in reply, spurring on my teasing. I move up to her belly, kissing her hips, up her sides, down her arms, over the side of her breasts, up her neck, stealing a kiss on the corner of her parted lips before moving back down to her fingertips.

Jolie writhes and makes the sexiest little sounds as I kiss and tease her. Her hips roll gently through my assault. Her nipples are hard peaks, and I finally suck one into my mouth, letting my tongue swipe over the rosy point.

“Yes,” she sighs heavily. “Jameson.”

The way she says my name takes me apart completely.

“Please,” she begs.

“Please, what?” I ask innocently.

“Anything,” she gasps.

If anything is on the table, then I know I what I want most. To taste her. She smells so sweet, and I can’t resist. I brush my face across her thighs, grateful now that I’ve had the foresight to take care enough of my beard to keep it reasonably soft. Then, I close the distance, ending both of our agonizing, and close my mouth over her. I let my tongue swipe ever so gently across her, testing her sensitivity.

When she presses into me in reply, I have my answer, I can go a little more. I haven’t done this in forever, but I really, *really* missed it. I take another swipe with my tongue, then set off flicking it gently over her swollen bud. Selfishly, I let my tongue trail further down, stealing a taste of her, before returning to my steady assault.

I don’t need to ask her how I’m doing, she’s giving me all the signals I need. My hands wander while my mouth stays latched, tongue busy in a rhythmic drumming. I reach over her soft thigh, the place where her hips lead into the dip in her waist, up over her breasts, where I linger, gently brushing my fingers lightly over her sensitive nipples.

Jolie lets a loud huff of breath from her nose, lips pressed together, eyes clenched tightly in clear concentration. *That's it*, I think to myself, urging her on with my tongue.

Her chest rises and falls rapidly as she builds toward her release, I keep my pacing steady, focusing on the feeling of her in my mouth. Then, she's there. Her legs clamp around my head, hips bucking off the bed as sweet groans escape her lips. Her hands clench into my hair, pulling hard, sending chills of anticipation down my spine. I back off from her sensitive spot, trailing my tongue down into her folds for one more selfish taste of her.

# CHAPTER 19

## Jolie

Jameson. Has. Skills.

That alone doesn't convey just how good he is at unraveling a gal, but I simply don't have the words to express it better than that. I can only hope I've returned the favor to at least some extent, which judging by his reaction, I may have come close.

After a quick bite of breakfast this morning, and plenty of kissing, we are heading to the greenhouse for a morning town gathering. Jameson grabs my hand in his. I look down at our connection before giving him a tentative smile. Seems like it might ruffle some feathers in a small town to show up holding hands like this—and I'm quickly proven right—people are definitely giving little looks of surprise as we approach.

Evie gives me a sly wink as we settle in next to each other. As Nina and Opal start making some general announcements on the major town updates, Evie leans into my ear.

“Did you tell him yet?” Her words are barely audible.

I give my head the smallest of shakes.

When the meeting is adjourned, we head outside once more. Jameson is about to head out fishing for the day. He mentioned this morning he was with a group. Now there are a few guys I've never met before hovering near him. He gives me a quick peck on the cheek. “Tell me what?”

My brain skips for a minute like a scratched record as I make sense of his meaning. How good are his ears that he could hear Evie? I could barely hear her.

“Oh, you mean Evie's question?”

“Jameson, you ready?” a man shifting side to side on his feet near us interrupts.

He gives me a look that says *this isn't over*, but relents to the waiting group of men, giving my hand a quick squeeze before turning on his heel and stalking off.

There's no way he's going to forget that by tonight, right?

I have all day today to make a plan, which is pretty easy to do, since I'm standing basically in one place all day filming Henry as he helps a neighbor build a chicken coop. The sounds of little chicks peeping from within a heated box and hammering are my only distractions.

First things first though. I need to make sure we talk about where we stand before I tell Jameson the news. It's a bit earlier than I hoped to have that conversation, relative to when this trip ends, but it'll have to do.

There is no longer a doubt in my mind about it. I do first and foremost want a relationship with Jameson. Maybe there is something to loving someone from a distance, or knowing that you've probably lost them forever, but our time apart has made me certain I want to try something with him, if I get the chance. I've carefully relived every moment with him so many times over the winter. In those memories, I've analyzed, poked, prodded, questioned. And through all that hindsight, I've seen how unique of a man he is. I see how fascinating I find him, how much I respect him, and how I treat him with more deference because of that admiration.

That's when the red flags of my exes became clear for the first time. I hadn't really respected any of them. Sure, their looks impressed me, or their jobs, hell, even sometimes their money. They've all had things I didn't. Things I've wanted near me.

Jameson also has something I don't, but something bigger and more important: purpose. I haven't even realized I've been missing a purpose in my life, because I am always

living in my own version of survival mode. But being up here, with him, it has slowed my world down, made me refocus on what it means to survive, to be human, to be happy and contented, and live as one with nature.

As for the community. That's something I've dreamed of, who hasn't? Neighbors who actually know you, care about it, would sacrifice for you? That's incredibly rare as far as I'm aware. And up here, they have it. It's priceless.

Up here, I can be with a man I revere, with a community that works together, out of the meaningless rat race and into the majestic battle with nature and the elements.

Now it's just a matter of whether he's where I am... ready to take him like a shot, ready to run forward into the unknown and build something together.

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When I get back from a long day of filming, Jameson, to my surprise, is already home— I can tell because as I pull open the heavy wooden door to the ground floor, the smell of something cooking wafts down the stairs and hits me square in the face. The flickering light of a fire dances down the stairs, drawing me and my nose up to Jameson.

And of course, there is Mister Rugged, plaid shirt folded up revealing thick forearms, rocking in a chair by the fire, whittling away at a little toy rattle, which must be for Baby Bethany. My heart thumps hard in my chest.

“Something smells incredible,” I manage.

Jameson looks at me with a soft smile, shaking the rattle, which amazingly, makes an actual rattle sound. “Good timing, I'm just finishing up with Bethany's first toy.”

It's like I'm on an actual episode of Little House on the Prairie, and I love it.

“I'll grab some bowls,” I offer, heading to the kitchen. As I reach up onto the high shelf, I feel his arms wrap around me.

I melt into his grasp. “This feels nice.”

“It could always be like this,” he says, catching me completely off guard. I spin around to face him.

“Yeah?” I ask dumbly.

“What did you have to tell me?”

Taking a deep breath, I steel myself. “I suppose it’s more of a question for you.”

“Let’s sit.” Jameson grabs the bowls from my hands and places them on the counter before leading me back to the living room couch.

We sit close, knees touching, hands clasped together. His eyes are locked on mine, his face is so hopeful.

Here goes nothing.

“I imagined we would talk about this closer to the end of the trip, but now works too.”

Jameson stares at me like a statue, waiting.

“And I don’t know if you really feel the same way I do.” I give a little laugh at myself for how pathetic I’m about to be. “But thinking that I lost you this winter, I realized just how much I grew to care for you in such a short time.”

“Same here, Jolie.” He nods, thumb stroking my now-sweating hand.

“After I wrote to you, I knew there was a really good chance you’d never ever talk to me again, but our time together had changed me. I knew I couldn’t just stay in L.A. scraping by in a life that didn’t mean anything to me.”

Jameson’s eyebrows knit together in confusion as I take a breath.

“So, I called my old friend from Colorado and made plans to move there.”

His face sinks and I instantly blurt out the words, “It’s not set in stone, it’s just sort of like my back-up plan.”

“Back-up?” he asks. “In case we don’t work out?”

I tilt my head as if studying him. I have to just say it already. Here it goes. “The thing is, Jameson, I know I want to be with you, here with you, actually. In Port Providence. Do you want to be with me too?”

My breath is trapped in my chest as I wait for his answer.

The concern on his face is clear, as if he knows somehow there is more, but he gives me a reassuring hand squeeze. “I do, Jolie. I want you to stay. I want to be with you.”

Instead of feeling a flood of relief, I feel more dread than ever, because now it’s right here in front of me, it’s all possible, but I need to be completely honest, and see if he’ll still be happy with my news.

“Then, if that’s the case, there is something else I need to tell you.”

Jameson gnaws on his bottom lip he pulls his hands away. My face must reveal more of my fear than I intended to share.

“Okay,” he says slowly.

“I’m just going to say it, rip it off like a band-aid,” I say more to myself than to him. “Because, if you want me, you need to know that... that I’m... I’m pregnant.”

The room seems to stretch and spin for a brief moment before Jameson’s face hardens, the color draining from his cheeks. Without another word, he stands as if he’s being pulled up by a marionette, turns abruptly, and stalks from the room, footsteps heavy on the wood floor.

# CHAPTER 20

## Jameson

My thoughts swirl like a storm gathering in the sky, ready to unleash a wrath down below. I can't even think straight. What started out as the greatest words Jolie could say to me, that she wanted to stay, ended with the harsh reality that she's what... taken by someone else? Entwined with another man? Who was this *friend* in Colorado? Was she ever even serious about being with me?

I walk straight to JP. He's always been the person I can unload to. I pound on the door with urgency, probably too hard. Surely it makes him think there is some real emergency. I try to take a few breaths to calm myself, even if only slightly.

It takes a while for the door to open. JP stands in the frame, still pulling up a leg of his pants. I can see just beyond him that Evie and Tucker are under the covers in the newly lofted bed. If this were any other circumstance I might pay attention to those details, but I'm far too absorbed in my own misery right now.

"Get dressed. I need to kill something," I say, barely recognizing my own bravado. I shift my bow back and forth between my hands for emphasis.

JP's eyes go wide for a moment before he nods and grabs his coat off the hook, zipping it up over his bare chest before grabbing his bow.

We head into the night with weapons in hand. Stalking. Silent. JP doesn't press me, doesn't ask what we're killing, or why. Maybe it's left over from the days when I was the squadron leader and he executed my commands faithfully, without question. Or, maybe he just knows to let me walk off some of this steam.

I hold my arrow in the bow, pointing downward at the ground as we walk through the woods. Two predators, or



maybe it's just me tonight that's a cold-blooded machine, out for vengeance.

"Whenever you're ready," JP finally breaks the silence. His words seem to cut through my tunnel vision though, and I stop, hanging my head. Suddenly, I feel very defeated, and exhausted.

"She wants to stay and finally, it's everything I thought I'd never have. Then she goes and drops a bomb on me. She's knocked up. I guess it was a lot to expect her to wait for me over the winter. And she says she knew I'd probably have written her off because of the whole filming me without my permission thing... Of course she moved on...." I ramble, unsure if I'm even making sense.

JP places a hand on my shoulder and only then do I realize I'm trembling. "Brother. Take a breath and get focused."

I do as he says.

"Good. Now tell me what you're freaking out about."

"Didn't you hear the part about her being pregnant?" I spit the words.

JP nods calmly, lips perking up in a smile. "Yeah. Is that not what you've told me for more than a decade that you want in life?"

I shake my head as if shaking off a fog. "Yeah, my *own* kid."

JP shakes his head at me, a soft laugh snorting from his nose. "And think back to exactly what she said."

I search my brain. "She said she's pregnant."

"Right," JP concludes. "And did she mention it was another dude's?" His tone is downright condescending, but I can't even care right now, because damn it, he's right.

I shake my head no, the feeling of regret for not listening, for snapping to a conclusion, washing over me. Then

a thought dawns on me.

“How were you so sure I had it wrong?”

JP gets a sly smile on his face. “Because I’ve known for months.”

“Evie,” I say as I realize how. “She told you.”

“Swore us to secrecy, but yes, she told us.”

“What’s going on with you three anyway?” I dare the question, not sure I even want to know this information.

JP gives my shoulder a shove. “We can get into that later, but right now, a woman just told you she is pregnant with your kiddo, and it seems to me like you stormed off.”

“Shit. Right.” I shove the bow into his hands, spin toward my house and sprint off into the night without another word.

“You’re welcome, dumbass!” JP calls toward my quickly retreating form.

Hope blooms in my chest as I race through the woods, down the familiar trail, up to my door. She wants to stay! She’s going to have my baby! It takes everything in me to stay focused enough not to trip over the thick roots that jut from the forest floor.

But the swirling thoughts are dominating, and I don’t even hear it until I feel it— the heavy weight of something jumping on my back, pulling me down the ground, razors entering through my leg. Then a strangled cry, from me or the beast, I’m not sure. Maybe both.

My training and my adrenaline finally kick in, slowing time in a way that allows me to carefully assess. Mountain lion. Arrow through its chest. Four claw gashes on my left leg. JP running toward me. Puts pressure on wound. His hands are there. Pushing hard. Blood is still flowing. Fight the dizzy. Fight to stay present.

JP shuffles out of his jacket, unzips the inner lining, ties it tight around the gash in my thigh. He hoists me up, my arm is around his shoulder. The adrenaline keeps the pain away, for now. I hop quickly along at his side as we make our way down the trail. He turns us at the fork, away from my house. I know where he is taking me. We need to get to Miles and Nina's place, they have the most medical supplies nearby.

"Jolie," I croak, my throat suddenly dry.

"Hang on, buddy," JP says, voice calm and sure.

I keep moving, even though every time I blink, it feels like too much time has passed. When did we get into the living room? Miles is cleaning my leg. Nina is also at my side, readying a needle to stitch me.

Blinking around the room, taking stock, I see JP with his arms folded over his chest. Then there is another figure near him... Jolie. I smile at her, and she shakes her head, tears in her eyes. JP places an arm around her shoulders. I envy his arm, wishing I could be the one comforting her. My woman. My baby. A fresh round of regret washes over me.

"Sl-orry," I say the words, they are a little slurred. I've lost a good amount of blood.

Her tears flow harder at my words. I lift my hand out to her. She steps forward quickly to grab it. I squeeze the warmth, closing my eyes, letting her light flood me.

"I'm so happy." I can feel tears flowing down my cheeks.

"How much blood has he lost?" Nina asks, worried by my words.

JP speaks for me. "Maybe a pint. He's not delusional. He uh... Jolie?" JP pauses, looking between us.

"He just found out I'm pregnant," she answers.

Nina pauses mid stitch for half a beat before shaking her head. "Jameson, only you. Miles, get a bite block, this little bugger is still weeping, I need to cauterize."

Miles shoves a wooden spoon in my mouth, and I bite down, knowing what's coming. Then it hits, searing heat and the smell of burnt flesh. I lock eyes with Jolie, her face is steady. She is so strong.

"That's better," Nina concludes, finishing her stitches while Miles takes the spoon away.

"What else can I get you?" JP asks.

"Nothing. Just let him rest now. We shouldn't move him. He'll have to stay here tonight."

"Can I stay by his side?" Jolie asks.

"Be our guest. Miles, grab the sleeping bag. I have to feed Bethany."

"You are incredible, Nina," Jolie says in clear awe.

Nina shrugs it off, which is fair, because I've seen her handle much worse with much less.

Once the commotion dies down, Nina and Miles head to bed and Jolie slips down into the sleeping bag.

"I hate that you're on the floor," I murmur, still weak.

"Stop. You were attacked by a friggin mountain lion, and you're worried about my comfort?"

"How did you get here?" I twist my neck to get a better look at her face.

"Honestly, I assumed you wouldn't want me at your place anymore, once you got back, so I came here for the night."

"About that. I'm really sorry. I didn't even think to ask. I just assumed. Assumed there was someone else. I'm an idiot."

"Sorry it wasn't clear. But, are you happy about it?"

I nod, and simultaneously flinch in pain because my adrenaline has completely worn off and I can feel everything. "I can't even describe how happy I am, Jolie. Happy that you

want to stay, and that we're going to have a baby. I wish I could hold you." I practically groan the words, I'm so desperate for her.

"Soon, just rest, we have all the time in the world to hold each other."

I let my eyes fall shut at that thought. What an incredible thought it is.

# CHAPTER 21

## Jolie

Evie and I hold hands, waving goodbye to our friends as they lift off in the helicopter. Four weeks up here have both crawled and flown by. “So, we’re really stuck here now, huh?” Evie yells over the whir of the chopper blades.

“Stuck right where we want to be,” I shout back.

As the aircraft disappears behind the tree line and the sounds of nature resume in its silence, we begin our walk back to town.

“We should get the pie started first,” Evie decides, stopping as we pass a wild gooseberry bush. Our fingers work quickly, plucking the green berries that look remarkably like little grapes with stretchmarks. Come to think of it, soon my belly will look an awful lot like a gooseberry. I’m almost five months along now.

“I can’t believe we’re making a pie. When was the last time we did that?” I muse absently as we move on to the next gooseberry bush.

“Possibly never. Not that I can recall. But then again, when was the last time we built a new room onto a house?”

“Thanks again for your help this week. Jameson thought the baby could just sleep in a dresser drawer, bless him.”

Evie and I are particularly proud that we’ve managed to get all the materials we need for the project. Don is helping us figure out the technical aspects to finish it all next week. It’s going to give us much needed space for a new baby. And, it will help us learn one of the many skills we’ll need to really participate in life in Port Providence.

“That’s what we do up here, isn’t it? Help each other out. God, that feels good to say.”

“That reminds me, we need to bake one extra pie for West and Henry. JP and Tuck say they’ve been grumpy lately and it will really cheer them up.”

“Why won’t they just come to dinner tonight?” I really hoped I’d get to spend more time with West and Henry. I know that Jameson’s entire squad means the world to him, but they are such grumpy loners, it’s been hard to bond with either of them.

Evie raises her eyebrows. “They said they didn’t want to come to a date night. Maybe they’re sad they don’t have ladies in their lives.”

“Hey, you never know. If the show goes for a second season and there are new women on the crew to replace us, it could happen.”

Evie nods, but looks skeptical. I guess it does take a special kind of woman to actually want to stay here. “Anyway, I’m happy we get to celebrate our first official night being forever trapped in Alaska with our guys.”

“Who knew we’d lock down best friends? That’s the dream, sis.”

Evie nods. “And we live not ten minutes’ walk from each other. I literally couldn’t ask for anything more.”

“Not even an air conditioner?” I tease. The heat in the summer up here is pretty surprising, and it’s still only spring.

“I’ll get used to it soon enough,” she says, popping a tart gooseberry into her mouth. That’s one thing I truly love about my little sister, she’s always been so optimistic.

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“They’re coming,” Evie sings as she watches out the back window. I lean over and spot Jameson walking with JP and Tucker. They are all massive men, though Tucker is a little thinner, and shorter than JP and Jameson.

“Our guys are hunks,” I say with a girlish bubble in my throat. I can’t help it. I have a damn crush on my man, even

though he's carrying a chain with a few dead geese clipped to it, slung over his shoulder.

"And they come bearing birds to be plucked, which is perfect, because I'm determined to make a fluffy down comforter."

"You'd think three in a bed means it's plenty warm," I tease.

Evie shrugs. "You're not wrong, but Tucker is a cover hog."

I have no idea how things work between the three of them, and I've quite frankly been too chicken to ask, but they seem really happy, and that's all that matters.

The door creaks open then, and the guys' voices fill the room. Even after four weeks, my heart still beats harder when I see Jameson, because I miss him. I try to work with him as much as I can during the day, but I have to do whatever needs done, and sometimes that means going our own way.

"I'm telling you, a crib is the bigger baby prison thing, a bassinette is just a basket sort of thing," JP eloquently argues.

"They're going to want the baby prison, trust me, I have two younger siblings, you don't want those things crawling all over the place," Tucker adds.

The sound of six boots hitting the wood floor echoes out as Evie and I wait, silently smiling at each other.

"Jolie will know which to do," Jameson concludes.

"She wants the crib for its prison qualities," I call down the stairs.

"Told you," Tucker rejoices as they make their way up the stairs into the kitchen.

"Smells great in here," JP kisses Evie on the cheek.

"Guess we're having a plucking party tonight?" she says as Tucker kisses her other cheek.



JP pats her bottom lightly. “You bet, lady.”

Jameson pushes through the thruple to get to me and we wrap our arms tightly around one another.

“Missed you,” I say into his chest. He’s so freaking tall, talking to his pecs is pretty much my only option.

“Miss you both.” He kisses my neck as he tenderly rubs my belly.

“You guys wash up now, and we’ll get the table set. Everything’s ready,” I announce. Jameson heads back to the bedroom to change while JP and Tucker stand side by side at the sink, washing their hands in unison.

Evie and I set out the plates of roasted rabbit and the first carrots of the season, which we’ve pulled fresh this morning. They come out in odd shapes, compared to what we’re used to, which actually makes the whole thing more fun, because we named each one based on its shape. Mister one leg, Lady loopy butt...

After we eat our meal and hear a recounting of the goose hunting adventure of today, Evie and I prepare plates of freshly cooled gooseberry pie, while the guys mysteriously disappear into the bedroom.

I eye Evie suspiciously, but she avoids my stares.

When they return, everyone is silent, watching expectantly.

“Okay, what’s going on? Did I give you all food poisoning or something?”

JP and Tucker walk past me to Evie, each of them taking one of her hands. My brow creases in confusion. Then I turn back to see Jameson standing right in front of me.

“My mother left me one thing when she walked out of my life.”

“Holy shit, we’re going heavy just like that,” I blurt the words, then promptly seal my lips as he chuckles. He totally

gets my sense of humor, which is perfect because it can confuse some people.

“Holy shit indeed, love. Do you want to know what she left me?”

I nod, wondering if it perhaps something baby-related that he wants to pass down to his child. Maybe a blanket? A pair of shoes? A small toy?

He jams his hand down into his pocket and pulls something out. It’s clenched tightly in his palm.

As he flips over his large hand and unfolds his thick fingers, I gasp at the object in his palm.

It a ring. Gold, with a small diamond in the center of two gold leaves.

I open my mouth to say something, but I have no words. I breathe out loudly instead, looking back at Evie and then again at Jameson.

“What, does this, is this...” I stutter.

He nods. “Pops said she left it with him, to be given to me, to be given someday to the love of my life. And today, I’m giving it to you. The love of my life.”

“Thank you,” I manage to say, my hand shaking as I reach for it.

Jameson snaps his fingers shut around it and I meet his eyes again.

“Yes?” I ask him.

“Jolie...” he pauses, causing my heart to flutter and tremble even more with excitement.

I hold my breath, savoring the moment.

“Will you marry me?” his smooth voice says the words with complete conviction.

My eyes slam shut as I nod vigorously, tears already flowing down my cheeks. “Yes,” I shout as I open my eyes

and fling my arms over his shoulders, lifting myself off the ground. My legs wrap automatically around his firm frame, hooking at the ankles. His arms wrap around my waist tightly.

Just then I hear the sound of a cork popping and I turn around to see JP with an overflowing bottle of sparkling cider. Evie and Tucker are balancing five glasses between them while JP pours.

“You knew?” I squeal at Evie who nods with a big grin on her face.

I feel Jameson grabbing my hand and I watch in awe as he slips the ring on my finger.

“To forever,” he says, grabbing a glass of cider from JP.

“To forever,” we all say in reply, raising our glasses high.

If you enjoyed **Tempted**, you won't want to miss book two in the Wild Winter Nights series, **Adored**, featuring lonely widower Henry and fun-loving Chloe.

During a mandatory trip to L.A. to promote their new documentary, Chloe might just be the one woman who can break down all of Henry's icy walls.

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## **Thank you!**

This book represents something really special: the first collaboration between Billie Bloom and Kendall Ryan! It was wayyy too much fun writing this book.

Thank you to everyone who helped bring this book together, especially the wonderful editor Ann Attwood and our lovely beta-readers – you know who you are!

## About the Authors

Billie Bloom lives in the state where people think fifty degrees is shorts weather and they point to where they're from using their hand as a map. They swoon for steamy romance that makes their mouth drop open like a fish, and their spouse ask curiously, *what are you doing over there?* As a lover of the genre, they can often be found in a trance-like state drooling out of one side of their mouth as they write (or read) up to sixteen hours a day – you know, as one does. Billie is shamelessly obsessed with fictitious frat bros, alpha jocks, and most *especially*, sassy twinks.

A New York Times, Wall Street Journal, and USA Today bestselling author of more than three dozen titles, Kendall Ryan has sold millions of books and they have been translated into several languages in countries around the world. Her books have also appeared on the New York Times and USA Today bestseller lists more than 100 times. Ryan has been featured in such publications as USA Today, Newsweek, and InTouch Magazine. She lives in Texas with her husband and two sons.