

A romantic couple in winter attire embracing in a snowy landscape. The man has a beard and is wearing a red turtleneck sweater. The woman has long, wavy brown hair and is also wearing a red turtleneck sweater. They are standing in a snowy field with trees in the background. The overall mood is cozy and intimate.

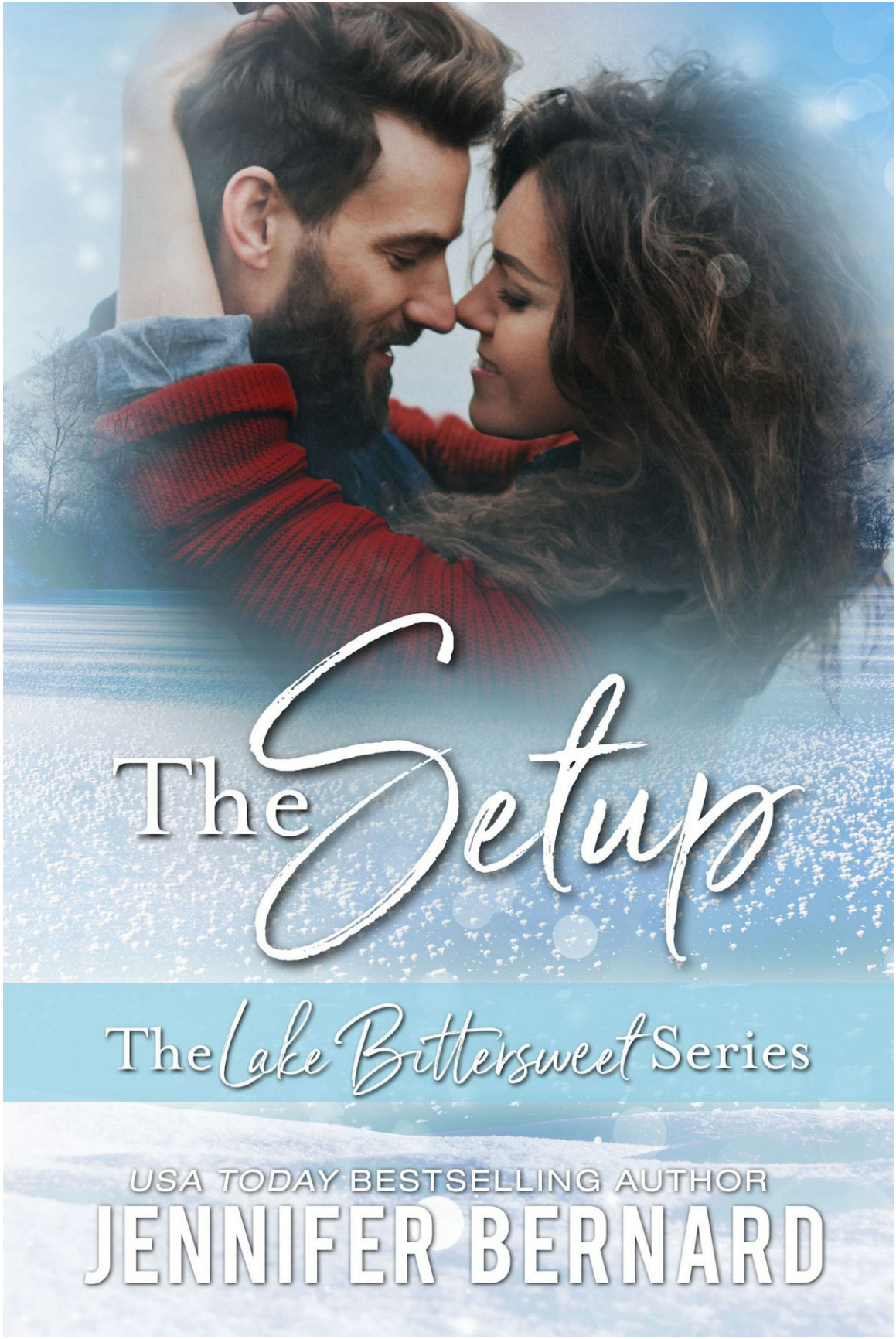
# The Setup

*The Lake Bittersweet Series*

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

**JENNIFER BERNARD**





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## *one*

Gina Moretti knew she had a long list of faults, and right at the top was “inability to be polite while raging inwardly.” When that flaw surfaced during a bad date, things could get awkward. There was the time she’d tossed a glass of wine in a date’s face. Once she’d even stabbed a breadstick into a dude’s hand. (Said hand was on her ass, who could blame her?) The best method of surviving a bad date, she’d learned, was to keep her mouth full of food or any handy beverage.

As her date—Phil something—continued his tedious explanation of Bitcoin versus Ethereum, she treated herself to a giant forkful of manicotti. It was a defensive move, she told herself. The equivalent of screaming into a pillow, except with marinara sauce.

“You really know how to put down some food.” Phil broke off from his lecture to give her an approving stare. “Lotta girls don’t like to eat this much on a date.”

Gina shrugged and gestured at her stuffed mouth to explain why she wasn’t answering.

“I mean, I don’t mind it. I figure if you like to eat pasta this much, there’s other stuff you like to put in your mouth.”

Gina nearly choked on her food. Was he making some kind of crass reference to oral sex on a first (and last) date?

“Do you work out, though? Because that’s a lot of calories to burn off. I’m not really into the flab, that’s just me. I keep fit and I appreciate the same from the ladies. Know what I mean? Frank said you’re an athlete, it’s why I asked you out, I’m sort of a hockey fiend, anyway I guess you don’t have to worry too much about...” He trailed off as she desperately forked another large chunk of manicotti into her mouth. “That’s...uh...that’s a lot of food. Is that safe? I took CPR once, but I zoned out and the one time I tried it on someone, they threw up in my mouth.”

Gina felt laughter, along with some nausea, bubble to the surface. Oh God. She was going to choke to death on giggles and tomato sauce and then she was going to kill her brother for this. He’d done it on purpose, hadn’t he? Her second-oldest and most-annoying brother had punked her by setting her up on this date. He must know what a tool this guy was. Not even Frankie was that clueless. He was teasing her, the way all her brothers had since the day she was born. It was the Moretti way.

She held up a finger, then bolted to her feet. “Excuse me,” she managed to mumble, and shot through the Loon Feather Bistro to the ladies’ room. She dashed into a stall and spit out her pasta into the toilet, a blast of sauce and cheese and pure relief.

“Oh my God,” she murmured out loud. The laughter came freely now, until tears were running down her face. “Is that safe?” She repeated his words, picturing his half-alarmed, half-revolved expression, and let the helpless giggles roll out of her.

When she’d flushed the toilet and composed herself, she sat on the seat and texted Frankie. *Ur dead 2 me.*

A string of laughter emojis was her only answer.

Question: did older brothers EVER grow out of teasing their younger sisters? Bigger question: why had she fallen for this trick? Was she that desperate for a relationship?

Hmm...maybe she kind of was, but not in the way people thought.

Recently she'd read something that really rang a bell—which didn't happen often because she wasn't a big reader. "The most important relationship in your life is the one you have with yourself"—or something to that effect.

Ding-ding-ding! It felt so true to Gina, because her relationship with herself was a disaster. Somewhere along the line she'd lost her oomph, her mojo, her confidence. The process had started about seventeen years ago, when she'd face-planted at the Olympic training camp. It had continued with her next big disaster, her brief marriage and divorce from Eddie "Junkyard" Jorgen.

Worst of all, both catastrophes had happened just before Christmas, which used to be her favorite holiday. Since the divorce, every year, as soon as she saw the first holiday decorations go up, she braced herself for another disaster. She gritted her teeth through every holiday season and only relaxed after New Year's Day had passed.

This year, she'd decided to do things differently.

The inspiration had come from her friend Emmaline. She and her new sweetie Conor had launched a hot competition to find her a date for the holidays. When Gina had found out, at first she'd been annoyed, but then she'd thought...why not? If she had to give herself a grade in the man department, it would be an F—or maybe a J for Junkyard. Why not let her best friend take a shot at it?

Word had spread, and now it seemed everyone in Lake Bittersweet was getting into the "set up Gina" business. She'd decided to embrace the matchmaking madness. What the heck, it kept her busy. Besides, it was nice of her family and friends to try.

Except for Frankie. He deserved a kick in the balls for this one.

She texted her friend Emmaline. *Help. Date emergency.*

*Wine or breadstick? Do I need to bail you out?*

*Ha ha. No. Hiding out in bathroom.*

Her phone rang. "You got this, babe," said Emmaline. "Just go out there



and tell him you're not interested."

"He's a friend of Frank's. They play hockey together." Gina groaned. "I should know better. What's wrong with me?"

"Don't be so hard on yourself. Nothing's wrong with *you*. You're perfect." Emmaline was always so supportive and sweet-natured. Gina's romantic life might suck, along with her not-so-professional life, but she was lucky in her friends. That was worth a lot. It was good to know she hadn't screwed up *everything* in her life.

"It's the holidays," Emmaline continued. "You always get weird this time of year."

"I'm sure I'll be back to normal next year. January second, mark your calendar."

"Maybe this year there will be a Christmas miracle." Oh Emmaline, ever so adorably hopeful. Of course she didn't know about her first heartbreak humiliation, Coach Peters. No one knew about that one, although unfortunately everyone knew about Junkyard.

"It'll be a miracle if I don't kill Frankie, I'll tell you that."

Emmaline laughed. "Seriously, I have a good feeling, Gina. Trust me."

"Speaking of good feelings, what are you and Conor doing right now?" Gina asked, deciding to indulge in a little self-torture. It was better than going back out to her date.

"That's a delay tactic, isn't it?"

"Maybe."

"Well, I shouldn't go along with it, but since you mentioned the magic word, Conor, we're not doing much. We're watching a movie while he rubs my feet."

"I fucking hate you. I mean I love you. You know that. And now I understand the good-feeling thing. That was your feet talking."

Emmaline took no offense, probably because she knew Gina so well. "My feet are very wise. Now they're telling you to tell hockey dude that you're not

interested. They also said to mention that the next time you get a call from a number in Maine, you should answer. That's Conor's college friend. He thinks you'll hit it off."

"Is he Conor's setup?"

"Yes. Personally I think you'll like my guy better, but whatever. Conor says he's super-cool and he designs sailboats for a living. You love canoes, he loves sailboats, it's like a love-boat connection."

Honestly, he sounded intimidating. What would she have in common with an Ivy League sailboat designer? She didn't design canoes, she just loved them and raced them; and now she didn't even race anymore. She'd been a go-hard scrappy athlete who'd crashed and burned in the Olympic training camp. If they talked about boats, they'd have to talk about that fiasco.

"Seems like a stretch. But he's probably better than the guy who just made me spit up all my pasta into a toilet."

Emmaline chuckled. "Love that positivity. I'll text you later, okay?"

"That's nice, but I expect you to be making mad passionate love with your foot masseur later."

"Then I'll text you after."

Emmaline hung up before Gina could get out another "I fucking hate you," which was good because she could never, ever hate Emmaline no matter how many rich, charming, handsome men her friend got engaged to.

She stationed herself in front of the mirror and fluffed her black hair back into its proper bouncy curls. Noticing a speck of tomato sauce on her chin, she splashed water on her face, then refreshed her Iced Raspberry lip gloss. It matched the deep crimson of her clingy jersey dress, which ended just above the knee. The length showed off her favorite boots, black leather with silver grommets and stacked heels.

"You're a babe," she told herself. "You can do this."

As long as "this" didn't mean smiling politely while Bitcoin Phil said

stupid shit, sure, she could do this.

She marched out of the restroom and threaded her way through the tables, spotting her fifth grade teacher, her OB/GYN and a firefighter who'd been crushing on her friend Kendra forever. Jacob must be trying to forget Kendra, because he was on a date with the new history teacher from the high school.

That was life in a small town; not even dating was a private endeavor.

She slid into her seat opposite Phil, who was scrolling on his phone, his plate empty. Oops, she'd missed the rest of dinner, apparently.

"Sorry," she said. "That took longer than I thought."

"Forget about it. I...uh...well, I gotta get going." He glanced at his phone again. "Maybe see you at the rink."

Wait. She leaned across the table to peer at his phone. "Did you just set up another date while I was in the bathroom?"

Unfazed, he shrugged. "Didn't seem like this one was going anywhere."

"You got that right, buster."

Buster? Where had "buster" come from? Nobody said "buster" outside of old movies. Screwing up another date must have really rattled her.

"The waitress came with the check and I told her to split it. I already paid my part." As she watched, in wordless shock, he got to his feet. "See you around, Gina. You should think about going Paleo. You got a real problem with carbs."

She stared after him as he strolled toward the coat check desk by the Loon Feather's entrance. Somewhat annoyingly, he wasn't a bad-looking guy—the kind of solid-muscled, sandy-haired Midwestern type she'd grown up with.

A glass of wine appeared in her line of sight. The waitress set it down on the table before her. "It's on me," she said with a wink, then added the check. "But the rest of it still needs to be paid, sorry."

"That's all right. That manicotti was out of this world. Worth every," she looked at the bill and winced, "kajillion pennies."

The waitress laughed, then bent down to whisper in her ear. “Actually, the wine isn’t from me. It’s from someone who doesn’t want you to know he sent it. But he’s super-hot and not at all creepy, so I’m just going to tell you.”

“What? Who?”

Gina looked around the restaurant, confused. Had Mr. Geller from fifth grade sent her a glass of wine? She wouldn’t describe the sixty-year-old with the wispy moustache as “super-hot,” but hotness was in the eye of the beholder.

Maybe Jacob the firefighter? A sympathy gesture? But Jacob’s table was empty; he and his date were probably moving on to the next phase of their romantic evening.

“At the bar,” whispered the waitress.

Gina swiveled her head toward the bar and spotted a lone man who looked vaguely familiar. She stared for a long, astonished moment. Was that...who she thought it was? Was it possible? If so, she might need an entire bottle of wine.

“Tell him no thanks,” she told the waitress, then flung up a hand. “Never mind, I’ll tell him myself.” She slid a credit card from her wallet and handed it to the waitress, then got to her feet. Carrying the glass of wine in one hand, she marched toward the bar.

As she came close, getting a better look at his profile, she saw she was correct. It was Kirk Williams, in the flesh. Kirk was back in Lake Bittersweet, just casually hanging out at the bar of the Loon Feather Bistro as if he hadn’t left almost twenty years ago without even a goodbye.

Part of her wanted to fling that glass of wine right in his face. But that would be an unjustified waste of good wine. He wasn’t a date, after all. As if that would ever happen. He was practically a celebrity now.

She placed the glass of wine on the bar next to him. He looked up, surprise in his hazel-green eyes, fatigue in his face. She’d forgotten how freaking good-looking he was, even though she’d seen him on TV enough

times that she should have remembered.

“Hi, Kirk,” she said, with dignity.

“Hi, Gina.”

“Don’t you think it’s a little rude to send a drink to a woman who’s on a date with someone else?”

He shrugged. “It wasn’t a come-on, just some moral support. Looked like you could use it, considering the fifteen-minute bathroom break.”

“You timed it? Seems a little creepy.”

“Rough estimate.” He smiled at her, all warmth and sparkle. She didn’t trust it. Kirk Williams could probably get any woman to fall at his feet, but not her. She put him in the same category as her brothers because he’d practically grown up at their house. Back then, he’d been on the quiet side, wiry, a late bloomer who girls didn’t notice until late in high school.

“Damn, it’s good to see you, Gina. I almost didn’t recognize you.”

From the appreciative glint in his eyes, he meant that as a compliment. Figured, since she’d been a gap-toothed tomboy the last time she’d seen him. “Likewise. You were wearing a lot more foundation the last time I saw you on TV.”

He snorted, shifting gears to match her teasing approach. “Thanks for watching. Need an autograph?”

“Definitely. How much can I sell it for? Ten bucks on eBay?”

“Five ninety-nine on a good day.”

Crap. So he wasn’t as arrogant as he probably deserved to be, given his semi-famous hero status. After Kirk had left Lake Bittersweet, he’d joined the Army and somehow managed to save his entire squad from an ambush. He’d been hailed as a hero far and wide. Then he’d written a book about some of his experiences in the military—which she hadn’t read—and gotten even more famous. Also, he was super-hot, just like the waitress had said, so he’d wound up with a lot of press coverage.

He’d never bothered to come back until now, even though Kirk had been



her brother George's best friend. Despite her ups and downs with her brothers, she'd defend them all to the death, as they would her. So on George's behalf, she was furious with Kirk. Or ought to be.

It was hard to hang onto that indignation under that bright hazel gaze.

"What are you doing here? Does Georgie know you're back?"

"No, I just got into town. No one knows. Except you, now." That magic smile, as if she was special because she was the first to spot him.

"I'll be sure to alert the newspaper. And the mayor. She'll probably want to issue a proclamation."

Her wry tone made him wince. "I'm begging you..."

"Ooh, I love it when famous people beg me for stuff." She flashed a grin at him. "Unfortunately, they're usually asking about extra towels or bug spray."

"Bug spray?" He shook his head. "Never mind. Look, Gina, can we start over? If you don't want that wine, hand it over. I probably need it more than you do by now."

"Ha. Let me guess. No one teases the famous author and national hero Kirk Williams anymore? You're out of practice? You'd better get into shape before you see my brothers." She paused. "Are you going to see them? Seriously, what are you doing here?"

He folded his arms across his chest as he rotated his stool ever so slightly. "You don't seem all that happy to see me. You look like you're one breath away from tossing that wine in my face."

Did he know about her wine-tossing history? Or was he just guessing?

"Are those your breadsticks?" She pointed at the jar filled with crunchy spears.

With a cautious glance, he moved them farther away from her.

She narrowed her eyes at him. "What have you heard?"

"Heard? Nothing. Just remembered the Great Pretzel Battle of whatever year that was. Wasn't there bloodshed?"

She rolled up the left sleeve of her dress. “I still have a scar. Worth it, though. I won.”

“You did. Most competitive kid sister in all of Minnesota.”

“I’m sorry, *just* Minnesota?” She found herself grinning at him with the exact same sassy challenge that was her childhood default mode. It was such a good feeling that it chased away the bad aftertaste of Bitcoin Phil.

Talk about a miracle.

## *two*

The gorgeous woman who used to be everyone's little sister finally smiled at him. Gina's grin was all-encompassing, spreading from her dark flashing eyes to the merry curve of her lips. Even her rambunctious curls seemed to get onboard.

Kirk's heart glitched a little. Weird. He'd never thought of Gina as anything other than a kid, sometimes irritating, sometimes endearing.

"I've changed, mostly. I'm not that feral little girl anymore."

He wasn't so sure he believed that. "No more snack battles?"

"Okay, there was one, but it was more of an ambush involving a breadstick and a bad date. A different one. There've been a few."

"I'm sure he deserved it, whoever he was."

"Honestly, he really didn't. I was in a mood. He was collateral damage."

"Was there *actual* damage?"

"Slight abrasion," she admitted. "Also, he crosses the street whenever he sees me now."

He moved the jar of breadsticks even farther away, making her laugh. That was how she'd been as a child too, always ready to abandon her grudge and break into laughter.

Her phone buzzed and she tugged it from her purse. As she scanned the message, he took a moment to slide his gaze down the curves of her body in

that red dress. “Gotta go,” she said as she dropped the phone back in her purse. Then she caught the direction of his glance and glared at him. “Were you checking me out?”

“Is that...no...maybe...sorry, I just haven’t seen you in a while. Just trying to catch up.”

“Well, catch up to this. You have a lot to answer for, Kirk Williams. I don’t know why you’re back after all these years, but you shouldn’t have just left like that, with hardly a goodbye. My family was really sad about it.”

He frowned slightly. Georgie had never mentioned that, and he’d kept in touch, at least sporadically.

“Then you got famous and you never bothered to so much as call. My poor mother.”

He hated the idea of hurting Anna Moretti’s feelings, but then again, he had sent a gift basket almost every Christmas. Chocolates, fruit. It wasn’t as if he’d forgotten about the Morettis. They’d practically raised him from the age of about fourteen. Mario Moretti had encouraged him to join the military, Anna had made sure he was fed when his own father forgot. George and Frank and Mario Jr. had treated him like another brother. And Gina...well, she’d always been around, trying like the scrapper she was to keep up at hockey or paddling or climbing trees.

“I was planning to stop in. Do you think they’d mind?”

Gina’s eyes flashed to his, then her dazzling smile returned. “You’d probably make my mother’s entire year if you did that. She still boasts about you, even though you ditched us.”

Ouch. Maybe he needed to amp up the chocolate tribute.

“Are you sure? I don’t want to intrude if they’re all wrapped up in the holidays. I remember how crazy things get at the Morettis’ this time of year.”

At the mention of the holidays, Gina made a sound like a soft groan. “Wait, are you here through the holidays?”

“That’s the plan.”

“Then I hope you didn’t make any other plans, because you know Mama will want you at our house. And since you ghosted us—”

“I get it, I get it,” he laughed. “Don’t worry, I’m in.”

Secretly, he had been assuming the Morettis would include him in their Christmas celebrations. His best Christmas memories came from the time he’d spent at their place. But he hadn’t realized they were hurt and angry with him. He’d have to do something about that, right away.

The waitress appeared at Gina’s elbow with a credit card slip to sign. Damn, her loser date hadn’t even paid the bill? Kirk wished there was some graceful way he could take care of it, but Gina would probably empty a bottle of wine over his head if he tried that.

She must have caught his expression, because her cheeks flushed as she signed.

“Dating is the worst, isn’t it?” he said, going for the sympathetic approach. “Sometimes I think there ought to be a prenup before a date. Everyone knows in advance who’s paying, what the budget is, and what the expectations are for afterwards.”

The waitress burst out laughing. “Oh my gosh, I absolutely love that idea!”

Gina chuckled too, but the waitress’ laugh drowned her out.

And then she kept talking. “The bartender just told me who you are, I can’t believe Kirk Williams is back in Lake Bittersweet. Do you think I could get your autograph?” She edged past Gina and handed him a bar napkin.

Gina backed away, giving them space, as she teasingly mouthed “eBay” at him.

He quickly signed the napkin, then tried to jump to his feet to catch up with Gina before she reached the exit.

Which was when he remembered he needed crutches to go anywhere, and by the time he found them propped under the bar top, Gina was gone.



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While the bartender ran his credit card, Kirk propped himself on his crutches. The waitress hovered nearby.

“Is that from...you know, the Incident?”

“No,” he said. “More recent. Yeah, I know, I’m a magnet for trouble.” He took his credit card from the bartender and slid it into his pocket.

“Well, if you need anything, any help or...I mean, I get off in a few hours.”

He settled the crutches into place, his sore muscles groaning. This wasn’t his first stint on crutches; as he’d told the waitress, he was a magnet for injuries. Probably because he tended to throw himself into situations without thinking them through. He could probably use help once he got to the house he was leasing. But he didn’t *want* help. He wanted to get through this glitch in his life and get back to work.

The problem was that he’d inadvertently played the hero once again, and back in Boston, it had been big news. He’d been jogging through the park when a small child had toddled into his path. Of course he’d stopped to check on him, not realizing he was interrupting a kidnapping attempt. Not just any kidnapping attempt, either—the boy was the son of a local baked bean heiress. He’d fought with the kidnapper and wound up with a broken left tibia and tons of local media attention.

Too much attention, some of it from overenthusiastic fans. Messages poured in from all corners of the internet. They kept calling him a hero, which made him so uncomfortable. The poor kid had literally stumbled into his path. How was it heroic to do what anyone would have done?

But one of the messages had come from the sister he hadn’t seen in over twenty years. Her profile photo showed that she still had the same vibrant red hair and cheeky grin that had earned her the nickname “Sassy.” She wore cat-eye sunglasses and was blowing a kiss at whoever was taking the photo.

*We should talk. Meet in Lake Bittersweet?*

That sounded better than dealing with media requests and autograph-seekers and intrusive fans. Until all the fuss died down, here he was.

“That’s a really nice offer, thanks,” he told the waitress. “But I’m fine. I’m getting used to these things.”

“Well, if you change your mind, you know where I work.” She winked at him and returned to her customers.

“Thanks again.” He crutched his way through the tables, bracing himself for more greetings from people who remembered him. But none came.

That was exactly why he’d chosen the Loon Feather Bistro, because he hadn’t expected to see anyone he knew here. Most Lake Bittersweet locals only went to the most expensive restaurant in town for the most special of all occasions. Fiftieth anniversaries, lottery wins, record trout catches. It was mostly tourists here.

And, apparently, bad dates with beautiful Morettis.

Seeing Gina had been a shocker. When he’d first noticed her, he literally hadn’t recognized her. He’d simply appreciated the curly-haired knockout in the red dress. Eyeing her date, he’d wondered if they were a long-time couple or if it was a proposal situation. He was checking the mystery woman’s hands for rings when his gaze followed an enormous forkful of food from her plate to her mouth.

That was when he realized her face was familiar. It was the same face he’d seen covered in peanut butter smears from the sandwiches Mrs. Moretti sent with them on their canoe trips. He’d seen that face getting stuffed with popcorn on movie night in the Morettis’ den.

It was freaking Gina Moretti, wearing the hell out of a red dress.

Had he ever seen her in a dress before? Never. Okay, maybe on Sundays, when the Moretti parents dragged their clan to church. But not a red dress, not a dress that painted every curve with seductive allure.

Apparently that was what happened when you left town. People grew up.

Scrappy little gap-toothed kids turned into stunning women.

When he reached the car he'd rented, he stuck the crutches in the backseat and hopped on one foot to the driver's door. It was awkward, of course, but he knew how incredibly lucky he was. The child's kidnapper had been armed, but his wild shots had missed. If Kirk had gotten shot, that little kid might not have gone home.

Even his injury wasn't too bad. At the rehab center, he'd gotten close to an older woman who'd gotten her leg amputated above the knee. Along with the physical therapy, she was working on loving "Lucille," as she called her stump. He, on the other hand, would make a full recovery, if he did his PT and didn't do anything reckless. Yeah, he was lucky. Not a hero. Lucky.

He programmed the address of the house he'd rented—one of the summer vacation homes—into the car's GPS. It had been so long since he'd been to Lake Bittersweet, he didn't trust his memory. As he drove, he decided he'd better call George before Gina spread the word that he was in town. He and George still kept in touch. The only reason he hadn't told him that he was coming to Lake Bittersweet was that he wanted to keep it quiet. He didn't want any reporters trying to contact him here. Or, God forbid, any of the fans who knew every word of his book and lurked outside his building wanting to talk.

"Gina told me," George said as soon as he picked up. "Sneaky bastard, I'm not even mad. Good to have you back. Where are you staying? You can stay with us. You gotta stay with us."

'Us' meant him and his boyfriend, Otto. Georgie had come out to his family a few years after Kirk left, and if Kirk had one regret, it was that he hadn't been around to help him through that. He hadn't been all that surprised, even though George had never opened up to him about it. Maybe he hadn't been ready, but sometimes Kirk wondered if George just hadn't trusted him enough. Or maybe he figured Kirk had enough problems of his own.

Which he had.

“Thanks, but I rented a place. Big expensive one on the lake. It has a home gym and a pool. It’ll be good for my rehab.”

“Yeah? How’s that going? Is that why you’re here? Don’t they have better rehab places in Boston?”

Trust George to give him the third degree. He was a lawyer, after all. He didn’t miss much.

“I just needed to get out of town for a while.”

“You have to spend Christmas with us,” George said firmly. “None of us will survive the Mama Moretti meltdown if you don’t.”

He thought about Gina’s accusation that he’d hurt George and the whole family by not being in touch. George gave no hint of that. Maybe Gina had been exaggerating. She loved drama; the whole family did.

“Nice of you to ask. Good thing, too, since I already bought presents for everyone.”

George laughed. “Smart man.”

“But I have to start over with Gina’s present. I got her a slingshot like the ones we used to make, except not made of sticks.”

George chortled. “Actually, she probably wouldn’t say no to that.”

They both laughed, but Kirk felt a twinge of...something...that they were laughing about Gina. Teasing the Moretti brothers’ little sister had been harmless fun that he’d joined in on...but how had it felt for her? She’d always either laughed or punched someone in the nose or stormed off in a fury.

He turned off on the winding one-lane road that led to the fancy summer houses. So different from Edgeview, where he’d grown up. That neighborhood was all the way on the west side of town and he had no intention of going back there. That part of his life was over.

As he cruised along Lakeshore Lane, he peered at each stately home as he passed by, seeing no lights anywhere. Good. He’d probably be the only

person on this side of the lake. Some peace and quiet was exactly what he needed.

“That was the last thing I expected to see, little Gina on a hot date at the Loon Feather.”

“Well, get used to it. Everyone’s trying to set her up these days. It’s a whole thing. Frank is pissed that she didn’t like his workout buddy. He wants another shot, says there’s some bartender from Braddock that she’ll like. But she told him he’s lost setup privileges for the next year because this guy was so bad. It’s his own fault. Frankie never learns not to mess with Gina.”

Kirk appreciated the affection in George’s voice when he talked about Gina; much different from the little sister-big brother dynamic he remembered.

“Why does Gina even need a setup? She’s gorgeous. I didn’t even recognize her.”

“Oh, she doesn’t. Gina never has any trouble meeting men. But they never last long so she’s decided to broaden her horizons. She might be trying to get Mama off her back too. Don’t we know it’s our sacred duty to be fruitful?” He mimicked Anna Moretti’s dramatic complaints with so much accuracy that Kirk had to laugh. “I keep telling her I’m a fruit so I’m doing my part. Doesn’t seem to help.”

Kirk laughed as he checked his odometer, which he’d set when he’d first turned onto the lakeside road. Exactly three miles, bingo. “Looks like I’m here. I’ve got to find the keypad and get myself settled in.”

“Good luck, and call me if you need anything. Damn, man, I can’t believe you’re here. You’re coming over for dinner, okay? Maybe tomorrow?”

“I’ll check in soon,” Kirk answered vaguely. As much as he wanted to see his old friends, he knew that as soon as he did, more would surface. He’d be pulled into the social life of Lake Bittersweet and there would be no escape.

Not that he minded being social. But being back in Lake Bittersweet was a big deal for him. So many memories lurked around every corner. He needed



to take this slow. He was still a little shocked that his sister Sassy had suggested meeting here. She'd left long before he had.

He pulled into the driveway of the Mason place. Jerome Mason owned a high-end security firm. The house had top-flight security systems everywhere. Cameras covered every inch of the property and an invisible electric fence protected the perimeter. In the summer it was deactivated, since people in Lake Bittersweet tended to cut across the corners of shoreside properties to reach the lake. But Mason had told him how to set the perimeter alarm, and he intended to do it.

A complicated algorithm changed the passcode for the security system every couple of days. He'd been given a cheat sheet so he never got locked out. It was in code too, just in case.

Normally he would have considered such extensive security to be paranoia. He'd served in Afghanistan. He'd nearly died in that ambush. He'd learned how to handle the adrenaline rush of fear. He certainly wasn't afraid of the residents of the peaceful lakeside community where he'd grown up.

But with all the over-the-top media attention, he wanted a safe haven. He wanted to hole up somewhere quiet and peaceful and very, very different from the Edgeview hovel he'd grown up in.

He might be back in Lake Bittersweet, but he wasn't going back to the kid he used to be. Could a state-of-the-art security system take care of that too?

It took him a few tries with the keypad to get the code right. Finally he heard a click and was able to open the door to his new temporary home. His crutches echoed on the tiled floor of the foyer. He used his phone to find the light switch, until he remembered that the lights were keyed to his voice. He'd actually sent Jerome Mason a voice recording so that he could preprogram it that way.

"Turn on the lights," he said out loud, feeling a little moronic to be speaking to an empty house.

Bright illumination suddenly filled the foyer. He flung up a hand to protect his eyes. “Dim the lights,” he said quickly. He was plunged into darkness again.

“More light.”

Back to full brightness.

So maybe the “dim” function wasn’t working. Or maybe the computer didn’t understand the word “dim.” This wasn’t a Star Trek spaceship, after all. He considered disabling the whole system, but decided to mess with it in the morning.

He stumped through the house where he’d be spending the next month or so, and realized that it had a few issues. First, it was carpeted throughout with thick gray shag-like carpeting that snagged his crutches at every step. It was like walking through quicksand. The only rooms without the carpeting were the kitchen, bathrooms and the home gym.

Next, the house was huge. It was actually three stories high, and the best bedroom took up the entire third floor—probably for the sake of the views. He’d have to use one of the guest rooms on the second floor, or find a place to sleep on the ground floor. That meant he’d be stumping up and down the stairs a lot—which were also carpeted.

And what about cleaning? No way was he going to be able to maintain this nightmare of a carpet. Was there a special vacuum cleaner or was the house computer in charge of that?

“Vacuum the carpet,” he said out loud.

No response from the security system. Obviously, mundane household tasks were not in its programming. *I don’t do windows*, he imagined it saying.

His left thigh ached. He needed to do his exercises before he hit the sack. If he skipped even one day, he could feel the difference. Especially after driving, which always seemed to send his thigh into an angry pulsing tantrum.

He decided to leave his bags in the car for the night. The house was

supposed to be stocked with amenities such as toothbrushes. He'd deal with everything else tomorrow.

At least the home gym was exactly what he needed it to be. That one room made up for the damn carpet. It had everything—soft floor mats, hard floor mats, parallel bars, a stationary bicycle, a treadmill for when he graduated to that phase, a Peloton, an elliptical, a weight machine and free weights. He also noticed Thera-bands in a variety of colors. Clearly someone here had recovered from surgery and knew the drill.

There was even a massage room at the far end of the gym. If only it came with a live-in masseuse, it would be perfect. And that indoor pool, so blue and inviting with its underwater lights and subtle chlorine scent. *I'll be in you soon.*

He lay down on the softest mat he could find and did some gentle stretching. But as soon as he got horizontal, he felt an overwhelming need to close his eyes. *Just a minute of rest*, he told himself. *Then I'll get back to work. Then I'll climb up those stairs again and choose a bedroom with a view and...he was out.*

## *three*

In December, the lake was painted in shades of steel-gray and deep evergreen. Creamy curls of foam danced on the surface, chased by the winter wind. Even though Gina didn't compete anymore, she still loved paddling, especially on a misty morning when ice crystals danced against her face with every stroke.

She didn't often run into anyone else this early in the morning. But of all people of course it would be Ronnie Kenosha, her very first canoe teacher. She'd know his canoe anywhere; he still made birch bark canoes in the traditional Ojibwe style, with pine lashings and beautiful patterns painted on the side.

He was up ahead, gliding close to the piney shoreline. She made a "caw-caw" sound that traveled through the mist.

He turned to greet her, then paused his canoe so she could catch up.

"Thought I'd see you out here," he told her when they were rafted up together in the shallows. Ronnie was one of her very favorite people in the entire world. He wore his long graying hair in a single braid and didn't bother with neoprene paddling gear, even in December.

"You were looking for me? Aren't there easier ways than paddling in twenty degree temps?"

"Is there?" He seemed unconcerned. "My granddaughter needs a coach.

She's got some real talent. Reminds me of you."

"Then it's a good thing she has you for a grandfather. You're the best coach in Minnesota."

In fact, he'd spoiled her. She'd thought all coaches were like Mr. Kenosha—fair, kind, patient.

"No no, firecracker. She needs you. I'm too old now. Don't got the energy."

Panic flooded her. "Are you okay?"

"Yah, I'm okay. Just old. Think about it. She's sixteen, name's Amber. Amber Kenosha. Come see us sometime."

"You know I'm not a coach. I just teach group classes. Has she taken one of my classes? I don't remember her name."

"Nah, I've been teaching her. She goes to school in Braddock. She's real good, I promise. Olympic good."

The word made her freeze. She had no business getting near the Olympics, not after what had happened. Teaching classes was one thing. Canoe basics, the strokes, proper technique, no problem. But private coaching was an entirely different matter. Who was she to teach anyone, when she'd failed so utterly in her own quest for excellence?

She hated to turn down her favorite teacher, but it was for the best. "Can't do it, not even for you. I'm the fulltime manager at the Blue Drake now. And actually," she checked the waterproof watch strapped to the outside of her neoprene glove, "I'm late. I have to do a favor for Sally Trammell."

"Dream Getaways?" She could read his thoughts behind his impassive expression. *Why are you wasting your talent serving tourists?*

"Yeah. She needs me to check someone in. But I'm honored that you thought of me, Ronnie. I'll see if I can find someone really good for Amber."

She released her paddle from his canoe and they drifted away from each other.

Biting her lip, she refused to allow herself to look back at Ronnie. They'd

never talked about her failure at the Olympic training camp. Had he been disappointed? How could he not be?

She dug her paddle into the water, increasing her speed until it felt like she was flying across the lake. At least her Olympic-size failure hadn't destroyed the joy she felt while paddling. She'd be happy to stay out here all day.

But she'd promised Sally.

Sally had ambushed her two days ago at the SweetBitter Café. She'd even gone so far as to buy Gina a chocolate chip muffin, which meant she was really desperate.

"Okay, I'm going for the hard sell, kiddo. It's Christmas and if you don't do this, I won't make it to my daughter's and my grandkids might forget who I am. My daughter has twenty people coming and she'll have a completely emotional breakdown if I'm not there to help."

Sally fluffed her bob of silver hair and adjusted her orange-framed eyeglasses. She had retired to Lake Bittersweet from a career as a high-powered advertising exec, and still seemed to move twice as fast as the locals.

"Oh brother. That's low, Sally, even for a recovering marketing expert."

Sally blinked at her pleadingly behind those orange frames.

Gina sighed heavily. "Which house are we talking about?"

"The Mason house. The high-tech one on the eastern shore."

"Mason. He's the security expert, right? The one with all the computers?"

"Yes, and he's extremely particular about who sets foot in his house. You're the only one I trust."

Security expert. A little bell had rung in Gina's head.

For the last few weeks, she'd been trying to locate the man who had stolen her mojo, Coach Peters. The general idea was to confront him and tell him what a piece of shit he was, and hope that would help her move on from that experience. But she'd had no luck.

Would a security expert know how to find him?

Maybe she could ask Jerome Mason for a little help in exchange for stocking his cupboards and vacuuming his carpets?

Gina blew on the foam of her extra-shot cappuccino. “What’s Mason like? Is he pretty friendly to us lowly locals?”

“Mason?” Sally cocked her head. “I hear he’s recently divorced. I’ll set you up with him if you’ll do this tiny favor for me.”

Gina coughed on a mouthful of foam. “No, thank you.”

“Are you sure? Word is you’re open to setups.”

Oh God, *Sally knew*? This was getting out of hand.

Sally went on. “I have a rolodex full of contacts who have grown sons—”

Gina cut her off with quick zip of a gesture. “One more word and I’ll shove the job off on my brother Frank. Last time he used a vacuum cleaner he nearly vacuumed up my nephew’s pet gerbil.”

Sally shut her mouth with a snap. Then, cautiously, “Is that a yes?”

“Lord, you’re relentless. Yes, fine, I’ll do it. Go save your daughter from holiday mental collapse.”

“You’re an angel, darling girl.”

“You know that’s not true. I have one condition.”

“Anything.”

“Please don’t try to set me up with anyone. I have to set some limits. People are getting way too into this.”

“Fine. Honestly, if I knew anyone really eligible I’d save him for my other daughter.”

After her morning paddle, Gina stopped in at the SweetBitter for her usual cappuccino.

The owner—and her good friend—Rick brought her a glass filled with thick foamy liquid the color of grass.

“What’s this for?”

“How was your date last night?”

“Well, I hid out in the bathroom while he made a date with someone else. And I still don’t understand Bitcoin.”

He grinned with satisfaction. “I knew Frankie would fuck it up. Here, this is my bad date antidote. I’ve honed the recipe over years of dating disasters, and it has a one hundred percent success rate.”

Gina eyed it suspiciously. “What does it do, exactly? Make you so ill you forget about the date?”

“Pretty much,” Rick said cheerfully. “Enjoy.”

She took it to go, and headed for the eastern shore of the lake, where the fancy houses were located. The smoothie sat in her cupholder, changing from a disturbingly vibrant green to a horrifying brown as it oxidized. If a bad date had a color, that would probably be it.

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A loud sound was blaring at him, telling him to wake up, get out of bed. But Kirk was trapped in the past.

*It was just before Christmas and someone was knocking at the door of their house. No one ever came to their house. Why would they? It was dumpy and miserable and Poppa would yell until they left anyway. Kirk ran to open the door before the knocking woke Poppa up. As usual, he was in his recliner in front of the TV.*

*A couple—a middle-aged man and woman—wearing Santa hats stood on the doorstep. One carried a bag full of wrapped presents. “Merry Christmas!” they sang together. “We hear there’s a little boy in this house who’s on the nice list this year!”*

*He shook his head, even though man-oh-man, he wanted those presents. Whatever they were. But it was too embarrassing and his father would flip out. “No, thank you, ma’am. Sir.”*

*“You aren’t,” the woman checked her list, “Kirk?”*



*Could he say he was George Moretti? Or Frankie? No, he couldn't lie right to her face. "My Poppa already got me so many presents. There's a big pile under the tree." He tried to come up with some specifics, calling on the Christmas lists the Morettis had been obsessing about. "I think there's a Nintendo and a new hockey stick and a scooter and a Hula Hoop."*

*The Santa lady looked puzzled. Oops, the Hula Hoop was Gina's Christmas wish.*

*"You should go over there." He pointed to a house across the street where a family had just moved in. They had seven kids and could probably use some extra presents. "But thanks anyway. Merry Christmas."*

*"You're a sweet boy, you know that?"*

*"Imagine," he heard the woman Santa saying to the man Santa as they crossed the street. "Imagine being so generous at such a young age. Quite the little hero."*

*I'm not a hero! he wanted to yell. You don't understand!*

The loud sound came again. He blinked himself awake on the cushiony workout mat. Right. Lake Bittersweet. The Mason house.

He dragged himself into a sitting position and rubbed out a kink in a neck muscle. Squinting, he looked around, grounding himself in the here and now. Lackluster daylight shone through a glass sliding door, which opened onto a brown lawn with patches of snow. Outside, a gray, roiling sky threatened more snow. Stark, bare-branched trees mingled with evergreens at the edges of the lawn. Winter in Minnesota. Somewhere out there was the lake. Lake Bittersweet.

He'd slept until morning. And someone was pounding on the door.

He found his phone. It was after nine-thirty, holy shit. How had he managed to sleep all night and half the morning on a damn workout mat?

This was probably someone from the management company handling the

house rental. Dream Getaways or something like that. It had to be; no one else knew the house was even occupied. Jerome Mason had mentioned that the manager would be stopping by soon after he arrived to make sure everything was in good shape.

Groaning, he rolled off the mat and began the awkward process of getting himself upright and onto his crutches. Why did it always mean sticking his ass in the air? It was a good thing no TV cameras or autograph-seekers were around to see this. But it might give Gina Moretti a good laugh.

## *four*

Gina glared at the doorbell of the three-story glass-and-stainless steel mansion. She didn't know this house very well; it was one of the newest on the lake, designed by an architect who was trying out some new ideas. Rumor had it there was a pool behind those blank walls. Paranoid-level security, too.

But no matter how many high-tech features it had, a doorbell was still a doorbell. And Jerome Mason wasn't answering. She pressed it one more time, then pounded on the door once again, just in case the man had selective hearing challenges with the doorbell part of the spectrum.

Then she paused as the sound of awkward thumping from inside caught her attention. It didn't sound like footfalls, not exactly. It sounded like a weird sort of horror-movie dragging motion, like a dead body being hauled downstairs. Why had she watched so many horror movies with her brothers?

A frisson of fear shivered down her spine. At this moment, she was the only living being on this side of the lake, other than whoever was inside this house. Her phone was back in her car. All she had for self-defense was her keys.

She gripped her key ring in her fist, with two keys pointed outwards. Classic self-protection move for women in parking garages—at least in every thriller she'd ever watched. Here in Lake Bittersweet, there were no parking

garages. But there were creepy men, and if Mason was one of those, she'd be ready.

She heard the sound of keys being punched on a keypad—probably the twin of the one outside the front door. A soft cursing, a beep, and then the door lock clicked. She brandished the keys, poised to attack if necessary, and maybe even if not, just to be safe.

The door swung open—and so did her mouth when she saw Kirk Williams' sleepy eyes and stubbled jaw. And that bedhead...and half-unbuttoned shirt...and hard chest...she snapped her mouth shut again.

When he saw her threatening posture, he took a quick step backwards, which nearly made him lose his balance. He was on crutches, she saw. *Crutches?*

With her free hand, she grabbed the front of his shirt to keep him from falling. His gaze seemed stuck on her other hand, the one with the keys. She dropped them, feeling like an idiot, and they clattered to the tiled floor.

The hand that she'd twisted into his shirt touched hard muscle. His chest. She was groping Kirk's chest. Oops.

Why hadn't Sally mentioned that it wasn't Mason staying here, but Kirk? Disappointment rushed through her. There went her chance to ask for a security expert's help. On the other hand...that chest, those muscles...

Gina snatched her hand back, though it still prickled from the brief contact with Kirk's chest. "Sorry," she said. "Are you okay?"

He managed to stabilize himself. His hair was ruffled and his eyes bleary, as if he'd just woken up. It was almost ten in the morning. Maybe she should have waited until later in the day. Another oops.

"Yeah. Good. You?"

She bent down to pick up her keys. "I'm fine. I...I didn't know you had crutches. I didn't recognize the sound and...I'm sorry. Overactive imagination."

He didn't seem fazed. In fact, he seemed to understand perfectly. Maybe

he too had watched too many horror movies as a kid.

Or maybe he'd gone to war and survived an ambush and done all kinds of other traumatizing things.

In the chilly gray light of day, she scanned his face, looking for the boy who'd been almost like an extra older brother to her. He was still there, somewhere—in the gleam in his hazel eyes, the quirk of his smile. But generally speaking, he looked older and...if not wiser, then more experienced.

A little shiver went through her, different from her earlier shiver. This one held something else, something she didn't want to consider. Attraction? God forbid.

“How did you know I was staying here?” he asked, sounding wary. He beckoned her inside, backing up on his crutches to give her space.

“I just had to find you. I just couldn't stop thinking about you and that autograph you promised.”

At her teasing tone, he laughed. “You mock me, but can you believe there are people who track me down for autographs? There's a kid who shows up outside the studio after every interview I give. No matter where it is, he's there.”

That sounded mildly creepy, actually. She followed him as he led the way to the kitchen.

“I promise I'm not an obsessed fan. I'm from Dream Getaways. I'm here to check on you and make sure your stay here in Lake Bittersweet is everything you ever dreamed of. I mean, if you leave out the part where I nearly attacked you with my keys.”

He burst out laughing. “Yeah, I'm thinking I should leave that off the review.”

“I'd appreciate that.” She eyed his crutches, noticing how wobbly they were on the shag carpet. “Were you on crutches last night too, or did something happen since the last time I saw you?”

He chuckled as he reached the tiled floor of the expansive kitchen. “It’s been over a month. Hoping to get off them soon. I booked this place for the private pool and the home gym. Mason didn’t want to rent it, but...”

“He couldn’t turn down a war hero.”

Kirk let that pass without comment. “I wish he’d mentioned the carpet, it’s like walking through eelgrass.”

They both shuddered. Eelgrass grew in the marshy stretches at the edge of Lake Bittersweet. It could easily swamp you in the mud.

“I can try to find you another rental,” Gina offered, but he shook her off.

“I’ll get used to it. Maybe it’s a good workout.” With a sigh, he settled onto a barstool next to the pristine marble-topped kitchen island. “Make coffee,” he said in a slightly louder voice.

“Excuse me?” Gina bristled. “That’s a little rude, don’t you think? I’m not here to be your servant, you know. We take care of cleaning, provisioning of supplies, laundry, concierge-type services. Not making your damn coffee.”

He gave her an astonished look, then burst out laughing again. “Sorry, I was talking to the computer. This house has a voice-enabled security system. I was thinking that maybe it makes coffee too.”

Just then, the sound of a machine whirring to life made them both swing toward the counter by the sink. Sure enough, a stainless steel coffee maker was dripping deep brown liquid into a mug.

“Holy shit,” said Kirk. “I love this fucking house. Want some coffee?”

“No thanks, Rick made me a revolting hangover smoothie I’m still digesting. I think it blocks out the hangover misery with even worse misery.”

When he started to get up to fetch the coffee mug, she stopped him with a gesture. Despite her objections to being ordered to make coffee, she didn’t mind helping out an injured ex-soldier. She got up and extracted the mug from the coffee maker. “How do you take it?”

“I’m not picky. Any old way it comes.”

God, she could think of a few dirty jokes in response. But this was a

professional encounter, she reminded herself. She was on the clock. She carried the mug to his eagerly waiting grasp.

“Ahhh,” he sighed as he breathed in the steam. “I didn’t even make it to the bed last night. Ever spend the night on a workout mat?”

“That’s an awfully personal question from someone I knew a million years ago.”

He smiled a bit as he drank deeply from the mug. “It feels like it was just yesterday when we all hung out together, tromping around the woods and dirt-bike racing and so forth. Playing in the lake.”

All hung out together? That wasn’t how she remembered it. “You guys were always trying to get rid of the annoying little sister.”

“Were we?” He squinted into the air. “I don’t remember it that way. You were fun to have around. Like a mascot.”

She set her teeth. The word “mascot” didn’t make it one bit better. “As I said, that was years ago. I’m here to bring you up to speed on the house.” She dug her iPad from the messenger bag slung over her shoulder. Dream Getaways used an in-house app that detailed all the information for each house they managed. “Have you located the towels and extra sheets and blankets?”

“I didn’t make it out of the gym,” he admitted. “I was wiped out from the drive.”

“So why are you here, Kirk? I don’t think you ever said.”

“Oh, a couple reasons,” he answered vaguely. “Do you follow the news much?”

“Not lately. Did something happen? Let me guess, you performed another newsworthy act of heroism?” Even though she was teasing, his expression told her she’d hit the bull’s-eye. “Seriously, you did?”

“I broke my leg rescuing a toddler from a kidnapper,” he admitted almost sheepishly. “But it was just a stroke of luck, not nearly what they’re making it out to be.”

“Hm.” She didn’t really believe that. Kirk had never been one to toot his own horn, or even know he had a horn. While everyone else argued and quarreled, he would just take care of shit. A quiet storm. “So you’re here to escape the media madness?”

“It’s one reason.”

Of course she was curious to hear more, but he didn’t seem to want to go any further. He was focussing on his coffee, and besides, she was here to do a job for Sally, not chitchat with the client.

“I’ll go take a quick sweep through the house, if that’s okay with you.”

He waved his coffee mug at her. “Go ahead, I’m good here, just me and my coffee. We’re very happy together.”

“Well, if you feel like expanding your little family, there should be several breakfast options in the fridge.”

“How long have you worked at this job?” he asked her. She could hear the unspoken question. *Why this and not something involving canoes?*

“It’s not my regular job, I’m just filling in as a favor. I work at the Blue Drake now. Full-time manager of the cabin rentals. But I’ve worked for Sally in the past. I’ve worked just about everywhere in town. I get bored easily.”

Probably because she wasn’t doing the thing she loved most, but that wasn’t his business. He was still listening, his hazel eyes steady, scruffy jaw visible behind his coffee mug, waiting for more details. So few people listened like that, especially in her family, in which everyone talked over each other all the time.

“I also teach canoe classes part time,” she finally added. “But that doesn’t pay much. I volunteer at the high school too. Mind if I leave this here?”

She took off her sheepskin jacket and left it on the counter, along with her marigold-yellow scarf. In the winter, she wore as many bright colors as possible to combat the gray and the cold.

“No problem.”

A memory came back to her. “Remember the time you guys hid my



clothes after we all went swimming, and a squirrel ate a hole in my shorts?”

He let out a snort. “That was Mario. Swear to God. Didn’t I give you my hoodie to tie around your waist?”

“It was the least you could do.”

“Did I ever get it back, come to think of it?”

“I have no idea. My mom probably washed it and stuck it in someone’s drawer.” Actually, that wasn’t true, she remembered suddenly. She’d given it to an older girl who had a crush on Kirk. No, not given. Sold. For ten bucks. What’s-her-name would have paid even more, she remembered, that was how grateful she’d been.

Flushing at the memory, debating whether to confess, she climbed the stairs to the second level, where the guest bedrooms, a den, and the home office were located. In the den, the liquor cabinet was fully stocked with everything from expensive bottles of Scotch to Campari and mini-bottles of soda water.

If the zombie apocalypse came to Lake Bittersweet, she’d try to find her way here and hole up with Kirk, she decided.

The view from the upper floor, where the main bedroom suite was located, was absolutely breathtaking. She could see over the swaying tops of the pine woods to the lake beyond. Her heart twisted as she watched the wind twirl the foam in a winter dance. Where she lived, it was easy to forget there was a lake nearby. Her apartment had a view of the brick house next door. She liked it that way.

Watching the lake always gave her a bittersweet twinge. She loved it, and yet it reminded her of her Olympic failure. Some of the best hours of her life had been spent racing across the lake in a canoe. Her passion for the sport of canoe sprint had taken her all the way to the Olympic training site in Charlotte.

On the other hand...a lake was more than its surface. It had depths too. Lake Bittersweet had a way of holding onto secrets, and sometimes they

came bubbling to the surface in unexpected moments.

Like with Kirk...

Sometimes he'd been really sweet to her. Once, when she was ten, he volunteered to paddle in the double canoe with her for the July 4<sup>th</sup> races. Her father had planned to compete with her, but he'd gotten sick. None of her brothers had time, but Kirk had stepped in and they'd actually won the race. That was her first taste of victory and she was hooked.

But what about all the times he'd just shrugged when her brothers had refused to let her play touch football because she might get "hurt"? Or when they insisted that boys shouldn't have to wash dishes because they were splitting the firewood and she couldn't even lift the axe?

He was like a brother, and yet not like a brother. It was confusing. And now he was full-grown and intensely attractive, and that was even more confusing.

She shook off those thoughts and focused on her job. First, she made up the enormous custom king-size bed in the main suite, just in case Kirk decided to crutch his way all the way up to the third floor. Better bring some bedding to the ground floor too.

As she grabbed an extra pillow for downstairs, a thought occurred to her. Jerome Mason wouldn't rent his place to just anyone. Sally had said he was very protective of his house. Since Mason wasn't here, what if she asked Kirk to put in a good word for her? Should she take a chance and trust him with the story of Coach Peters?

No one knew about that experience, especially not her brothers. In general, when it came to her brothers, she kept her most personal business to herself. They knew only that she'd failed spectacularly at the Olympic training camp. They didn't know why or any of the details. She hadn't wanted them to know since they'd either tease her or want revenge on Coach Peters.

But Kirk wasn't *actually* her brother. He wasn't a Moretti, who were all

known for being dramatic and messy. She didn't want that type of reaction. She just wanted some calm and level-headed help, minus the over-the-top judgment and emotion.

Would Kirk even *want* to help her? He was a busy celebrity now. He might not have time to spend on her problems.

On the second floor, she poked her head into the home office. It held multiple computer terminals and a wall of servers. A few lights blinked, and a split-screen monitor showed various angles of the wintry grounds, along with each entrance to the house. On one of the feeds, she watched a rabbit hopping through the yard. Her instructions were to dust in here if it seemed to need it, but everything looked pristine.

She carefully closed the door and headed for the stairs. Maybe Kirk was her best option, but she didn't yet know if she could trust him. Would he be the Kirk who had kept her secret the time she'd beaten up a bully? Or the Kirk who had laughed when Frank had turned her first bra into a battle flag? Everyone called him a hero, but would he be *her* hero?

## *five*

When Gina reappeared, she was carrying an armful of bedding.

“This is in case you wind up on the floor again,” she told him. “They have some extra sleeping cots, do you want me to set one up for you here on the ground floor?”

Her tone was formal, that of a person doing a job. It felt very strange to have Gina wait on him like this. He still didn’t understand why she was working for the Blue Drake instead of dominating sprint canoe races.

“Nah, I’ll manage. You don’t have to wait on me, Gina. I’m a grown man.”

“With an injury,” she pointed out. “And the power to leave a review.”

“I’ll let you write the review, how about that?”

“The stunningly beautiful manager anticipated my every need, so I left her a five thousand dollar tip, the bare minimum of what she deserved,” she intoned.

He laughed and dug in his pocket for his phone. “Do you take Venmo?”

She waved him off. “Seriously, I’m worried about how you’re going to make it up those stairs. Don’t be a tough guy, it’s so predictable. I’ll make up the cot and you can use it or not, it’s up to you and your own personal pigheadedness.”

For some reason, her bluntness cut through his automatic “I don’t need

help” stance. He’d gotten plenty of soft and soothing attempts to smooth his way. He hated that. He liked her approach better.

“Have you ever thought of going into one of the helping professions?” he murmured as he followed her to a utility room that opened off the kitchen. “You’d be a natural.”

“Oh, here we go. Didn’t take you long, did it?”

“What didn’t?”

She dragged a wheeled folding cot from the utility room and pushed it through the kitchen. “To start teasing me. Just like the good old days.”

“Sorry, do you want me to stop? Does it offend you?”

“It doesn’t offend me. I’m a Moretti, I’m used to it. And no, don’t stop. It’s a good reminder.”

“A reminder of what?” His time in Lake Bittersweet felt like a million years ago. He was a different person now in so many ways.

“How you were always around, adding to the chaos. As if three older brothers weren’t enough.”

She said it lightly enough, but he got the point. Apparently he’d been another thorn in her side. He wondered if she’d understood *why* he’d always been around back then, or if she’d been too young and sheltered. He’d left when she was about fourteen. That was plenty old enough to know that not everyone had a family like the Morettis. But she’d certainly never come to Edgeview. Not even George had.

When the wheels of the cot hit the shag carpet, she came to a dead stop. He dropped one crutch and bent to help her carry it over the carpet. It was awkward, hopping on one foot, the metal frame of the cot in one hand, a crutch in the other. But he couldn’t just stand by while she wrestled that thing into submission.

“I can handle it,” she said sternly. “It’s my job. And you’re injured.” He ignored her until they set the cot into place. “Step back,” she ordered. He moved out of the way as she released the lever that held the cot closed. It

sprang open, barely missing him. She aimed a glare at him, her dark eyes snapping, her cheeks pink. “I told you I had it under control. That cot could have sliced you like a turkey breast.”

He wished she hadn’t used the word “breast.” Hard not to notice that she now had a full-grown set of them, and that her navy blue V-necked sweater showed them off beautifully. *Stop it. This is Gina.*

He gazed down at the metal frame that had come within an inch of knocking him on his ass onto the shag rug. “I survived boot camp and combat, I think I can handle a cot.”

“As can I.” Her scowl softened as he brushed a hand across his leg, making sure he hadn’t been hit by the frame. “You okay?”

He nodded, stumping back to the crutch he’d dropped. She rushed over to him to pick it up, but he stopped her with a gesture.

“Look, I have to do something to earn that five thousand dollar tip,” she said lightly.

“Let’s call a truce here.” He bent and picked up the crutch. “I’ll let you do your job and you don’t baby me.”

She went back to the cot and shook out a sheet, sending a sweet laundry fragrance into the air. It was comforting. As she tucked the edges of the sheet under the mattress, he added, “And I’ll stop teasing you if you don’t like it.”

“It’s not that I don’t...” She trailed off, then added a top sheet to the cot. “Fine. I accept.”

He wondered what she’d almost said instead. The old Gina would have blurted out whatever was on her mind, but the grownup Gina seemed more cautious. Less of a scrapper and more of a...survivor.

“Can you define what teasing is?” he asked. “So I know the boundaries.”

She picked the fluffy comforter she’d brought from upstairs and dumped it on the cot. “See, now you sound like you’re humoring me. Like you’re not taking me seriously. Just like the old days.” She unfurled the comforter over the cot in a billowing wave of quilted fabric. It caught a current of air and

floated back toward her, one end of it draping itself over her head.

She clawed it away and glared at him, but he was ready. He kept his face stern. “Sorry, were you saying something about taking you seriously?”

“Oh, shut up.”

But the corner of her mouth twitched, and a moment later she was laughing as static electricity from the comforter made her hair stand on end. That was how Gina had always been, he remembered. Ready to brawl one minute, laughing her ass off the next. Fiery. And now that she was all grown up, another word seemed to fit. Passionate.

He’d have to watch himself so he didn’t focus on that quality. They’d just had a moment, that was all. He didn’t need to be thinking about her “passionate” side.

When she left a few minutes later, her messenger bag in tow, her yellow scarf wrapped cozily around her neck, she told him, “My parents asked me to invite you over for dinner. They have the same number, just give them a call.”

“Are they still hurt about how I left? I talked to George last night and he didn’t mention it.”

Color tinted her cheeks. “I might have exaggerated that part.” Under his curious gaze, she admitted, “Okay, it was me. I was hurt that you didn’t say goodbye. It’s silly, I know. I was fourteen, what can I say?”

A weird sense of delight flooded into his heart. Teenage Gina had wanted him to say goodbye? It had never occurred to him that she would care.

“I’m sorry. I screwed up.”

She gave him a long look, as if assessing his sincerity. He felt it in his lower regions, a stirring, an awareness...an interest.

She nodded. “Okay. Thanks.”

“Will you be there? At your parents’ house?”

“Sure, sounds super fun.” Her wry tone of voice made it sound more like a chore than a good time.

“You don’t want to have dinner with me?”

“It’s not that I don’t want to have dinner with *you*—”

Aha. She’d walked right into it, so he pounced. “Then have dinner with me,” he said promptly. “The Loon Feather. You pick the night. I’ve got nothing but time on my hands.”

“What?” Looking flustered, she shook that off. “No. There’s no need for that. What I was going to say was, it’s the combination of you and my parents that I’d rather avoid.”

“Why?” What he really wanted to ask was what she meant by “there’s no need for that.” And why she’d rejected his dinner offer with so little thought.

“Oh, you’ll see. Brace yourself. If you think your obsessed fans are bad, you ain’t seen nothing yet.”

With that, she headed out the door toward her car, a jaunty little electric Nissan Leaf. She was moving too fast for him to follow on his crutches, so he didn’t even try. He’d see her soon enough at the Morettis’ house.

Maybe then he could figure out why she didn’t want to spend time with him, either with the Morettis or without them. Whatever the reason, he didn’t feel the same way. He wanted to see her again. He wanted to win her over, get her to shine that smile at him some more. He wanted to charm her.

Ever since his book had become a bestseller, he’d gotten used to people being impressed with him. Gina treated him more like a possibly defective and slightly annoying family member. It was different, and it made him want to prove something to her.

“You’re a shallow bastard, you know that?” he muttered to himself as he closed the door and let the silence of the house settle over him. “It won’t kill you if someone isn’t impressed with you.”

Maybe not...but this wasn’t just “someone.” This was Gina. Her opinion mattered to him. Why, exactly? He mentally shrugged. He liked a challenge, that was probably all it was.



## *six*

For the next couple of days, Kirk checked his Facebook every hour or so, but no messages came from his sister Sassy. He let her know that he was in Lake Bittersweet, ready to meet. But he got no answer. Sassy had always been unpredictable.

Her profile had no identifying information, which made him wonder if it was even real. Was someone playing a trick on him?

That uneasy suspicion increased when he got a call from a network producer as he was getting dressed for dinner at the Morettis.

“Are you available for a quick comment on the situation in Singapore?”

“No. I don’t even know what the situation is. Take me off your call list for now, Banks. I’ll let you know when I’m available again.”

“I can fill you in pretty quick,” the producer began.

“No. I’m not going on the air. Not for anything,”

“Not going on the air?” Banks sounded deeply shocked by that concept. “But you’re great on the air, you’re a natural. Photogenic, articulate, charismatic.”

“It’s a no,” Kirk said firmly. “You can put away your thesaurus.”

“See? What other hero soldier knows the word thesaurus?”

“Every single one. I’m serious. Don’t call me again. I’m taking a break.”

“Yeah, I guess I don’t blame you. Stay safe.”

The way he phrased that made Kirk do a double take. “What do you mean?”

“Oh, nothing. I just see how your fanboys behave. That kid was here again.”

“That kid...you mean Price? Timothy Price?”

“I don’t know his name. The one who hangs around you like a girl with a crush.”

Price was harmless, but he could be annoyingly persistent. “You didn’t tell him anything, did you?”

“Nope. But he gave me the heebie-jeebies. I thought he was going to cry when I told him you were gone for a while. I think he did cry after I went past the guard and he couldn’t follow me. I looked back and saw him wiping his eyes. Haven’t seen him since.”

“Sorry about all that, Banks.”

“You know how you could make it up to me?”

Kirk rolled his eyes. “I have to go. I’ll be in touch when I’m ready to get back into the game.”

“The news is not a game,” Banks said solemnly, which made Kirk give a snort of laughter.

“Glad to hear that,” he said dryly. He wished it weren’t a game, but sometimes people seemed to treat it that way.

He ended the call and thought about poor Timothy Price. The kid was only about twenty, and Kirk thought he might be homeless, at least sometimes. He knew Kirk’s book by heart—literally. He quoted full paragraphs to Kirk every time Kirk saw him after an interview. In his opinion, the kid had a serious and misplaced case of hero worship.

But was it something more dangerous?

There were people who didn’t like him, after all. Every time he did a TV spot he got nasty emails. Some people thought he was full of himself. Other people found his voice annoying, or his hair, or the way he laughed. It went

with the territory. He just brushed it off.

And then there were the people angry about his book. Most people picked up *Frontlines* expecting to read about the ambush and how he and his squad had escaped. That part was there, but you couldn't read about that without also hearing about Keiria Brown, a fellow soldier and good friend of his.

Keiria had been the occasional target of sexual harassment, and instead of stopping it, their commanding officer had ignored it and even joined in. One night he'd gotten wasted and groped her. Luckily, Kirk had shown up early for their regular game of spades and caught him in the act. Keiria had reported the incident and he'd testified for her. After his book had come out, the colonel had resigned.

So yeah, he'd dragged a lot of stuff into the daylight that some people wanted kept quiet, and that made him a few enemies. Every time a news producer called him up to book him to comment on the latest sex scandal in the military, he knew it was a ticket to another avalanche of bitter emails.

It didn't stop him. The book was out there, after all. Writing *Frontlines* had been cathartic, but he was no scandal-monger looking to destroy careers. He'd like to write another one on an entirely different topic, but he hadn't figured out what.

He finished getting dressed, then put a call in to a friend from the Army who now worked for the FBI. He left a message for Earl Granger asking him to call when he got a chance.

His phone rang shortly thereafter. By then he was in his SUV, cruising down the road that hugged the lake. The Morettis lived all the way on the other side, closer to the public landing, just past the bait shop they ran.

He punched the button for the car speaker. "Hello?"

"This is Granger. What's up?"

The man had a way of getting right to the point. "Listen, would you mind checking on someone for me? There's a kid in Boston, kind of a fanboy, and I'm worried about him."

“Worried why?”

“I’m out of town for a while. That might be...disruptive for him.”

“Jesus, Williams. Are you serious? You’re worried for your stalker?”

“He’s not a stalker. He’s a kid who thinks I’m some kind of hero. All I need you to do is find him and let him know I’ll be back in a month. I’ll pay you,” he said quickly, into Granger’s silence.

Finally, a long sigh. “No need. What’s the name?”

Kirk told him, then spelled it as well. He wondered if he could ask Granger to look into his sister Sassy, too. For many reasons, he decided not to. For one, Granger was based out of the Boston FBI office. Minnesota wasn’t his territory. For another, Sassy would probably kill him if he invaded her privacy like that.

“How are you doing, man? Any plans for the holidays?” he asked instead.

“Nothing big.”

Granger had always been a man of few words. Kirk didn’t know much about his family, other than a few references to an unfortunate family history. They shared that common bond, but they didn’t talk about it.

“If you feel like a trip to the heartland, come on out.”

“I thought you were in the hinterlands.”

“Little of both. Open invitation.”

A few minutes after he hung up with Granger, he slowed the car as he reached the downtown area of Lake Bittersweet, a mix of older brick buildings and newer plaster construction. Residents in winter gear—snow boots and hats with ear flaps—walked briskly in and out of storefronts, nodding to each other, occasionally stopping for a quick chat before the cutting wind shoved them onwards. Kirk could feel that wind buffeting his car.

Nothing like a cold Minnesota winter wind. Even safely inside his SUV, he shivered.

All along the main business district street, long strings of fairy lights

swung from one lamppost to the next; they too swayed in the wind. Was a storm coming? He peered up at the sky, noting clouds with gray bellies. If they decided to unload, the town could get a decent snow dump.

He drove past the Blue Drake Club, which looked just as gaudy and out-of-place as ever. When the late rock star, Steven Gault, had opened that club, he'd put Lake Bittersweet on the map. Kirk had lots of memories of sneaking into the club to listen to the latest world-class blues act or hot new pop star looking for some street cred.

The Blue Drake had changed his life because it had opened his mind to a bigger world. He could leave this little town, he'd realized. He wasn't stuck in Minnesota, doomed to grow into his father, silent, morose, depressed, bitter. He could leave and become *someone*. Make his mark. Earn the world's respect.

That was all he'd ever wanted...to be someone worthy of respect. Someone who mattered, someone who people paid attention to.

What if it was a mistake coming back to Lake Bittersweet? What if being here dragged him back to those old days when he felt like nothing? Even though no one from his family lived here anymore, what if all those horrible feelings were waiting here, ready to jump him and dig their claws into him?

## *seven*

Just when his heart was starting to race with anxiety, he rounded a bend and spotted the Morettis' bait shop squatting at the top of a pier not far from the Blue Drake's private dock. A stuffed and lacquered fish was mounted over the door. The building looked in need of a paint job, but he knew the Morettis usually spruced it up in the spring after the long winter had taken its toll.

A hundred yards behind the shop, nestled into a grove of gently swaying pines, stood the Moretti house. His haven during all of middle and high school. Painted white with deep green trim, it was clearly a house for boys. Its yard was a kind of junkyard of cast-off toys—an old jungle gym, a teetering basketball net, a sand pit for horseshoes, a target for archery practice, multiple deflated footballs, an old hockey net that Mr. Moretti had rescued from the dump. He'd intended to rehab it for use on a pond deep in the woods, but it still sat at the end of the lawn.

He spotted two little kids racing across the snow-covered lawn, playing tag, and for a moment thought he'd been transported back to the old days. But no, he remembered, those must be Mario Jr.'s kids. One of them looked so much like Gina, all wild curly hair and sturdy little body, that he blinked. Those Moretti genes really held true.

Before he could even knock on the door, it was flung open and a flock of

Morettis crowded around him, embracing him, slapping him on the back, talking nonstop, elbowing each other aside.

He was out of breath and a little claustrophobic by the time Anna Moretti called a stop to the whole thing. “Let the man breathe,” she ordered.

Everyone else stepped back, and even though it had seemed like a mob, he saw it was only the two Moretti parents and George and Frank. Mario Jr stood by the fireplace, holding a child on his hip. All the brothers were taller and fitter than he remembered, but they still looked just as mischief-minded and curly-haired. The room practically reeked of testosterone.

There was no sign of Gina.

His heart sank, and he wondered if something had come up to keep her away. This dinner would be much less fun without her.

Then she walked through the archway that led to the kitchen, wiping her hands on a dish towel, and the entire room seemed to brighten.

“Sweet lord above, I thought Elvis had just walked through the door,” she grumbled.

“Better than Elvis,” Mrs. Moretti proclaimed, patting him on the cheek the way she used to on occasion. “And just as famous.”

“Not remotely,” he began, but in the Moretti house, it could be hard to get a word in.

“Anna and I read your book cover to cover,” Mr. Moretti interrupted. “Couldn’t be more proud.”

“It was wonderful,” gushed Mrs. Moretti. “If they make it into a movie, make sure they cast that cute boy to play you, what’s his name now...” She snapped her fingers, trying to remember.

Frank, master of the wry quip, said, “Does it start with Chris? Most of them do.” He still had that hockey player build, with some extra muscle packed on.

“No no, he has the wavy hair and the pretty eyes, the ski chalet, he’s a little skinnier than our Kirk, look at those muscles on you, my my, but you

didn't always have those and I still remember when you were nothing but bones and eyes."

"And hair," said George. "Don't forget the wavy hair."

"Of course hair. Why wouldn't he have hair? He's still young. But for healthy hair, you must eat more salmon." Suddenly serious, she fixed him with a stern look. "Salmon, you understand? Or herring."

He nodded, because what else could he do? He'd forgotten what it was like conversing with Mrs. Moretti, whose thoughts had their own non-linear logic that masked her sharpness. She had to be tough, to handle all those wild and highly competitive boys, and their little sister. By some kind of hidden magic, she'd always run circles around them.

His glance swung toward Gina, as if magnetically drawn there like a compass. She was squinting at him, frowning, and said suddenly, "Mama, are you talking about Timothée Chalamet? The one in *Dune*?"

"Chalamet, yes! Ski chalet, that's how I remember him. It's a memory trick, though I suppose it's not much use if I only remember the chalet and not his name."

"But Kirk looks nothing like him! For one, he's about twice his size."

"Oh psssst." Mrs. Moretti brushed that away. "Those little details don't matter. It's the pretty eyes and those long eyelashes."

Kirk blinked a few times, then realized he'd only managed two words since he walked through the door. "Someone bought the movie rights," he told her. "But I have nothing to do with casting. Or the script, or any part of it. The last thing they want is me hanging around."

"Well, that's ridiculous." She put her hands on her hips, ready to do battle. "Give me a number, I'll talk some sense into them. I can organize a boycott, I did it when one of our aldermen started spreading nonsense conspiracy lies. Got rid of him in no time."

Once again, he met Gina's glance and saw that she too was fighting back laughter.



George flung an arm around his shoulders and pulled him in for another hug. “You ready to turn around and run for your life yet?” he murmured in Kirk’s ear.

Kirk shook his head with a smile. “No, man, but I could use a beer.”

“On it. Otto’s out of town, you’ll have to meet him another time.” George looked happy and thriving, with the same up-for-anything grin that had made him stand out in high school. All of the Morettis had dark hair, but he already had some silver streaking his short-cropped curls. George had also put on some pounds since Kirk had last seen him. Healthy pounds, to his eye. Wine-and- happiness pounds.

“Gina, *cara*, get a beer for our Kirk,” ordered Mrs. Moretti.

Gina rolled her eyes, and Kirk could practically hear her thoughts. *Why do you single out the only woman here to fetch the beer? That’s so sexist!* It was the kind of thing she used to fight with her mother about; he remembered lots of door slamming and stomping of feet.

“Nope, I got it, Mama,” said George, with a quick glance of apology at Gina. Maybe they’d worked some things out over the years. “I brought some Belgian ale I think Kirk would like. I’ll grab it.”

“I brought something too,” Kirk told the group. “But I couldn’t carry it in from the car. Could someone...”

“I’ll get it.” Gina hurried toward the front door before anyone could preempt her. “I could use some air.”

She brushed past him, carrying the scent of fresh herbs with her—basil or thyme, something that made his nose prickle and his stomach growl. The food served at the Morettis’ house was always mouthwatering.

“I’ll go help her,” he told the rest of the family. “Make sure she grabs the right thing.” He hadn’t even taken his coat off yet. “Be right back.”

He stumped after Gina, who was wearing skin-tight skinny jeans and a bronze cowl-neck angora sweater that seemed to brighten up the whole yard.

“It’s locked,” she called to him when she reached his SUV. “You know

you're in Lake Bittersweet, right?"

"Still getting used to the idea." He didn't want to mention that a tabloid reporter had once climbed into his car when he'd left it unlocked. He clicked the fob and she opened the back door. "It's that blue gift bag. Bottles of wine. I didn't want them banging against my crutches."

She bent over to reach inside the car for the bag. His gaze latched onto her ass and her firm curves. Was she still as athletic as she had been as a kid? Winning all the trophies, no matter the sport? Why was she managing rentals instead of competing in world championships? He still hadn't gotten a satisfactory answer to that question.

Withdrawing the gift bag from the car, she peeked inside. "Ooh, they're going to love you even more now. These are from Piedmont. Ancestral Moretti territory."

"Oh, I remember. I went there, did you know that? On leave from the Army. Everyone else went home, I went to drink wine."

A wistful expression crossed her face. "Someday I'll get there. It's on my bucket list."

"If you do, I'll meet you there and show you around," he said lightly. "I know where all the best breadsticks are."

She laughed and shook her head at him as they walked back toward the house. "I'm giving you that one, but after that I'm cutting you off. No more breadstick mentions."

"No? How about hockey sticks? Are those fair game? I remember when you clocked me after that race on the pond—"

"No hockey sticks either. Why doesn't anyone like to admit that I've grown up and don't fly at people for no reason anymore?"

"Oh, you always had a reason."

Surprised, she lifted her eyebrows at him. "Thank you. I did. Good reasons, too."

"That part's debatable," he murmured. She punched him lightly on the

arm, sending a fizzy rush of excitement into his bloodstream.

“Just when I thought we could be friends, you bring me to my senses.”  
Even though the words sounded harsh, she was smiling.

Maybe he was right back to zero with her, but maybe not. He still had some tricks up his sleeves. Including all that wine.

## *eight*

Gina had dreaded this dinner for Kirk, even though she'd known it was inevitable. Of course her parents wanted to see him, and so did her brothers. Even Mario's kids were curious about the guy they'd seen on TV. Mario let his three mop-tops meet Kirk, then took them home so they could put up their Christmas lights.

After that, there was no avoiding the gush-fest that Kirk's presence inspired.

He deserved it, she kept reminding herself. He was so successful, more so than almost anyone she knew. No other Lake Bittersweet kid had gone to war, performed heroic acts, written a bestselling memoir, and then appeared on TV with world-famous news anchors. It was incredible, what he'd accomplished. He deserved all the attention and she didn't begrudge him a minute of it.

The problem was the feeling that kept creeping back in, that sense of being invisible in her own family.

If only she'd been able to do what she'd set out to do. Would that have made a difference? If she'd stayed at the training camp and gotten selected for the Olympic team, would her family have seen her as worthy?

It was too late now. The sport of women's sprint canoe racing was relatively age-flexible. Some people competed into their late thirties. But

these days she just paddled for fun, not with the competitive fire that had driven her before. Now it was all about the sensory joy of it, the water sliding under the hull, the silent gliding through patches of sunlight and dappled tree shadows.

The word “canoe” caught her attention, and she snapped out of her trance. “Yes. What? Sorry?”

Frankie laughed and threw a bit of bread at her. She caught it in one hand, quick-draw style. “Kirk was asking if any of us still like to paddle. I told him you’ll be out there until the lake freezes.”

She grinned. “Even then I find a way.”

“Kirk, you two should paddle together some time,” Mama said. Gina had heard that tone of voice before. The matchmaker vibe. She’d have to put a stop to that immediately.

She glanced at Kirk, wondering if he’d noticed. He wore a thick rust-colored sweater that did wonders for his hazel eyes. Since she’d seen him last, he’d allowed some dark scruff to appear on his face, and it suited him. Damn it.

“Remember when you won that trophy with Gina?” her mother continued. She’d touched up her roots for this dinner, and put on an extra bright shade of pink lipstick. She was vain about her trim figure, despite her four children, and loved to wear form-fitting leggings and low-cut blouses. “That trophy still has a prime spot in our den. Of course, a trophy is nothing compared to a war medal. Do you have it with you? Your medal?”

“No, I--”

Gina bit the inside of her mouth. Poor Kirk, going up against Mama’s whitewater current of words, like a canoe with no paddle.

“I ask because as soon as I found out you were back, I talked to the mayor and we decided to give you the keys to the town. She wants to have a big ceremony after Christmas. The week before New Years would be perfect, so start preparing that speech, my dear Kirk.”

“Ooh, will there be an official proclamation, Mama?” Gina asked, all exaggerated eagerness. She caught Kirk’s eye; he looked torn between amusement and mortification.

“I really don’t need the keys—” he began.

“Well, of course you don’t, no one has keys to the town, it’s not as if we’re a gated community. It’s symbolic, it means that...well, what does it mean?” She looked to her husband for help.

“That he’s a bigshot.”

“That he has a big head,” threw in Frank.

“Or a big c—“ George started under his breath, before Gina clapped her hand over his mouth. Sometimes George could get carried away with the irreverent comments, even more than she did. And his were X-rated. It was a good thing Mario had already taken his kids home.

“What was that, Georgie?” asked their mother.

Both Gina and George struggled to hang onto innocent expressions. She looked to Kirk for help, but all he said was, “How about all of the above?” which just made it more impossible not to laugh.

Luckily her father stepped in at that point, thanks to his years of managing volatile Moretti dinner conversations. “So Kirk, I never got the story of why you’re back in town.”

“Oh, just taking a break,” he said.

Interesting, Gina thought. Apparently he didn’t want to share the story of his heroic deed.

“Yes, you must be so busy, all those interviews and news appearances,” her mother gushed. “It must be exhausting to be so in demand. And yet you make time for us. We’re so honored, aren’t we, Mario?”

Gina caught Kirk’s eye, trying not to laugh. She’d warned him, after all. He made a little face at her, so quickly she doubted anyone else noticed.

Her mother continued. “I remember when your father moved away. One day he was just gone. No one knew where he went.”

“He, uh, died a while back,” Kirk said. “I got the news when I was in Afghanistan. But we hadn’t been in touch for a while.”

Kirk shifted uncomfortably in his seat, and Gina noticed color rising in his neck. She didn’t know much about his family because he never used to talk about them. By the time she paid attention to such things, they’d all left Lake Bittersweet. She’d heard rumors of prescription painkiller addiction, and of course there was his mother, who’d run off with the grocery bagger from the Braddock Safeway.

“And your mother?” Mama asked, relentless as a pit bull. “And Sassy? Where is she?”

Right, *Sassy Williams*...Kirk’s sister who’d left long ago. Gina had no memory of her at all. Sassy was older than Kirk, she knew that, by about ten years.

“I’m not in close touch with either of them,” said Kirk. “I do talk to my mom now and then. She remarried a while back and they live in Florida. I don’t know where Sassy is. We were messaging on Facebook, but then she stopped communicating. My family in a nutshell.”

Kirk grabbed for his fork and knife and dug into his veal parmigiana. Gina knew that strategy well. Pop a piece of food in your mouth and no one could expect you to talk.

“Well, they’re missing out on a shining star.” Mama reached over the table to touch his hand.

Gina felt the same impulse, but she wrestled it down. He didn’t need two Moretti women fawning over him. Poor Kirk, how sad to be so disconnected from his family. She might be a big disappointment to hers, but she always knew they loved her.

“Any parent ought to be proud of you. I’m bursting with pride myself, simply as someone who watched you grow up. Of course I’m proud of my own children too,” she added quickly. “Did you know that George is a homosexual?”

George choked on a sip of wine, spewing droplets onto his plate. Gina shoved her napkin toward him. “Mama!” she hissed. “How is that appropriate?”

“I’m saying that I’m proud of him for owning his truth.”

Frankie covered his face with a napkin, clearly trying to hide the fact that he was quaking with laughter.

“I gave her some affirmation videos,” George choked out in explanation. “Guess you watched them, huh Mama?”

“Yes, I did, and they were simply beautiful.” She turned back to Kirk, whose eyes were wide with something like terror. He was probably afraid of choking if he started laughing with his mouth full of veal. “I’m proud of my homosexual son.” She enunciated the words clearly, as if she’d been practicing.

“I believe you,” Kirk said through his mouthful of meat. “You should be. He’s the best.”

“You two always were such good friends...are you also a homosexual?”

“No. No, I’m not.” Kirk finally managed to wash his veal down with a swallow of wine.

“Mama...” George groaned.

“In that case—”

As one, all the Moretti children spoke up. “Don’t even...please no... absolutely not...” Finally, Frank managed to break through by virtue of having the loudest voice.

“Mama, *do not* try to set Kirk up with any of your church friends.”

“And why not?”

“We talked about this. You’ve already made me go out with them all, and I can save Kirk the trouble and guarantee he won’t be interested. Also, he doesn’t live here and they’re all looking to get married.”

“Can’t we let Kirk decide for himself?” She swung toward Kirk. “Wouldn’t you like to meet some lovely, charming, marriage-minded young



women while you're here?"

He swallowed, as if stalling for time. Gina hoped he didn't choke while trying to figure out the right answer. She jumped in to rescue him.

"Remember the rules, Mama? No matchmaking. We all agreed that it never ends well."

"Hmmpf." She glanced at Gina, then back at Kirk. "It's true, I did agree to let the children find their own partners. I might have had a tiny and regrettable hand in Gina's marriage."

She caught Kirk's surprised glance. "Very short, ending in divorce," she explained lightly. Not her favorite topic. "And it really wasn't Mama's fault, but even so, she agreed to the rules."

"The rules don't apply to Kirk. He's not my son."

"He practically grew up with us, so I think he's included." George glanced around the room, looking for unity. They all nodded, Kirk with extra eagerness.

Mama threw up her hands, giving in. "Never mind, marriage isn't all it's cracked up to be, anyway."

Well, that was different. They all went quiet, stealing glances at each other. Gina noticed that her father seemed unfazed as he sipped his wine. He knew his wife well, because in the next instant, Mama grinned.

"Except for us, of course." She blew a kiss across the table to Papa. "Neither of us is perfect, but we sure do love each other."

Of course they did; what else could keep them together through four kids and nonstop work building their bait shop business?

"We all just want what you have, Mama," George said, lifting his glass in a toast. "Minus the impossible family, maybe."

"Oh no no no no!" Her mother was too appalled to lift her glass to that. "Children are the most important part. I will not participate in that toast. Can you imagine, Kirk, I gave birth to four children, four perfectly healthy, able-bodied children, and only one of them has bothered to reproduce?"

“Mama, you don’t need to take it so personally,” said Frank. “The rest of us will get around to it someday.”

That word “someday” was like a red cape to a bull. “That’s why I keep telling Gina she should freeze her eggs if she’s going to be so picky. She just flits from one boy to the next.”

Gina settled back in her chair, wishing she had a blanket to hide under. They’d all heard this rant many times, and it was best to just let it flow. Interrupting it would set off more fireworks.

“It’s called dating, Mama. It’s a very common practice. In fact I just went on a date the other night. By the way, thanks for nothing, Frankie. You’re cut off.” She directed a glare across the table at her brother.

“You’re about to run out of men in Lake Bittersweet. You might have to switch to women,” Frankie teased.

“Wonderful idea,” Mama exclaimed. “Lesbians make lovely parents. Gina, dear, in that case, you ought to stop breaking men’s hearts. I’ve also been reading about something called polyamory. Am I saying that right? If you can’t settle on one person, why not two or more?”

*Oh God.* Fighting off a fit of laughter, Gina tugged her turtleneck up over her face. It only covered the lower half, but it helped. She caught Kirk looking her way, his eyes bright with amusement, and gave a moment of thanks that he was used to the Moretti family’s ways.

“Gina’s not a lesbian.” George put his hands on the table and leaned forward. “Mama, you shouldn’t throw around speculation about someone’s sexuality. Did you miss that part of the video?”

Great. Now they were all talking about “sexuality.” Could this go downhill any faster?

“Well, I’m open to suggestions,” said her mother. “Maybe I shouldn’t have let her play with you boys so much. Now she has no illusions about the male gender. Men are nothing but annoying brothers to her.”

Frankie thumped a fist against his chest. “You’re blaming us for Gina’s

crappy love life? That's a stretch, Mama. She made that mess all on her own."

Gina closed her eyes, thinking of her cozy little apartment. It cost her way too much in rent, but it was totally worth it to have her own place. She loved curling up in her blissfully comfortable loveseat with a glass of wine. She could switch on the TV and lose herself in someone else's drama. Maybe a reality dating show would do the trick.

Around her, the dinner table erupted into quarreling. Papa banged his fist on the table, calling for silence, but that trick had stopped working fifteen years ago. George and Frank were arguing about the ethics of outing people, and Mama was listing to Kirk the women she *would* have set him up with if she'd been allowed to, along with personal details such as, "prefers a vegan diet" and "wants a large family."

Talk about an ambush. Just let him try to get out of this one.

## *nine*

“Admit it,” Gina whispered to him as they walked down the porch steps after dinner. “Another tour of duty would have been easier.”

She had a point. Kirk’s ears still rang from that full-on brawl that had taken over the dinner table. And somehow his phone was full of numbers he was supposed to call. How Mrs. Moretti had managed to skirt the rules, he had no idea.

“It was good to see everyone,” he said diplomatically. He knew perfectly well that it was one thing to complain about your family, and another to hear someone else complain about them. Gina would leap to their defense like a tiger if he said anything too critical.

He crutched his way to his car and initiated the stow-the-crutches-in-the-backseat dance. Hopefully by the time the snow got deep, he’d be through with the damn things.

He glanced up to catch her watching him with a curious expression. “You don’t really talk about your broken leg much, do you? I think everyone assumes it’s related to your service, so they don’t push.”

“I told you what happened.”

“You told me the bare minimum.” She held the door open while he maneuvered himself inside. “You left out all the juicy details.”

He thought about his dinner invitation, and the way she’d rejected it

without a second thought. “Come over for a drink and I’ll tell you the whole story.”

Looking startled, she adjusted her bright pink scarf around her neck. It matched the wind-blown patches of color on her cheeks. “Now?”

“Why not? I could use a drink.”

“We went through four bottles of wine at dinner.”

“Yeah. And I could use another four.”

She laughed at that. “How about you come to my place? I’m on the second floor, but the stairs aren’t carpeted.”

“I can handle that.”

“I’ll make you some coffee. Drunk driving with crutches seems like a bad idea.”

“I’m not drunk. I kind of wish I was, but I never quite got there.”

Her dark eyes danced. He noticed little gold flecks in the deep brown; maybe that was why her eyes always seemed to sparkle. Combined with her bouncy curls and sassy-snarky attitude, she was a full-on knockout.

Her phone buzzed, and she quickly checked it. “Perfect timing. If you really want a drink, Kendra’s pouring at the Blue Drake. Technically, at Alvin’s Burgers and Blues, the new restaurant.” She looked at her phone again. “Kendra, Carly and Thomas, possibly Conor Gault and Emmaline are going. Interested?”

The thought of another group gathering made him feel tired. His leg was throbbing, and he really didn’t want to fend off more questions about how he’d gotten injured.

She caught his hesitation. “Maybe another time.”

“I’d still go for that coffee,” he said quickly. “Tonight or whenever you want.”

“Coffee?” George said from behind Gina, wrapping his arms around her. “I could use a cup. Where are we going? I hate going home when my man’s out of town.”

Sharp disappointment made Kirk's stomach drop. He'd really wanted some time with Gina, for whatever reason. But that didn't make sense; George was his longtime friend, not Gina. She was the pesky little tagalong with the heart of a lion.

But there was no way to change it now, so they all ended up in Gina's second-floor apartment in the old Standard Bank building, about a five-minute walk from the Blue Drake. As soon as he stumped into the space, silently cursing the existence of so many stairs in Lake Bittersweet, he felt a sense of peace come over him.

Gina had created a serene haven for herself. The apartment had the feel of a loft, with the kitchen taking up the back wall, and a view of the cozy downtown lights visible through the tall windows at the front. All the furniture was chosen for maximum comfort and the walls were painted a soothing cream with a touch of sage. He sniffed, picking up the relaxing scent of incense.

George plopped himself on the couch and swung his legs onto the padded ottoman. "If you ever want a nap, Gina's is the place to go. Do you know Mama takes it as a personal insult? She doesn't like coming here. She says Gina is trying to drug her with aromatherapy."

Gina, still in her coat and scarf, closed the drapes, which instantly made the space feel even more intimate. "You guys just sit back and relax, I'll get some coffee going."

"Are you being sarcastic?" George asked. "Sometimes it's hard to tell."

"I'm not being sarcastic," she said with irritation. "You're my guests, invited or otherwise, and I'm going to make you some coffee."

George stepped to Kirk's side to give him a hand as he lowered himself into a recliner. "I think I'm the 'otherwise.' Should I leave?" he whispered.

Kirk shook his head, though a small part of him wanted to say 'yes.' Even though George was such an old friend, Gina was the one who'd grown up so fascinating. Not that he didn't love his friend, of course. But he couldn't stop

thinking about Gina and how much she'd transformed, and yet was still the same fiery person he remembered. But with an overlay of...maturity? Complexity? Experience? Wariness?

While the coffee perked, Gina brought in cups, along with cream and sugar, and set them on the coffee table. She distributed cork coasters to them all.

"Little Gina, a fan of coasters," Kirk joked. "She's just full of surprises."

"You have no idea," George said as Gina shoved his feet off the coffee table. "Every time I turn around she's got a new job or a new guy."

Gina straightened and unwound her scarf. "Can we not? I just spent an entire dinner being topic number one. I need a break."

"Sorry," Kirk said quickly. "I didn't mean it that way. I love coasters."

"Actually, I think we need to talk more about Gina." George leaned forward, elbows propped on his knees. "A brilliant idea came to me during dinner. That's why I'm tagging along even if I wasn't, strictly speaking, invited." He shot a sideways glance at Gina, who, after hanging her coat and scarf on the pegs next to the front door, perched on the arm of the loveseat.

"You know you're always invited, Georgie. You're currently my favorite brother. Just keep your damn feet off my coffee table."

"Never a good sign when she calls me Georgie," he told Kirk ominously. "And she rotates the favorites. I think it might be random, but there may be an algorithm involved."

Gina swiped at his head, but he ducked. "Do you see what I have to put up with?" She turned to Kirk. "These idiots all act as if we aren't grown adults."

The roar of the electric kettle died down, and she jumped to her feet to tend to the coffee.

"You shouldn't tease her so much," Kirk said in a low voice to George. "I don't think she likes it."

"Really?" He looked surprised. "Are you sure? She always gives as good

as she gets.”

“Well, why don’t you ask her?”

Now George looked even more surprised. “I’ll think about that.”

Gina came back with a French press coffee carafe, and set it on a coaster. Finally she let out a sigh and sank onto the love seat next to George. “You guys know I can hear every word you say in here, right? For the record, I don’t mind teasing, so long as it comes from a place of respect.”

“I respect you.” George tousled her hair with one big hand. “Any other woman on the planet would have ditched us all by now. You’re one of a kind, Gina Moretti. One of one. The only one.”

“Don’t quote Beyoncé at me,” she snapped. “And don’t mess with my hair. It’s been a long night.”

“Sorry.” George pulled his hand away and she shook herself like a cat. “Did I just lose my status as your favorite brother?”

“It’s shaky,” she warned. “But bribes are always welcome.” She pulled up her knees and wrapped her arms around them, then relaxed her head to rest it on the back of the loveseat.

George stretched out his legs and crossed them at the ankles. “So, how are the setups going?”

Gina sighed. “Interesting.” She sounded like she was hedging.

“Interesting is not the same as fun or enjoyable or satisfying or—”

“Fine. So far it’s not going great. Frankie is dead to me, as you know. Thomas Cooper tried to set me up with his brother Galen, who everyone knows is in love with that teacher. We went hiking and spent the whole time plotting how to get her attention. Conor swears I’m going to *love* his friend Charlie Green, but he won’t be here until after Christmas. And the name Charlie just makes me think of a spaniel.”

“King Charles Spaniels are fantastic animals, very gentle, playful.”

“Good to know.” Gina made an approving face. “Then I look forward to meeting him.”



“What does the name Kirk make you think of?” George dropped that question like a little grenade, making both Kirk and Gina startle.

Kirk narrowed his eyes at his friend. “What are you talking about?”

“The obvious.”

He gestured between Kirk and Gina, who both looked at each other, completely mystified.

Just then, a sleek black cat jumped onto the arm of the loveseat, and Gina changed her position so it could climb into her lap.

Kirk watched her stroke the cat, who arched his back and purred happily.

“That’s Gina’s true love right there,” joked George. “She’s nicer to Jetta than she is to most people.”

“Jetta?” Seemed like an odd name for a cat, but what did he know? He’d never had a pet in his whole life, unless you counted the feral cats that used to hang around his childhood neighborhood.

“Jet because of her beautiful black fur, and Jetta because she turned out to be female. But I just call her Jet. I found her in the wheel well of my car when she was a kitten,” Gina explained. She dipped her head to drop some kisses onto Jetta’s furry head. Her open affection for the creature was incredibly endearing. “And I hate the word ‘nice.’ It always sounds like you’re faking it. I don’t consider myself ‘nice.’”

“Then why do you volunteer at the pet shelter?” asked George.

“I get discounted cat food.”

“Why do you help out the high school ski team on your off hours?”

“Because they begged me and you know I’m a sucker for flattery.”

“Why do you let your canoe students crash at your place when they can’t go home?”

“I guess I have no life.”

This was turning into a ping-pong match. Kirk could barely keep up.

“Why do all your friends call you the most loyal one?”

“I don’t know, ask them.”

“Why were you the first person I came out to, because I knew you’d have my back, why—”

“Jesus, give it a rest!” Gina’s cheeks glowed pink with embarrassment. She glared at her brother. “I feel like you’re working up to something here. Just spit it out.”

“I am. It’s why I invited myself along. I want to make it official.” George leaned forward and pressed the plunger on the French press.

Kirk exchanged another glance with Gina, who shook her head and lifted her shoulders.

“Make what official?”

“My entry into the Gina-stakes.”

“The *what?*”

George stroked his perfectly trimmed beard. “Oopsie. You didn’t know people are calling it that?”

Gina turned pink, her fingers picking up the pace as she stroked her cat’s ears. Jet opened her green eyes in a nervous slit. She looked like she was trying not to laugh. “I swear, this town. It was just supposed to be Conor and Emmaline, and then everyone else decided to get into the act and wait, if they’re calling it the Gina-stakes...please don’t tell me people are placing bets...” As her stroking got more agitated, Jet gave a yowl and leaped out of her lap.

“Sorry, Jet!” Gina called after the cat, who ignored her and stalked toward the kitchen.

For a flash, Kirk wished he could put his own head in Gina’s lap and let her skillful fingers do their thing.

He sighed as he forced himself to face the truth. He was attracted to Gina. Extremely so. Try as he might, he couldn’t stop looking at her. When she spoke, he was entranced. When she was quiet, he wanted to know what was on her mind.

But as far as he knew, she saw him strictly as an older-brother type. One

with an injury, at that. Could he change her mind about him, with only a month to work with—while he was on crutches?

Sure, he liked a challenge, but Gina was a vibrant, beautiful woman who everyone was trying to set up. What chance did he stand? And what the hell were the “Gina-stakes?”

## *ten*

Gina felt as if her only ally had left when her cat Jet abandoned her. George was up to something, and even though he was currently her favorite brother, she couldn't always count on him to not embarrass her.

"Fill me in," Kirk said. "What's the Gina-stakes?"

"That's my term for the matchmaking mania that's currently taking over the town. I'm hoping everyone else gets on board with it too." George's dimple flashed as he grinned. "It's catchy, isn't it?"

"No, it is not. And it will not catch on," Gina said firmly. "Because you're not going to repeat it outside this apartment. I'm not a sweepstakes prize."

"Of course not, you're the one who *gets* the prize." George took a sip from his coffee. "It's because we all love you and want you to find the holiday date of your dreams. Whether you want it or not."

"Well, do you want it, Gina?" Kirk asked, looking amused by the entire topic. Easy for him to laugh, when he wasn't the one with a "stakes" after his name. "Seems like you should have a say."

She took a pause to consider. On balance, if the alternative was surviving the holidays solo, she preferred the Gina-stakes. *Ugh, don't call it that!* "My own personal track record of picking men is sketchy. That's why I'm okay with all these setups. But if any more of them are like Frankie's guy, I might

have to shut this down.”

George reached over and gave her a brotherly squeeze on the shoulder. “Don’t be so hard on yourself. Even I had a crush on Junkyard at first. That bike, those boots, that ink. Bad boy catnip.”

Her cheeks warmed again. She kept blushing, and couldn’t stop. Did Kirk Williams have to get a front row seat to a whole discussion devoted entirely to her love life?

“You know, this conversation would be a lot more fun if we talked about someone else for a while,” she grumbled.

“Sure, let’s turn to Kirk,” George said instantly, shifting his attention to the tall man stretched out in her armchair, his crutches resting on the arm as if poised for a quick escape. “Do you have a significant other you haven’t mentioned to your oldest friend?”

Ha! Now it was Kirk’s turn on the hot seat. Gina curled up in the loveseat so she could be cozy while she watched him squirm for a change.

Also, she was very interested in his answer to that question.

“No, George. I’m not hiding a girlfriend from you. At the moment, I’m single.”

“And very attractive,” George added.

“Uh, thanks.” Kirk shot a quick glance Gina’s way, as if begging her for help. But she just blinked at him innocently. She’d survived her moment, now it was his turn.

“Am I the only one who can do math in this room?” He looked back and forth between the two of them. “I want to set you two up with each other.”

“Excuse me?” Dismayed, Gina scrambled onto her knees on the loveseat. She didn’t want George stomping his big feet all over her relationship—whatever it was—with Kirk. A flush of heat swept through her, and she couldn’t bear to look over at Kirk to see how he was reacting. “Stop it, George.”

George leaned forward and propped his elbows on his knees. “Don’t react

so quickly. At least think about it.”

She finally looked over at Kirk and found him shooting George a hard, frowning glance. Her heart dropped all the way down to her fuzzy slippers. Clearly, the idea pissed him off. But then why had he asked her to dinner at the Loon Feather? She’d been wondering about that, but now his reaction made it obvious. It had been a “catch-up” kind of invite, not for a date.

“Kirk is one of the few people I’d trust with my baby sister,” George added.

*Baby sister...oooh*, now he was really in trouble. She felt like Jet when her cat crossed paths with the dog next door. If only she could arch her back and get her hair to stand on end like Jet did.

Quickly, before Kirk could say anything, she turned on her brother. “I’m adding you to the banned list. The whole family’s on it now, from Mama on down.”

“You can’t just ban me. That’s against the Gina-stakes rules.”

“There are no rules because there is no Gina-stakes.” Any minute now and she might have to wrestle her current favorite brother to the ground.

Kirk still hadn’t said anything. He probably didn’t want to be rude by rejecting George’s idea.

“Can I appeal this ruling?”

“No appeals. And why do I have to have a brother who’s a lawyer?”

“But it’s arbitrary and unfair.”

Finally, Kirk spoke up. “Gina can make whatever ruling she wants. It’s her life.”

“Exactly!” She shot him a grateful look. He was standing up for her, just the way he’d done when they were little—sometimes. “I’m sorry to say, George, you’re in serious jeopardy of losing most-favored-brother status. It’s a good thing Frank’s so far behind.”

George threw up his hands in self-defense. “All right, I’m backing down. I’m just trying to help because I love and adore you both. But I’ll shut up

now.”

“Thank you,” Gina said. “But don’t pretend you’re not in it to win this silly Gina-stakes. I know your competitive ass.”

“Just think about it,” he added quickly. “That’s all I ask.”

“George!” She tossed a throw pillow at him. “Kirk is here to rehab his leg and get some peace and quiet. He doesn’t need your interference.”

That brought the topic to a close, thank goodness. An uncomfortable quiet settled over the room. Was this going to make things awkward with Kirk? She glanced at him under her lashes just as he stretched his arms overhead.

“Speaking of my leg, it’s telling me to get my ass into bed, and these days, it’s the boss.”

Her heart twisted in disappointment. No wonder he wanted to go home; he’d wanted coffee, not George trying to push him into asking her out.

He caught her glance, and must have read her expression. “Seriously, the end of the day is always the worst.”

George got up and offered his hand to help. The fact that Kirk accepted it told Gina that he really was in pain. He normally liked to do things for himself as much as possible.

She jumped to her feet. “Do you need anything? We can drive you home if you like. I can drive your car and George can bring me back.”

“Thanks, but I’ll be okay. I just need to get horizontal.”

“I have a guest room,” she offered. “All my friends know it’s always available, no questions asked. Unless someone’s already in it, obviously. But no one’s here tonight.”

“That’s a great idea.” George got Kirk upright then, helped him get his crutches in place. “Why stress out your leg more than you have to?”

“Thanks, but I should really get back. I’m all set up for my morning rehab routine out there.”

Yup, he was definitely running for the hills. She couldn’t blame him.

George grabbed his coat for him and as he pulled it on, he directed a

smile at Gina. “Are you coming out tomorrow?”

“If you request it. Need a little cleaning?”

“Yes please. I can manage laundry, but it’s hard to vacuum on crutches.”

“I’ll be there. Don’t bother with the laundry, either. I got it.”

Even the fatigued version of his smile made her knees wobble a bit. Imagine going on a date with him. Would she make it through dinner without melting into a puddle?

As soon as Kirk had left, she turned on her brother. “What the hell, George? You totally put him on the spot and embarrassed him.”

But a funny smile was playing over her brother’s face. “I don’t think so. You’re the one who rejected my idea. He would have said yes. I think he’s interested in you.”

She threw up her hands and went back to the living room to clear away the coffee things, even though none of them had drunk more than a few sips. “Go home, you’re drunk.”

“Fine. But you heard me.” He pulled on his coat, dramatically tossed his wool scarf around his neck, and headed out the door.

She gave up on the coffee cups and collapsed onto her loveseat. “Here, kitty-kitty,” she called, hoping Jet would have forgiven her by now. She had—neither of them held onto a grudge for long—and a moment later she had a warm lapful of purring cat.

What a frustrating night, all the way from dinner until just now. Throughout the evening, she’d sensed this glimmer of something—a connection with Kirk, a silvery thread of amusement and alliance joining them together. It had made being with her family a different experience, in a good way. And then George had barged in and ruined it. Could she get it back? Did she want to? What was this new thing she was feeling for Kirk?

As she scratched Jet behind the ears, she checked her email on her phone and saw she had received an answer from the school where Coach Peters had last worked.



*“Coach Peters is no longer employed here, but unfortunately I’m unable to share his forwarding address as that would be against school policy.”*

Perfect. Back to zero again. She tossed her phone onto the loveseat cushions and devoted herself to petting Jet until her cat’s purring sounded almost like an actual jet engine.

Why not ask Kirk for help? That thought kept coming back to her. Kirk was a celebrity, sort of, and people did things for celebrities. If he asked Mason, maybe he’d get a “yes” instead of the incredulous laughter Gina herself might get.

She’d been waiting to see if she could trust him. But if he was only going to be here through min-January—she’d checked the booking in the app—she didn’t have time to delay. Nothing he’d done so far had given her a reason *not* to trust him. He’d stood up for her just now with George.

It wasn’t his fault he was so wildly successful that it emphasized her own failure. That was on her. And wasn’t she trying to sort it out by locating and confronting Coach Peters? He was the one who had destroyed her confidence. All she wanted was to look him in the eye and “own her truth,” to use Mama’s words.

“You are a heartless, callous user and abuser,” she’d tell him. “You draw people in, break them down, then toss them aside like they’re nothing. I’m not nothing. Say it, you bastard. Say I’m something. Say I’m talented, that I worked hard and I deserved to make that team.”

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*“Don’t cry,” he told her when he found her staring at the team roster for the upcoming qualifiers, fighting back tears with every ounce of her strength. “You’ll get more chances to make the cut. I have some ideas about extra training that might benefit you. Your problem is mental more than anything else. That’s where true champions have the edge. In here.” He tapped the*

*side of her head. She wanted to throw herself into his arms and sob her heart out against his chest. “There’s a block there, something emotional holding you back. Will you let me try some psychological training with you? We can meet in the evenings, just you and me. I don’t want anyone else to know, so they don’t think I’m giving you special treatment.”*

*“Is it?” She blinked her tears away, a seventeen-year-old away from home for the first time, trying to be a grownup. “Special treatment, I mean?”*

*“Well, yes,” he admitted with a low laugh. “But that’s because you’re special. I really think you could be great. We just have to work on the inner Gina.”*

Should she have known that the “inner Gina” would also be the naked Gina? The “let me touch you” Gina? The “this will make you relax” Gina?

And once it became clear that he wanted her in bed more than he wanted her on the team, should she have done something different?

Of course she should have. Part of her had known it would all blow up in her face.

But the rest of her didn’t listen. She was falling in love, hard and swift, her first ever experience of heady, mind-spinning, intoxicating love. So she didn’t do any of the sensible things, the things that might have saved her future. She’d tumbled headlong down the rabbit hole, and when it was all over, she found herself back in Lake Bittersweet, with her heart hollowed out and her potential competitive career a smoking pile of ashes.

## *eleven*

The next morning, Gina went for her usual early morning paddle on the lake. She wasn't the only one braving the icy chill. Near the rocky island where the walleye hung out, she spotted Ronnie Kenosha in his double canoe, partnered with a teenage girl.

That must be his granddaughter, Amber. She wasn't ready to meet her, so she discreetly back-paddled out of sight.

As she did so, she remembered her teacher explaining what canoeing meant in the Ojibwe culture. "It's a way of perceiving the world," he'd told her. "In our language, the words for 'bow' and 'stern' refer to the future and the past. We pass through life as if we were traveling by canoe."

Maybe that was her problem. Her canoe of life had lost its sense of direction.

After she hauled out her canoe, Gina zipped home for a quick, scalding-hot shower, then got dressed for her trip out to the Mason house. Should she pay a little extra attention to her outfit? Like wear those new fleece leggings that shaped her ass so perfectly?

Sure, why not.

On her way out to Kirk's, she stopped in at the Blue Drake kitchen. She came in through the back screen door, the one that had been squeaking for as long as anyone could remember. The door had even been replaced a couple

of times, and yet it still managed to squeak.

She found Alvin Carter, the part-owner and chef of the restaurant, arguing with Kendra, his daughter and Gina's longtime friend. The hot topic was whether or not to add avocados to the options for burger add-ons.

"My generation loves them," Kendra insisted.

"You want to talk about your generation? Y'all got more problems than some green slimy fruit that doesn't even belong in this hemisphere. It's an alligator pear, that's its real name."

"Alligator pear? Seriously?"

"You want it on the menu, that's what we're gonna call it."

When Mr. Carter spoke in that deep voice, people tended to obey. He was also "Redfish" Carter, one of the most revered blues singers in the country. He didn't perform much anymore, preferring to run the kitchen at Alvin's Burgers and Blues. But he still knew how to use that voice.

Kendra, wearing an ochre sweater that made her skin glow, turned to Gina with a roll of her eyes. "How come none of my business school courses were about dealing with a sixty-year-old toddler?"

"I'm sixty-four, girl."

"I was being approximate," she said through gritted teeth. "You here to save me, Gina?"

"Um..." Gina hated taking sides between Alvin and Kendra, both of whom she loved dearly. Luckily, she was rescued by the arrival of Carly Gault, who ran the rest of the Blue Drake, everything except the restaurant. That meant she was technically Gina's boss, although it rarely felt that way. Carly had delegated the summer cabin rentals and maintenance to her, and never interfered.

They'd all become friends the summer before Gina left for training camp. Carly, Gina, Kendra, Trixie Tran, and Brooke Kendall had all worked as chambermaids at the Blue Drake. Brooke was gone now, and Trixie lived in Lost Harbor, Alaska. Carly had only returned to Lake Bittersweet after her

father had died last year.

But Gina and Kendra had stayed close, even though their lives had gone in very different directions. Kendra had gone to an accelerated college slash business school program and was basically an entrepreneurial badass. Whereas Gina had...well, no reason to keep hammering the “crash and burn” point.

Carly had brought a box of blackberry muffins from the new bakery that Peggy, who worked part-time at the firehouse, had recently opened. Alvin shooed the three of them out of the kitchen, so they pulled on their coats and scarves and took the muffins and a thermos of coffee to the end of the Blue Drake pier.

“We’ve spent so much time sunbathing here that it almost feels warm,” Carly joked.

It didn’t feel at all warm, in fact. The wind had risen since Gina’s morning paddle. Gusts of wind swirled around them, causing them to zip up their coats and pull their hats down over their ears. They all huddled in a cozy circle around the box of muffins, as if it were a campfire.

“I have news,” Carly announced, once they were as comfortable as they were going to get.

“You set a date?” Gina clapped her hands together, forgetting about her muffin, which got squished between her mittens. Carly had gotten engaged to her long-ago sweetheart Thomas Cooper after they’d recently reunited.

“You’re pregnant?” Kendra’s turn to guess.

“You both suck,” Carly grumbled. “Give me those muffins back. I retract them. You don’t deserve these masterpieces from Peggy.”

Kendra and Gina exchanged remorseful looks.

“We’re sorry. Let’s start over,” said Kendra. “Carly, do you have something important to share with your friends?”

“Friends who have no idea what you’re about to say and promise not to interrupt?” added Gina.

Carly's green-eyed gaze slid from one to the other of them, but then she broke out into a grin. "Okay fine. We set a date *and* I'm pregnant."

Hearing that as news instead of speculation was a completely different experience. They all shrieked and grabbed each other in big hugs, happy questions spilling out.

"When? Where? How far along? When did you find out? How are you feeling? How freaking happy are you?"

Finally Carly extracted herself from their excited circle and held up her fatally squashed muffin, which was no more than a handful of crumbs by this point. "Maybe muffins were the wrong way to go. Okay, here's the rest of it. The wedding is going to be on New Year's Day, we haven't decided where yet, but maybe the Blue Drake. It's kind of soon, but well, we are four months along and see no need to wait. Danny will be back for Christmas break, and we wanted to schedule it while he was here. But obviously not on Christmas because everyone has plans already, so we decided on New Year's Day. It won't be very traditional, but I do want to have bridesmaids, which obviously will be the two of you and hopefully my sister Bliss. If Trixie can make it, her too."

"If you do it at the Blue Drake, we can cater, even though this is insanely last-minute," Kendra said. "My dad would love to, so long as you don't want avocados."

"What?" Carly looked confused. "No, I wouldn't dream of having avocados in the middle of winter. I mean, I do dream of them, because they're delicious, but I think I can get married without them."

"Married!" Gina launched herself into another round of jumping up and down. "You're getting married!"

They all celebrated for another exhilarating moment, until a chilly gust of air buffeted their little circle, demanding attention.

Gina looked out over the moody gray surface of the lake. *Brooke should be here*, she thought sadly. Their fifth friend, the tall, irreverent blond who'd

given birth to Danny Cooper, and then died. “Brooke would be really happy about this,” she said softly.

“Do you think so?” Carly’s anxious expression surprised her. “Do you think she’d be okay with me being Danny’s stepmother?”

“Of course she would! She always knew you and Thomas were meant for each other. The thing with her and Thomas was an experiment so she could confirm she didn’t like men. She would have loved you two getting married. Well, except she thought marriage was an outdated institution,” Gina added, remembering Brooke’s rebel ways.

“That’s right, she called it a patriarchal mind prison,” Kendra agreed. “Are you sure you want to do this?”

“Not with anyone except Thomas, that’s for sure.” Carly grinned. They spent a few more moments discussing details, until they were so cold they fled back inside the Blue Drake kitchen, where Alvin became the next person to learn the news.

When Gina left the warm kitchen and hurried to her car, later than she’d planned, she was still glowing with joy for Carly and Thomas. They’d had such a rocky road to happiness, and it seemed like a miracle that everything was falling into place now. That summer, when Thomas had broken off their relationship, Carly’s life had been shattered. Now she was happier than ever.

After that same summer, Gina had gone through the worst experience of her life. Did that mean there was still hope for her?

Decision made, she took the turnoff to the lakeshore road. She still didn’t know for sure if she could trust Kirk, but she had to take the chance. She was tired of feeling trapped by the past, stuck with the wounds Coach Peters had left her with. Time to fight back, and if she needed help for that, so be it.

## *twelve*

Kirk had spent the morning doing water exercises in the heated pool, listening for the sound of a doorbell. But Gina didn't show up until after his shower, and when she did, she seemed nervous. Maybe she was afraid he'd taken George's suggestion seriously.

Which he would have, except he wanted to make his own move at the right time and in the right way. He didn't need a Gina-stakes getting in the way.

"Don't worry about last night," he told her, just in case it was on her mind.

"Huh?" She blinked at him. Adorably, in his opinion. She wore a First Nations hoodie, thick leggings, and fleece-lined boots that she kicked off in the entry way. He watched her slide across the tiled entryway in her thick wool socks as if she was skating. "Oh that whole George thing? I was going to say the same thing. Let's just forget that entire conversation even happened."

Ouch. Was she really that opposed to the idea of George setting the two of them up?

Before he could ask, she said, "Actually, there's something I'd like to ask you. A favor, sort of."

"You got it," he said promptly.



Her dark eyebrows drew together? “You mean I can ask?”

“I mean, I’ll do the favor.”

Her face relaxing, she laughed and fluffed out her hair where her curls had been flattened by her hat. His fingers itched to help her with that task, but he tightened them on his crutches. “That’s reckless of you. I bet you had no idea I was going to ask you to announce to my entire family that I’m the cream of the Moretti crop and all my brothers can suck it.”

“I mean, it wouldn’t surprise me,” he said with a grin. “Ain’t no competition like a Moretti competition.”

“True true. Let me take care of the cleaning first.”

“I’ll make lunch,” he offered. “How’s tuna?”

“You can manage it on crutches?”

He lifted one eyebrow at her. “I can manage a lot of things on crutches. Happy to demonstrate my impressive strength and stamina.”

Her dark eyes danced and sparkled. “Sounds kinky.”

“You have no idea. Except the vacuum cleaner,” he admitted. “That thing kicked my ass. I kept tripping over the cord, and then while I was plugging it back in, I vacuumed up the change that had fallen out of my pockets when I tripped. So you might want to clean out the bag. Sorry. I’ll make it up to you with the best tuna sandwich you ever had.”

“You’re on.” She headed into the shag-carpeted living room to rescue the vacuum cleaner. “Can I keep whatever change I find?”

“Sure. There might be other things in there too. Cough drop. Possibly a condom.”

She laughed. “I guess you really can manage a lot of things on crutches.”

She bent over to pick up the vacuum cleaner and his mind went blank, empty of a comeback. Something about her firm curves registered deep in his lizard brain. *Want, want, want.*

Hauling the vacuum cleaner, she disappeared up the stairs, and a moment later he heard the drone of the machine.

His body still humming from their short conversation, he swung into the kitchen. She seemed different today, as if there was something on her mind. Last night had been so awkward, and her reaction to George's setup attempt so clearcut...he should face facts. Gina wasn't feeling the same intense attraction that he was. *Let it go.*

Propping himself the way he'd perfected, he opened a can of tuna and added mayonnaise and a few other ingredients. He liked having someone to make lunch for. At home in Boston, he didn't even make lunch for himself. He was usually too busy to do anything other than order a sandwich from somewhere.

The process was relaxing. Cranking on the can opener, spooning out mayonnaise, chopping some green onions and shaking salt and pepper over it, forcing himself to slow down enough to prepare food for himself—there was something healing about that.

Ever since he'd written his book, he'd been moving too fast to take the time for food prep. No, scratch that. Ever since he'd left the Army. Or maybe even before that. Ever since he'd left Lake Bittersweet, really.

As if he'd been running, he thought suddenly. Always moving, always working, always training or planning or talking or meeting.

That was natural, he supposed. That was what you were supposed to do, right? To make your way in the world, you had to work work work, never stop, never pause and look around you, just go go go, like boot camp. Nonstop boot camp...wait, was that really what life was supposed to be?

He was still laughing at that idea when Gina appeared in the kitchen, disheveled and rosy-faced from speed-vacuuming.

"That was fast," he told her as he took plates from a cabinet faced with frosted glass.

"Well, rumor has it I used to be an athlete," she said lightly. She took the plates from him. "You go sit down. I got this. I told Sally I'd take care of you properly." She carried the plates, along with the bowl of tuna, to the breakfast

nook. She came back around and put her hands on his shoulders, nudging him toward the nook.

He sat down with a sigh, feeling every bit of that morning of physical therapy. He knew how important it was, but damn, it was exhausting. He could still feel her touch on his shoulders, impersonal but kind. *Let it go.*

Gina poked around in the kitchen, found bread and a few more condiments, then slid onto the padded booth on the other side of the nook. It was set into a bay window that looked out on the sodden brown grass and patches of snow in the backyard. “Lovely view,” she said sarcastically. “Don’t you miss this Minnesota beauty?”

“What’s better, city snow or country snow?”

“City snow, because you have more snow plows.”

“Country snow, because it doesn’t get so dirty,” he countered.

“City snow, because it looks pretty in the street lights. We don’t have as many street lights here.”

“Country snow because you can make snow angels and if you try that in the city, you’ll get trampled.”

“Okay, I guess you win that one,” she admitted.

“Which means you win, since you’re the one who lives in the country.”

“Fair.”

With that settled, they switched gears to build their tuna sandwiches. Gina jumped up to get them each a bottle of locally crafted orange soda from the fridge, then again to find some potato chips to go with the sandwiches.

“How do you know what’s here better than I do?” he grumbled.

“The app is very comprehensive. Every rental has a list of what’s supposed to be stocked here. We make sure it is. I mean, not ‘we’ because I’m just helping Sally out. I don’t normally work for Dream Getaways.”

“Right, you work for the Blue Drake.” He said it as a question, giving her a chance to elaborate. But she didn’t seem to want to add more, since she focused on taking the cap off her soda bottle, her dark eyes refusing to meet

his.

“I always thought you’d be a professional athlete.” He made that sound like a question too.

“Sorry to disappoint,” she murmured.

“No. I’m not...you didn’t. Don’t. Disappoint me, I mean. I’m just curious. You were so talented, and so competitive. I’d never known anyone as opposed to losing as you were.”

She glanced up then. “Really? Thank you. I’ll take that as a compliment.”

“It obviously is a compliment. Remember the time you sliced your hand open during a five thousand meter paddle?”

“Right at the beginning,” she corrected. “I’d left a knife in the canoe and forgotten about it.”

“Right. You kept paddling even though blood was running down your hand. Didn’t it get infected?”

“Yes. Also it hurt like a motherfucker. Sorry.”

“I remember. You almost fainted.” He remembered her father diving off the public landing, fifty yards away from the finish line, and swimming out to her side. An EMT had been called, it was a big drama right at the end of the race. But she’d won the race, and that was all that had mattered to her.

“I was fine.” She plopped a slice of bread on top of her sandwich. “I raced again the next day.”

“You did.” Her parents had refused to drive her to the next race, so she’d ridden her bike. And won that one too. No one, at least no one he’d ever met, was as fierce a competitor as Gina Moretti.

“So what happened to all that competitive drive?” he asked her. “You don’t have to answer if you don’t want. I’m just curious.”

For a long moment, he thought she wasn’t going to answer, or even acknowledge that he’d asked a question. He could relate; he didn’t like being asked about the ambush, or about the things he’d witnessed in the military. But writing the book had been cathartic, and he’d learned that *not talking*

about things had consequences too.

Eventually she spoke. “I didn’t have what it takes,” she said in a voice so quiet he almost didn’t hear. “I know I had the talent. I had the desire. I had the...whatever, the fortitude to train through pain and discomfort. I didn’t have...”

He waited patiently.

“I don’t know how to explain it. I was stupid. I...” She put down her sandwich, as if she’d lost her appetite. “That favor I was going to ask you for.”

“You mean the favor I’m going to do for you?”

“Yes.” A smile flitted across her lips. *Don’t look at her lips.* “Thank you. I’m trying to find my old coach, and I’m not having any luck. I know that Jerome Mason thinks well of you, and I saw all those computers upstairs. I was wondering if you could...put in a good word for me. Ask him if he’d help me.”

Kirk wondered if she had any concept of how much Mason’s company charged for their services. He was hired for multinational conglomerates, not individuals.

“Maybe I can help you myself,” he suggested. “I’m pretty good at research. I did a lot of it for my book.”

“Really?” Her dark eyes glowed, and he thought he’d do just about anything to see that sparkle light up her face.

“Sure. I’ll just need some basic information. Name, anything else you remember about him, places he worked or lived, that sort of thing.”

“I have all that.” She shifted her body so she could pull something from her back pocket. It was a folded wad of notebook paper covered with notes. She peeled it open, and he saw that it was several pages long.

He peered at the scrawls and loops of her handwriting. He could only make out a few words here and there. “You didn’t expect to ever show this to anyone else, did you?”

“No,” she admitted with a laugh. “These are my notes to myself. Do you need a translator?”

“Yup. I’ll need my laptop too. It’s up in my bedroom.”

“I’ll get it.” She jumped to her feet, ready to race out of the kitchen.

“Wait. Why do you want to find this man? Or is it a woman?”

“It’s a man.”

The way she said it, with an undertone of deep tension, he knew there was much, much more to this story. And that it was extremely important to her, and that he needed to step very carefully.

“My laptop’s on the nightstand up there.” He kept his tone as neutral as he could, even though all kinds of questions were running through his mind. As she dashed upstairs, he squinted at her handwritten notes. He made out a few dates and some names of colleges where he must have coached. On his phone, he did an initial search of “canoe” and “Peters.”

Apparently canoeing wasn’t a sport that got a lot of media attention, because all he found was one article about Ralph Peters being named to the Olympic coaching team almost twenty years ago. But it did include a photo of a man in a canoe, grinning as he held up his paddle. He looked to be in his early thirties, a good-looking man with an exuberant smile.

What had this man done to fiery little Gina? He could already feel a spark of anger building inside him.

## *thirteen*

When Gina reappeared with his laptop, he showed her the article on his phone. “Is this the man?”

“That’s him.” She sat down, this time on his side of the booth. This favor was already paying itself back, he thought as he inhaled the fresh snow scent of her hair. “That article is from the year I went to the training camp. He’s older now, obviously. I haven’t been able to find any recent photos. Which is weird, considering he went to the Olympics with the team.” She let out a sigh and ran her fingers through her hair, still disheveled from her speed-cleaning. “I guess nobody really cares that much about canoeing. Too bad, because canoes were part of this country before we were even a country.”

“Native Americans invented canoes, right?”

She turned to face him, her face lighting up all over again. “Here, yes. But canoes were invented in other parts of the world too. Where there’s water, there’s canoes. The different nations and tribes had all kinds of designs, depending on where they lived. Some were carved from a single log, like in the Pacific Northwest, and some were made from birchbark. Remember my teacher, Ronnie Kenosha? He still makes birchbark canoes. They’re so beautiful, but of course they’re a completely different type than what they use in the Olympics, which are a flat water style. He’s Ojibwe, and they used canoes for everything, transportation, traveling, trading. They used

to hold canoe races, and still do. There's a five-mile race on the Chippewa River every year. I could go on all day about this, sorry."

"Don't apologize. I love it." Obviously, her passion for canoeing hadn't faded one bit. "Is Ronnie still around?"

"Yes, I see him on the lake now and then. I wish all teachers were like him." A shadow crossed her face. "I thought they were, until I met *him*."

She poked a finger toward his phone, which still showed the photo of Coach Peters.

"Are you going to tell me any more before I start looking into him?"

She shifted on the padded seat, tugging her lower lip between her teeth. He waited, very curious, but then instead of answering she gestured at the window. "Hey, it's snowing."

He'd been so caught up in her that he hadn't even noticed the flurry of fat snowflakes twirling past the window. They watched the snow fall silently to the ground outside. So peaceful. So cozy to be inside with a warm presence next to him.

Abruptly, she turned to face him. "Can I trust you?"

He took the question seriously, giving himself time to answer. "I hope you can. I think you can. It's true I didn't say goodbye when I left, but other than that I think I've always been trustworthy."

She narrowed her eyes slightly. "Remember when you found me running away to the woods and you busted me?"

"Well, yeah. You were eight. I didn't think you'd be safe spending the night in the woods alone." He'd practically dragged her back to the Moretti house, and boy, had she been furious with him.

"I was actually planning to live there. In the woods, I mean." She plucked a potato chip off her plate, but didn't eat it, just turned it over in her fingers. "I had it all planned out. I'd found a cave where I was going to sleep, and I was going to hunt squirrels for food with my slingshot. I was going to ride my bike to school every day. You ruined my whole carefully-thought-out



plan.”

He wanted to laugh, because it was such a typical Gina idea. “Sorry,” he said instead. “My bad.”

She burst out laughing. “No, don’t apologize, of course I couldn’t live in the woods. Frank had read my diary and I was furious because he wasn’t getting punished enough. I thought it would teach my family a lesson if I just went somewhere else to live. The point is, I lump you in with my brothers, and they weren’t trustworthy because they liked to tease me so much.”

He turned that over in his mind. Now that he looked back from the vantage point of an adult, he could see what she meant. Gina, to them, had been a cross between an adorable mascot, an irritating pest, and a kind of trophy. Her brothers had competed for her affection—the favorite brother thing went way back—but they’d also tried to keep her out of their games. Probably for her own good, in many cases. Why would they want a little girl playing forbidden poker games with them?

And of course, they’d all loved teasing her because...well, they teased each other, too. That was what they did. Why leave Gina out? Just because she was the youngest and couldn’t always keep up?

“I didn’t know you didn’t like it. I guess we shouldn’t have teased you so much.”

“That wasn’t the problem. The problem was being treated like a child whose feelings were just...cute. Not real. So if my brothers got ahold of one of my secrets—like the fact that I slept with my blankie until I was twelve—they’d jump on it like a panther on a gazelle.”

“I remember that blankie. The gray one. Frank and Mario stole it and rowed it out to the middle of the lake and dropped it overboard.” The whole episode came back to him, from Gina’s furious screams to Frankie’s cackling.

“They drowned it. Or they tried to. You and George helped me get it back. It took us two hours of diving, remember? Frank and Mario actually got

punished for that one, which was unusual. But Mama knew I'd never sleep if I didn't have my blankie."

He shook his head, marveling at yet another Moretti family drama he'd forgotten about.

"They aren't still like that, are they?"

"Not as much, since we're all grown adults, except for Frank." She gave a light laugh. "But I'm still cautious when it comes to anything very personal. And you were right in the thick of things with them."

He nodded slowly. "You're right. I think..." He hesitated, since he'd never talked to Gina about his home situation. He'd avoided the topic completely, both at school and with his friends. "Being at your house was a lifeline for me back then. I was trying to fit in and be part of the crew. I didn't know how to treat sisters, especially younger ones. Sassy was ten years older than me and she left when I was seven. It was just me and my father at my house, and it was..." He shook his head. *Bleak*, he wanted to say. "Anyway, without you Morettis, life would have been pretty fucked. I wanted to be like your brothers. I'm sorry."

He met her eyes, and a flash of connection zipped between them. "You never talk about your family."

"It's not a fun topic. But that's no excuse. I'm sorry. Sorry I wasn't more trustworthy."

Awareness flashed in her eyes, as if opening that little window into his past meant something to her. Again he felt that pull between them. But was it just him? *Let it go.*

"Don't be too hard on yourself," Gina said, more lightly this time. "You actually stood up for me a few times. You weren't as bad as my brothers."

"Hallelujah." He whooshed out a breath of relief. "Good to know I wasn't a complete ass as a kid."

She shook her head with a smile. "You weren't. You aren't. I appreciate what you just said. I'm going to trust you with something, but I need you to

promise you won't tell George, or any of my brothers."

"I won't let you down," he said gravely. Privately, he made himself an even deeper promise. *I will do whatever you need from me, Gina Moretti.*

She toyed with the raised lettering on her glass soda bottle, as if she was gathering her nerve.

"It's something about that coach?" he prompted gently.

"Yeah." She exhaled a long breath, then took a long guzzle of soda. He watched her throat, her tumbled curls, the tension in her face. "Just that he ruined my life."

## *fourteen*

“I know that sounds dramatic.” Gina could read in Kirk’s face that he thought so, too. “And I am dramatic. It’s a Moretti thing. But I’m not exaggerating this time.”

She shoved aside her bottle, slid off the bench and began pacing around the kitchen, twisting her hands together. “I’ve never told anyone about this. You have to promise to keep it to yourself.”

Kirk put his hands together and gave a little bow. It landed somewhere between awkward and endearing, and put her at ease. “Absolutely.”

She drew in a long breath. Once she shared this story with Kirk, any potential attraction-slash-relationship-slash-Loon Feather-dinner-date would be over. He’d either feel sorry for her or scornful; either one of those options would kill their chemistry dead.

Shit. Of all people, why did her best hope have to be Kirk Williams? Oh well. *Do it, Gina.*

“Okay. Here goes. I was seventeen when I left for training camp. It was the first time I’d been away from home. I was one of the youngest athletes there. I felt so out of my depth. I’d always been the best with a canoe paddle, but there, I was always on the bubble. Always worried about getting cut and sent home. Most of the others knew each other already. I was one of the few newbies. So I had a lot of marks against me. It was really hard. And as much

as my family drove me crazy, I missed them. I was so homesick. I missed Lake Bittersweet, I mean the lake itself. The water, the air, that piney smell. The night of my eighteenth birthday, I had a Skype call with my family, then went right to bed and curled under the covers and cried my heart out.”

She didn't look at Kirk, didn't try to gauge his reaction. Better not to. The kitchen blurred around her as she paced. Kitchen island, cheery yellow walls, bay window filled with falling snow, fridge, island, walls...and somewhere in there was Kirk, just a fuzzy male figure for now.

“Anyway, that's where I was at when Coach Peters started offering me extra training. Of course I jumped at it. I needed it, also I thought he really cared about me and I was desperate for that. He said I was too mentally stressed, too uptight because of the pressure. He had me doing relaxation exercises, and some of them got really...intimate. But I thought it was just part of the program he was putting me on. He told me not to tell the others because it might seem like special treatment. And it was. Special, I mean. As in, not part of any recognized training program. But I only figured that out later. At the time, I didn't doubt him because he was the only person there who paid attention to me. I know that sounds pathetic.”

“It doesn't.” Kirk's grim tone made her finally shoot a glance his way. His jaw was clenched tight, his hand balled into a fist on the table. “It's not pathetic, Gina. It's understandable.”

“Yeah, well...is it understandable that I had an affair with him? That I fell in love with him? He told me he was divorced, but maybe he wasn't. I don't know for sure, but another paddler mentioned his wife at one point. I said, you mean, ex-wife? But she said that was news to her. Coach Peters didn't normally live in Charlotte, he was only there for the training camp. His wife, if he had one, wasn't around. I asked him again, and he went into a long rant about trust, and how I was betraying his trust by even asking the question, and I just felt so bad I never asked again. I know, I know, it sounds... pathetic.”

“Would you stop using that word? He’s the one who sounds pathetic, not you.”

She appreciated the support, but it didn’t stop her inner blame cycle. That never seemed to quiet down.

“He...he really messed me up, mentally. I started doubting myself about everything. Why was I with him? Was I really in love or was I just clinging to the only support I had? Should I break it off? How? When? It was affecting my training too. At first my split times had picked up, because I was happier. But then they got worse. I wasn’t getting enough sleep, I was anxious all the time. The others were noticing and giving me odd looks. Or maybe I was being paranoid. Then came the day he announced who would be on the team for a big qualifying race. I never imagined I’d be on the list. I didn’t deserve to be. But I was. That was when the whispers started. I wanted Coach Peters to take me off the roster, put someone on who’d been putting up the times. But he said he thought I had more talent.”

She was sweating now, she could feel it in her armpits and the back of her knees, beads of moisture gathering. Talking about this brought it all back, every suffocating emotion. She went to the kitchen sink and drew herself a glass of water, then drank it in one long swallow.

“Did you go?”

“I went. I had to. I thought about faking an injury, but that doesn’t really fly when you have team doctors around. So I raced. I came in dead last. Not only that, I managed to capsize one of my teammates. It was a fucking mess. I was so humiliated that I actually capsized myself too. I dove into the water—this was at the Whitewater Center in North Carolina. I didn’t want to come up. I wished I could just stay under my overturned canoe until it was night and I could sneak out of there.”

She put a hand to her heart, feeling it race. No wonder she never talked about this. It was so freaking stressful.

“Coach Peters dumped me after that. He was furious that I’d wasted all

his ‘special training.’ He said he’d been wrong about my talent, that I was nothing special, and that I didn’t have the mental fortitude to be a champion. I was...crushed, obviously. But maybe a little relieved too, because that meant I could quit the training camp and go home. The last thing he said to me was that we needed to keep our affair quiet because if I said anything, he’d force me to repay all the costs of the training time I’d wasted.”

“Wow. Is that even...real?”

“I don’t know. It didn’t matter because I had no intention of talking about it to anyone. I was too humiliated. The worst part was that it was a double-whammy of failing at my training and getting my heart broken. I just went home and told everyone I’d crashed and burned and apparently canoe racing wasn’t my destiny. It was very embarrassing.” She added a smile that aimed to be snarky, and probably just looked wobbly. “But, you know, not as bad as staying.”

He slumped back in the booth and ran a hand through his hair. “That’s a fucked-up story, Gina.”

“Yeah.” Now that it was released into the world—or at least the kitchen of the Mason house—she felt a little woozy. It was like letting a captured bird go free, and having no idea where it would fly to, or whether it *could* fly. “You can see why I never wanted to talk about it.”

“You never did? Not to anyone? Maybe a counselor or a therapist?”

“No. I was so ashamed. Everyone sees me as strong, because I’m athletic and I can keep up with my brothers. I thought I was strong, too. But after that...I don’t know, I had no more confidence in myself. I didn’t understand—don’t understand—how I got myself into that position. I had a choice. I could have said ‘no’ when he started offering extra training. I could have drawn the line at the massages, or the...” She broke off, because even now, admitting that she’d gone to bed with him was difficult.

She leaned against the counter and stared down at the floor, wondering what Kirk thought of her now. Nothing good, no doubt. He was probably

relieved they hadn't gone to dinner yet, and that he hadn't said "yes" to George's suggestion.

"Do you think Coach Peters blames himself at all?" Kirk finally asked.

She screwed up her face. "I think he blames me for being such a disappointment."

"And yet he was older than you, in a more powerful position. A position of authority. You were only eighteen."

"Above the age of consent," she pointed out.

"But still much younger than him, more vulnerable. He manipulated your emotions. It's despicable. And every time you blame yourself, he's doing it again."

She frowned as she tried to follow his logic. She'd never thought of it that way. Her emotions about that experience were so thick and sluggish, like a swamp she had trouble wading through. "How do you mean?"

"Don't you think he'd want you to blame yourself? That way he skates free."

Okay, that made sense. She appreciated the fact that he wasn't getting all "poor Gina" about this. Kirk was sticking to calm logic, though she could sense his underlying anger as well. "I suppose so. *If* he even thinks he did anything wrong."

"These guys often don't."

"These guys?" She shot him a shocked glance. "How would you know?"

He sat back in the booth, crossing his arms over his chest. His thick black sweater made his eyes gleam deep green. And he seemed to be growing his scruff out. "Did you really not read my book? Even the back cover?"

"No, I'm too busy to read much. I thought it was about boring military stuff." Of course there was more to it than that. She'd been envious of his amazing success compared to her failure. "My parents have a copy. Your author photo is very hunky."

He showed off his biceps in a self-mocking flex. "Yeah, well, don't get



distracted by my hot bod, that's not the point of the book. Some of it is about a situation kind of like yours. So this isn't new to me, that's all I'm saying. One of my fellow soldiers went through it."

She surveyed him cautiously. "And you...believed her? You were on her side?"

"Fuck yeah." He frowned, as if offended that she'd even asked.

"Did she, I don't know, confront him?"

"She reported him, yes. I testified for her. It's all in my book." He sounded irritated, as if she hadn't done her homework.

"Any, um, CliffsNotes I can skim?"

He laughed at that. "No, but let me jump ahead here. Is that why you're trying to find him? You want to confront him?"

Confront seemed like overkill. Or did it?

"Sort of." She worried at her bottom lip, not exactly sure how to explain. "The Moretti in me wants revenge, but that's not really it."

"Okay, then what?"

"I just want to look him in the face and tell him what a fucking dick he is. That's all. Also, what if he's done the same thing to other students? Maybe he has, and maybe it's too late to come forward. But at the very least, I can tell him that I'm willing to speak out. I don't even know if the media would be interested. I can just picture the headline. 'Canoe Coach Caught Canoodling.'"

"How about, 'Jerkface Faces Justice'?" Kirk suggested.

"Ooh, I like that one." At the thought of that headline, a shot of adrenaline made her giggle wildly. It was fun to think of Coach Peters actually paying for what he'd done, even though that wasn't her mission here. "But I don't want any headlines," she added quickly. "I just want him to admit he's a manipulative asshole."

"What if he doesn't do that? A lot of times people don't want to say they did anything wrong, or to say they're sorry, because they're afraid of legal

liability.”

She let out a sigh. Kirk made a good point, one she hadn't thought through. She was dealing with emotions, not lawsuits. But Coach Peters would be trying to protect his career. “You're right. I can't control what he does. This is about me. I left the training camp right before Christmas, without a word to anyone. I snuck out at night so no one would see me. It was the most un-Gina thing I've ever done.” She flashed him a rueful smile. “Maybe I just want a redo.”

Kirk gave a soft laugh. “I see what you mean. The Gina I knew would have torn into him like nobody's business.”

“Right? Then I flew home and kept my mouth shut. Do you know how unnatural that is for me?”

“I've known you since you were eight, so yes. I do.”

“It's like I put a muzzle on myself and pretended I could just move on and act like it never happened. I came back right in the middle of the holidays, so that helped. People were too busy to pry. I just want to speak my mind and get my confidence back. Maybe then...” She cut herself off. It was such a new feeling, having someone else know about Coach Peters, almost intoxicating. Part of her wanted to keep talking as long as he would listen.

But she wasn't quite ready to tell Kirk all about her relationship issues.

“Maybe then what?” he prompted.

“Maybe then I'll feel like myself again. The good, the bad and the ugly.”

He scrutinized her for a long moment. She held her breath, as if she was in an MRI, instructed not to move so the image wouldn't be blurry. What were those long-lashed eyes of his seeing as he scanned her face? What was he thinking about her?

She'd revealed her most shameful experience, and there was no going back now.

So far, she saw no scorn in his expression. Part of her had expected a harsh judgment, possibly because she judged herself. Her heart raced, and she

discreetly wiped her sweaty palms on her jeans.

“I get it. I’ll start looking for him right away.” All business, he booted up his laptop.

“Good. Thank you.”

She watched him tap the keys with a kind of hollow feeling. Where was the heat she’d noticed in his gaze now and then? It was gone, replaced by focused concentration on his task. The task *she’d* given him. She’d chosen to ask him for help, to take the chance that it might shift the attraction between them somehow.

She often thought that Coach Peters had cast a curse on her—a soul-sapping, love-repelling spell. She wanted to break it and get her life back. But had the curse just struck again and repelled Kirk Williams?

## *fifteen*

The search for Ralph Peters was more difficult than Kirk had expected. The man had simply disappeared from the public record a few years after that summer. Had he died? If so, there would have been some record of his death, wouldn't there? Maybe he'd gotten into trouble and decided to stay off the radar of a throng of angry women.

The project was a good break from his constant physical therapy. It got him back onto his computer, too. Every time he logged on, he checked for a message from Sassy. Still nothing.

It felt good to be working on his computer again. In the back of his mind, he felt a familiar itch. The last time he'd felt that way, he'd written *Frontlines*. The experience had been all-consuming, and afterwards, he'd figured he was done with writing. What other stories did he have, other than his army experiences?

Was the itch back because he had more to say? Unfortunately, it didn't come with a topic, which would have been helpful. So he shushed it and continued looking for Gina's nemesis.

After a couple days of coming up empty, Kirk took a break for an online physical therapy assessment. The downside of holing up in Lake Bittersweet was that he couldn't see his medical team in person. But the therapist was able to see enough on Zoom so that she cleared him to start walking with a

cane.

“Keep an eye on your mechanics. We’ll have to do some gait training down the line, but for now, just try to stay as balanced as possible. Use the cane as a just-in-case support as much as possible, instead of depending on it. Know what I mean? Do you have any good medical equipment stores there? I’m guessing not. I’ll overnight the cane to you.”

It came two days later, since overnighting didn’t mean quite the same thing in a rural place like Lake Bittersweet. The delivery driver who delivered it was a pretty blond who knew all about him.

“Mrs. Moretti told me to look out for you!” she exclaimed as she handed him the package that contained the cane. “She said you’d probably be getting packages because you’re recovering from a war injury.”

He winced. “It’s not a war injury.”

“Oh right, silly me! You rescued a baby during a hail of bullets, didn’t you?”

Apparently word had finally gotten out. “That’s not exactly what—”

“Oops, I almost forgot. Now that I found you, I have something for you.” She dashed back to the delivery van, and came back with an old-fashioned round tin with a charming scene of ice skaters on a winter lake printed on the lid. “Christmas cookies,” she explained cheerfully. “They’re my specialty. I’m Allie, by the way.”

He tried to remember the last time a delivery driver had made him cookies. Come to think of it, never. If it happened in Boston, he’d probably check them for anthrax.

“That’s really kind. Have we met before? Like in high school?”

“Well, I feel like I know you, after hearing Mrs. Moretti rave about you. She says you’re like another son to her. I only moved here ten years ago, or just think, we would have gone to high school together. I would have been a freshman when you were a senior, and I’m sure I would have had such a crush on you.”

She waited expectantly for his next move. Was he supposed to ask her in? Ask her out? Neither option appealed to him. Maybe he could be friendly standing right where he was.

He gave her his patented charming smile and lifted the lid of the tin. “Since we missed each other in high school, would you like a cookie? I bet these are out of this world.”

“Oooh, wish I could, but I have more deliveries. The holiday season is so crazy for us. But my shift ends at five.”

More expectant waiting. She wanted him to ask her out, clearly. Should he? Why not? She seemed very nice and from his quick peek at the cookies, she was a hell of a baker.

But his thoughts were completely taken up with another woman, one with dark curls and flashing black eyes, a sassy attitude masking a vulnerable heart. He couldn’t get Gina out of his mind, and it wasn’t fair to go out with someone else while that was true.

He compromised.

“I hear there’s a holiday party at the SweetBitter Café. I was planning to go to that tonight. Maybe I’ll see you there, Allie.”

Her face fell, but she rallied and plastered on a determined smile. “Now that’d be nice.” She gave him a wave, and as she hurried back to the van, he decided he liked her—in a friendly way. Nothing wrong with anyone taking their shot. If not for Gina, he might have gone for it.

He hadn’t heard anything from Gina since she’d told him about Coach Peters. He kept hoping he could bring her some info, like a white knight on crutches.

Until then...what the hell, even if he had nothing to tell her, he wanted to see her. Was she going to the SweetBitter party? George was the one who had invited him, saying “everyone” was going. But he hadn’t specifically mentioned Gina.

Kirk sent her a text asking if she was going to the party.

She didn't answer, which made him rethink whether he even wanted to go. Without Gina, how fun would it be? But he was itching for some company. He'd been sticking close to home, working on his exercises, searching for Coach Peters, getting nothing from Sassy. He deserved a change of scene.

As evening fell, he pulled on a pair of loose black trousers that fit over his cast, along with a cable-knit wine-red sweater that an old girlfriend had knit for him.

To get into the Christmas spirit, he wrapped a bright red ribbon around his cane so it looked like a candy cane.

It had been snowing off and on ever since Gina had come over the other day, and a few inches of snow now covered the yard. Dream Getaways had sent over a kid to snow blow a path to the driveway. Kirk had given him a big tip for his hard work, and promised himself he'd take on the task as soon as he could physically manage it. This whole being-coddled shit was getting old. He needed to heal up and get back to normal as soon as possible.

God, he was so tired of worrying about crutches and injuries and exercises. Tonight, he was going to have some damn fun. He wanted to feel like himself again. He wanted to find Gina and feel that fizzy sense of fun he experienced around her.

In that spirit, he pushed open the door of the SweetBitter Café and blinked at the explosion of holiday colors filling the cafe. Starting with the silver tinsel and sparkly snowflake cutouts dangling from the ceiling, and continuing with the red-and-green disco ball that sprinkled rainbow reflections around the room, it was like walking into a snow globe.

Rick, the owner of the SweetBitter, came rollerskating through the crowd toward him. Kirk gave a double-take. *Rollerskating?*

“Love the cane, baby.” When he caught Kirk's stare, he added, “The theme is Disco Christmas, did George forget to mention that?”

“Well damn, I forgot my skates. Or skate, I guess, since...” He shook his

injured leg at Rick.

“Not to worry, *muchacho*, I’m the only one allowed to wear skates in here.” He tipped his sequined red cowboy hat at Kirk. “No offense, I know you were on the hockey team back in the day. But it’s my party, and I’ll skate if I want to. Mulled wine? Cider? What can I get you?”

He gestured toward a table set up near the counter, where coffee urns sat next to piles of insulated cups. Kirk was still trying to decide when Rick went on.

“I’m happy you’re back in town, but I gotta warn you, Gina Moretti’s one of my best friends.”

Kirk’s gaze snapped back to him. “Warn me? What do you mean?”

“In case you’re joining the Gina-stakes, I’m a lock to win. I know what kind of guy Gina likes. It’s a side effect of my gay-dar. I plan to be the one who sets her up with the perfect man. So everyone else can just back off.” He spun on his skates to face a couple approaching behind him. “Hear that, buttercups?”

It took a moment for Kirk to recognize Conor Gault and Emmaline Curtis — he knew them both, but not together. Conor was a golden-boy summer kid, while Emmaline’s family ran a maple syrup farm. But they sure looked cozy, with Conor’s arm draped around Emmaline’s shoulders. They both wore ’70s-style bell-bottoms—and wore them well. Points to Conor for that.

“Whatever.” Emmaline gave an airy wave of her hand, nearly swiping the nose of a passing party guest. “I have it in the bag, as I keep telling Conor. Gina likes men who are good with their hands, and their bodies. Don’t laugh, that’s not how I mean it, although I’m sure that’s true.” She gave Conor an elbow to the ribs as he snickered at her phrasing. “It’s because she’s athletic. She won’t like Conor’s guy because he’s too mental. Mine is a forest ranger with a small artisan maple syrup farm. He works with his hands and he’s in fantastic shape. I’ve got this, guaranteed.” She turned to Kirk, shifting from a death glare to a bright smile. “By the way, hi, Kirk. Welcome back.”



“Thanks.” Kirk decided he didn’t like this maple-syrup-forest-ranger at all, for no particular reason.

Conor shook his head. “See, everyone’s getting this wrong. Gina is smart. She needs someone who can keep up with her here.” He tapped his own temple. Kirk noticed that he was letting his city haircut grow out to something more mountain-man style. “My guy, Charlie Green, has two graduate degrees in international relations and just gave a speech at the U.N.”

Kirk disliked this guy even more than the first one. He didn’t need to meet either one to know they were all wrong for Gina.

“You both better give it up before you mess it up.” Rick made a spin move on his roller-skates. “My guy is a sportswriter, so he’s the perfect combination of physical and mental. Boom. You can all suck it.”

Emmaline stuck out her tongue at him, while Conor made the “I’m watching you gesture,” two fingers pointing at his own eyes, then at Rick. Everyone started arguing with each other about the various qualities that made their candidate the best.

This Gina-stakes thing was getting completely out of control. How was he supposed to compete with speech-giving maple-farming sportswriters? While leaning on a cane?

He cut through the arguing voices. “For the record, Gina is a smart and stunning woman who will choose a man when she’s good and ready. You’re all going to lose. Mark it down.”

They all turned to frown at him, especially Rick. “Is that your official entry in the Gina-stakes? That Gina will stay single? Don’t you think she deserves a good man?”

“Sure she does.”

“Don’t you know the holidays are hard for Gina?” Emmaline’s pretty brown eyes pinned him accusingly. “Especially after Junkyard?”

“Her ex? Why—”

“That’s when they got divorced. That’s why the holidays are hard for

Gina. That's why we're doing this. Because we love her."

As he gazed around at the faces of her friends, he remembered that none of them knew Gina's other bad memory from this time of year. Her friends loved her, he didn't doubt it. But he was the only one she'd allowed in to her most private secret. His heart turned over in his chest as he realized how momentous that really was, how much she was trusting him.

"Oh my." Emmaline looked past Kirk, her eyes going wide. The others turned to see what had captured her attention, and Kirk heard someone give a low whistle. He turned too, and nearly staggered at the sight that greeted him.

## sixteen

It was Gina, but not any version of Gina that he'd ever seen. She was dressed in full-on sexy Santa gear—an off-the-shoulder red velvet number with a flounce of white fur at the hem and another around the neckline. It barely reached the middle of her thighs. Those white vinyl platform boots... disco reference? Along with the disco ball earrings

The gold necklace spelling the name “Gina” might also qualify as disco, but at that point his brain glitched because of how it nestled in her cleavage, in that perfect smooth valley between plump mounds of flesh...

He blinked out of his trance and dragged his gaze away from her chest. The rest of her was just as fascinating, anyway—the merry light in her eyes, the dusting of glitter in her hair, the red curve of her lips. *Don't look at her lips, asshole.* He tried to focus his attention somewhere else, anywhere, and stopped a server who was passing by with a tray of creamy drinks.

He grabbed one of them, ignoring the girl's “Hey.” Sometimes a guy needed a little liquid assistance. He handed her a twenty dollar bill, and gulped at the foamy White Russian.

“I heard my name,” Gina was saying as she came closer. “And then I saw a very suspicious combination of people. Was someone saying something about me? Me and the holidays?”

Rick finished whistling and picked Gina up in his arms and twirled her

around. “Know what I love most about you, girl? You can fucking dress for a theme party. No one does it like you. *Ay caramba melinda caracha.*”

As far as Kirk knew, that Spanish-sounding phrase made no sense, but Rick plowed ahead nonetheless.

“What are you drinking? The blood of your brokenhearted victims?”

“Yes, with a dash of whipped cream, sounds delicious.” Her bright smile passed from one to the other of them. Then she lifted one red-gloved hand and wagged a finger at them all. “I know that look. You were talking setups, weren’t you?”

The three others exchanged guilty looks.

“I wasn’t,” Kirk said virtuously. “I told them you’ll pick someone when you’re ready. Do I get a reward for that?”

“Yes. Here you go.” She blew him a kiss. He made a show of getting slammed in the chest by it, which wasn’t too far from the truth. “The rest of you, how do you want to handle this? I know you have money riding on it. How do you decide the winner? Is it which one gets a second date? Should I fill out some kind of survey? Update you on if we kiss, that sort of thing? I might draw the line at sex. Sorry.”

Everyone tried to talk at once, then Emmaline shushed them all. “We’re not putting money on it. That would be shameful.” She directed a quick glare at Rick, who linked his hands behind his back and whistled up at the ceiling, the perfect picture of an innocent bystander. “We just want you to find a good guy. Like how you pushed me to have a fling while I was in Hawaii, and look how that turned out.” She hugged Conor’s arm to her side and gazed up at him adoringly. “I just want the same thing for you. Without the sunburn.”

“There’s no way you got sunburned,” murmured Conor. “I’ve never seen so much sunscreen on one person before.”

“Well, I’m very pale, it’s like I live in a cave all winter.” Emmaline put her hands together in a pleading gesture toward Gina. “You aren’t mad, are you? Our intentions come from the heart. From the heart *for* the heart.”

“Or lower down,” murmured Rick, who covered his mouth with a hand when Emmaline turned on him. “Just saying. Don’t forget the pussy.”

Gina rolled her eyes, while the others burst into laughter. Kirk had forgotten what it was like to be surrounded with people who had known each other for years. He’d missed it, that comfort and familiarity.

Gina turned to Kirk. “See what you escaped by getting out of dodge? *I* should have joined the Army. Or maybe the circus. I’d probably feel right at home.” She lowered her voice. “Can I speak to you for a minute in private?”

“Is this one of those naughty or nice convos, Santa?” he asked, making her laugh.

She pulled him away from the group, her touch giving him a secret thrill. She smelled good, too, like hot cinnamon and sweet rolls.

“Okay, spill,” she ordered him when they’d reached a slightly more quiet corner of the cafe.

“Spill what?”

“Do I need to check myself into witness protection to avoid these setups coming my way? What am I in for?”

“They sound pretty good, actually,” he admitted. “If you like UN-speaking, forest-ranging sportswriters.”

She perked up. “A sportswriter? I could be into that. Sounds kinda sexy.”

He set his teeth. “Really? Is writing about a thing better than doing the thing?”

“I guess there’s only one way to find out.”

Was she teasing him? Flirting with him? Did that mean he still stood a chance? No matter how many times he told himself to let it go, attraction was a stubborn thing and didn’t listen.

“I can find out. I’ll check into him for you. I’ll add him to the research I’m already doing.” He smiled at her innocently. Would it be his fault if at least one deal-breaker popped up?

She wagged a finger at him. “Naughty boy, Santa says no, you will not

investigate my dates. That's the kind of thing my brothers would do."

Ouch. Would he ever break free of the "brother" curse? "How about I prove I'm not like your brothers—"

Someone turned up the music, and the sound of James Brown drowned out the rest of his sentence. Rick shouted, "get your Santa groove on, people!" and the crowd of guests followed his command. Kendra and Carly got a Cupid Shuffle type of dance going. Others either followed along or did their own dance moves. A few couples swayed in each other's arms as if it was a slow dance.

Gina gave a little jump of joy as she looked out at the happy crowd. "About time the fun started!" Her hips swayed as she bopped to the music.

Kirk sighed, since his physical therapist would have a stroke if he tried to dance. He just couldn't catch a break. He wouldn't be surprised if a professional ballroom dancer showed up as Gina's next date. A Cary Grant type who would swirl her across the floor and give her the time of her life.

"Go on," he told Gina, resigned to standing on the sidelines. "I remember how much you love to dance. Don't let me hold you back. Just don't break too many hearts out there."

"Oh no, you're not getting out of this. You like to dance, too. Remember when we all used to do the Electric Slide out on the Blue Drake pier?"

"Yeah, but..." He gestured at his leg, then waved his red-ribbon cane.

"Never mind your leg, the rest of your body can dance. Stay where you are, I'll do all the work." With a dazzling smile, she took hold of his left hand, and then twirled herself around until she was pressed against his chest. Or maybe he'd twirled her? Maybe it was a mutual, perfectly synchronized move, because the next thing he knew, she was spinning away again, his hand like a tether.

She did a two-step all the way to him this time, keeping hold of his hand. He allowed his upper body to keep the beat along with her, and even got his hips into the act too. As long as he kept his legs still, he could do this.

The joy of moving to the music with her flooded his veins, along with a heady dose of lust. Being with her felt like flying, never mind his cane and his cast.

Was it just him feeling that way? In the whirlwind of red velvet, dark curls, and bright laughing eyes that was Gina, he wished he knew.

## *seventeen*

Gina had always loved to dance—she and Kendra used to make up dances together—but this was on another level, and she knew exactly why. Because every time she spun to face Kirk, his eyes shone into hers, offering hot appreciation.

The rest of the room became a blur, and not just because of the twirling. Because everything else just didn't seem interesting or important. Not compared to the look in Kirk's eyes and the strength of his grip and the hardness of his body every time she spun into his chest.

She hadn't heard anything from Kirk since she'd shared her darkest secret. In her low moments, she worried that he looked down on her now; maybe he even saw her as a victim. Maybe her confession had ruined whatever sparks of attraction existed between them.

But here they were, dancing, and nothing had felt this good in a long time.

The music changed to a downtempo beat, but Kirk kept hold of her hand and pulled her against him for a slow groove, his arms loosely looped around her. She rested her cheek against his chest and listened to the hard, steady beat of his heart. This was Kirk. Kirk Williams. Her brother's friend. The elusive object of her...what? Fury? Resentment? Secret desire?

Yeah, maybe. Maybe all those times she'd fumed about Kirk always



being around, getting so much attention, maybe there'd been something more going on. Something she'd buried deep because it would have been mortifying if it came out. Her brothers would have tormented her beyond bearing.

The song ended. Kirk's grip loosened, and a tap on her shoulder made her jump. She turned around to see Rick, accompanied by a tall, bearded man wearing a blazer.

"Gina, there's someone I want you to meet," Rick yelled over the music. "This is Gomez, he works for the Tribune. He's been promising to come to this party for about six years and he finally made it."

"Hi there, Gomez." Gina offered her hand, feeling kind of silly in her sexy Santa outfit. "Welcome to Lake Bittersweet."

"Oh, I've been here before. One of my first stories was about a race you won." His smile flashed white against his dark beard. "I was an intern and they sent me here to report on the July 4<sup>th</sup> canoe races. It was supposed to be a local color story, but I went back and told them I'd just seen a future champion."

Ugh, why did he have to remind her? She stole a quick look at Rick, who was wincing. He should have prepared his guy better. *Whatever you do, don't mention her epic athletic failure.* "Well, I guess you called that one wrong," she said lightly. "I hope the rest of your career has gone better."

"It's been going very well." Was she imagining a touch of smugness there? "I was just nominated for a Pulitzer."

"Did you say a *Pulitzer*? Wow. Congratulations." That really was impressive. She scolded herself for being a jerk.

Rick elbowed him in the ribs.

"It's the local version," Gomez admitted. "A regional award, just this part of Minnesota. Would you like to dance?"

Rick shot her a pleading glance, which she could never resist.

"Sure," she told Gomez, taking his hand. "I love to dance."

She followed him into the melee of guests until he stopped near the fire exit, where the crowd was more sparse.

And then...he started to move. Jerk, more like. Worst of all, he was trying to include her in his mess, practically yanking her arm out of its socket.

Such a contrast to the smooth flow of the way she and Kirk had moved together. And that was with an injury! Imagine once he was fully recovered...Was there a direct line from how a couple danced together to how they got along in bed?

She shrugged off the thought. There was more to a guy than how he danced. Gomez had lots of other things going for him. She had to focus on those. Signaling that she wanted a break from dancing, she leaned against the wall and put a hand to her chest, pretending to be out of breath. Already faking something—that didn't seem like a good sign.

“How do you know Rick?” she asked him, pretend-breathlessly.

“My ex-wife went to college with him.”

“Oh!” An ex-wife. That could be either good or bad. Good because it meant someone believed in him enough to marry him. Bad because...well, it might be a complicated situation.

*You're over thirty, Gina reminded herself. You're going to run into divorced men. Not to mention you're divorced too. We all make bad choices sometimes.*

“So you got Rick in the division of assets?” It was supposed to be a joke, but it must have been a bad one, because Gomez frowned.

“We're all still friends. My wife and I decided not to get into petty quarrels like that when we got divorced.”

Didn't he mean...ex-wife? Gina decided not to call him on it. “How mature. Good for you. My ex and I do best with three thousand miles between us. What's your secret?”

He lifted one shoulder in a nonchalant shrug. “If it wasn't meant to be, what can you do? It's better to let it end peacefully instead of fighting the

current. Why waste the energy?”

His beard, now that she was closer to it, had a hipster vibe instead of the lumberjack type she was used to in Lake Bittersweet. Its lower edge was trimmed to a square. For some reason, it made her want to argue with him.

“I see what you mean, but some things are hard to let go. Like me with the last sour cream potato chips. I’ll fight anyone for those.”

Instead of laughing, he gave her a pitying look. “My wife and I will always be connected. She says we’re spiritual soulmates. Being married is a technical detail.”

There, he’d done it again.

“Is that why you still call her your wife?”

He hunched his shoulders as if she’d attacked him. “Are you always like this?”

“Like what?” She glanced down at herself and decided he must be talking about her ridiculous outfit. “Oh, no, I don’t usually wear short red velvet dresses with white fur trim.”

“I meant, rude.”

She blinked at him. Had she really been rude? Maybe so, because being polite while inwardly annoyed never went well for her. But this was Rick’s friend, or at least his friend’s ex-ish-husband, and she shouldn’t be rude to him. “I beg your pardon,” she said, with careful politeness. “I didn’t intend to be rude.”

Frowning, he glanced at her cleavage. “That isn’t real fur, is it?”

It was not. She’d bought the dress at a thrift shop for five dollars and none of it was real, not even the velvet, which was actually rayon. “Don’t worry, no little white mice were harmed in the making of this dress.”

“That’s not funny. Do you know what they do to—”

“All right, let me cut you off right there. This is obviously not going to work out.” She stuck out her hand, then realized she didn’t feel much like shaking his hand, so she used it to tuck a curl behind her ear. “To quote a

very wise man, let's not waste any energy on this. Let's not fight the current."

He didn't argue, or make any attempt to stop her from walking away from him. *Geez, Rick, you pulled me away from Kirk for that?*

Where was Kirk now? Seeing him would chase the bad taste of her encounter with Gomez away. She couldn't see Kirk anywhere in the crowd, so she headed for the banquet table where the drinks were set out. She'd definitely earned herself a mulled wine. One advantage of a red dress from a thrift store was that you didn't have to worry about spilling.

Rick sidled next to her as she was lifting the glass to her lips. "Well? You and Gomez?"

"I'm sorry, do I know you?" She finished her sip and glared at him. "You do remind me of someone, a former friend of mine who I thought knew better than to try to set me up with a smug humorless dude still in love with his ex-wife."

*"Ay obracito mullano Federico."* Rick and his faux-Spanish curses usually made her laugh, but not this time.

"Don't try to squirm out of this. Seriously." She lowered her voice. "What made you think we would hit it off?"

Rick groaned and covered his face with his sequined cowboy hat. "I'm sorry," he muttered through it. She pulled it away from his face. "It was a favor for Dora, his ex. She's dying for him to meet someone. She's my real friend, not Gomez. I thought, maybe he's learned something from the divorce, maybe he's matured and let's just give him a chance, blah blah...I'm sorry, honey boo. You can beat me with a wet bar napkin if you want."

"That sounds...weird. Forget it."

All she wanted right now was to move and have fun and be merry. This was a Christmas party, after all.

She linked her arm through his. "Let's get buzzed and dance until dawn."

"You're on."

"No more setups," she added. "I'm adding you to the banned list." That

banned list was growing fast.

“Punishment accepted.”

## *eighteen*

Gina tossed back her drink, then boogied into the crowd, where she lost herself in the beat and the rhythm. She and Rick danced together for a bit, then ran into Kendra and all joined together for some super-fun sexy grinding.

Kendra had a friend with her, a guy she'd met during her year abroad in Japan. She was trying to teach him how to line dance, and they were both laughing their asses off when he kept missing the steps.

Then Kendra disappeared and Gina found herself deep in a conversation with Thomas Cooper's two brothers, Galen and Billy. They were all technically dancing, moving their bodies while their feet stayed in place and Billy caught them up on all the baseball news from the Twins.

More mulled wine. She caught a glimpse of Kirk talking to Allie, the delivery driver. She was standing awfully close to him, standing on tiptoe so she could chatter into his ear.

Gina knew Allie well enough to think she was all wrong for Kirk. For one thing, she was pretty religious and told everyone she dated that she'd quit her job as soon as they got engaged. There was nothing wrong with that, obviously. Each to his or her own. But Kirk seemed like someone who wanted a more equal relationship.

Or maybe she was just imagining that. Maybe it was wishful thinking

based on what her perfect relationship would be like. Her very short marriage had been one continuous battle over money and who got to make the decisions. She needed to be an equal; that was more or less her lifelong battle as the baby of the family. Junkyard hadn't wanted that. What about Kirk?

An image flashed in her mind, Kirk coming through the door of the Mason house, singing out, "Honey, I'm home," while Allie skipped to greet him, a martini in one hand, a pot roast in the other. Everyone knew Allie was a great cook. Her shortbread cookies were to die for. If Allie made cookies for Kirk, forget about it. He'd be under her spell forever.

"Are you Gina?"

She blinked out of her depressing Kirk-and-Allie fantasy to find an unfamiliar but well-dressed man standing before her. "That's me."

"I'm Jim Cresswell," he shouted over the music. "Former colleague of Conor Gault. Just passing through town, and he said I should meet you because you're awesome. He didn't mention the sexy part, though."

*Another* setup? Two in one night? She wasn't sure she could handle that much matchmaking at one party. She squinted, trying to concentrate on the clean-cut Ivy League guy before her. He couldn't seem to come into focus. Were some people just blurrier than others? Was that a thing? He looked vaguely familiar, and he smelled nice, so that was something.

She sniffed, trying to identify the spicy fragrance, then realized she was leaning embarrassingly close to him. He smiled at her, showing off teeth that could star in an orthodontist's ad. So far so good, if she didn't count the blurriness.

"You smell amazing. What aftershave do you use?"

"Excuse me?"

Oops, was that a rude question? She didn't even know anymore. "I still need to get a present for my oldest brother," she explained.

He shifted his feet uncomfortably. Or was he dancing? Was that an Ivy League kind of shuffle? Just in case, she did it with him, and then they both

just kept shifting back and forth in the most half-hearted dance move ever. “I’ll ship you a bottle, how’s that?” he offered.

“Ship me? Oh. No. I’ll buy it. Just tell me the name.”

He said something she couldn’t quite make out. “What?”

Leaning closer, he said more loudly, “Just let me buy it for you. It’s a luxury brand, high-end.”

Oh. *Oh*. He thought she couldn’t afford it. Which was probably true, considering she earned most of her income in the summer and spent most of the winter more or less volunteering her time.

But how expensive could aftershave actually be? Now she was curious. “Let’s just say....” Uh-oh, her sss’s were kind of lispy, which meant he probably wouldn’t take her seriously. She tried again, more crisply. “Let’s just say I inherited a million dollars last night and I want to buy presents for all my annoying brothers. Aftershave would be the perfect gift. So maybe you could just tell me the name, huh?”

He told her—she didn’t recognize it—and added the price. A thousand dollars an ounce. She gasped out loud and gave him a shove. “Shut up.”

She’d underestimated the amount of force she’d put into that move—or maybe it was the shock of that price tag. He stumbled backwards, and would have fallen on his ass except someone grabbed him before that could happen.

It was Kirk. He had to brace himself on his leg in order to catch Conor’s friend, whose name she’d already forgotten.

“You okay, man?” Kirk asked.

Gina knew she ought to go help, or at least apologize, but she was so entranced by Kirk’s sudden appearance that her feet didn’t move. God, did he look good in that thick wool sweater that set off the dark scruff on his handsome face.

“Yeah, thanks. Sexy Santa’s getting a little sloppy...” He made a “drink” gesture, thumb toward his mouth, adding a patronizing smile to the whole general concoction of embarrassment. “In other words, we’re good, if you



know what I mean.”

Suddenly he wasn't blurry anymore. She could see him perfectly clearly, and she was pissed. Gina opened her mouth to rip into him, but Kirk held up a hand to forestall her. “No, I don't know what you mean. Why don't you spell it out?”

“I mean, we're fine.” Conor's friend's gaze slid to the side. “We're just getting to know each other.”

“He's Conor's setup,” Gina informed Kirk. “A very, very bad one. Conor might go on the banned list.”

“*You're* Charlie Green?” Kirk looked him up and down. Gina was pretty sure that wasn't the right name, but whatever.

“No. Not that it's any of your business. Why don't you move along now?”

So this *wasn't* the guy Conor was trying to set her up with? Just a random coworker? That was good, because she didn't want to be mad at Conor right before his wedding.

“I'm not going to do that.” Kirk was looking awfully...stern. Angry. Protective. “Gina is my best friend's little sister, and I don't like how you're acting.”

In an instant, Gina's fury—well, some of it—shifted to Kirk. Was that all she was, his best friend's little sister? Screw that. She had this situation completely under control all by herself. If anything, Conor's friend ought to be worried.

“You and my brothers can kiss my ass,” she told Kirk. “I don't need your help dealing with this loser.”

Conor's friend scowled at her. “Just so you know, I'm a lawyer.”

“I'm confused. Are you trying to sleep with her or sue her?” Kirk asked. Which struck Gina as so funny that she started giggling. She put a hand over her mouth to hide her amusement; she was still mad, after all. She couldn't let either of these guys forget it.

“Come on, Gina, let’s go.” Kirk took her by the elbow.

“No.” She shook him off. “I have something to say to this dude. You better watch your back, Charlie Green.”

“I’m not Charlie...besides, you’re the one who shoved *me*.”

“Yeah, but that’s because...” It was all getting mixed up in her mind now. His height, his clean-cut good looks, he reminded her of someone. “I know your type. You think you can just do whatever you want whenever you want just because you’re kind of cute in a Land’s End kind of way.”

The guy grinned, then frowned. Then grinned again. “Is that a compliment? I’ll take it.”

“It’s not a compliment! You are way too full of yourself, Charlie Green.”

“I’m not Charlie— Oh for fuck’s sake. Forget it. You can have her.” He slunk away from them, which was so unsatisfying that Gina lunged after him.

“*Have her?*”

Kirk’s arm was around her, one hand holding hers, keeping her anchored in place. He murmured in her ear, “Let him go, Gina. I know he’s a dick, but did you catch the part about him being a lawyer?”

That did ring a bell. She stopped resisting and let him lead her toward the back exit, into the passageway that let onto the service alley behind the café.

“Are you all right?” he asked, pausing before they reached the door. Beyond it, she felt cold air reaching inside with icy fingers. It cleared some of the foggiest from her head.

“I don’t know. I think so.” She made a sound that was part-sob, part-shudder, and completely undignified. Her body was shaking, she realized. And suddenly she realized who the Ivy League guy reminded her of. “Holy shit. For a second there that guy made me think of Coach Peters, and there were a million things I wanted to say to him. I wanted to punch out his perfect teeth.”

Kirk ran his hands up and down her arms, trying to warm her up. She loved that, loved his touch, his concern. “He does look like that photo.”

“It’s not just that. I felt the same vibe from him, you know what I mean? Like a vulture hiding behind an LL Bean catalogue.” She shivered, both from the cold air and the feeling she’d gotten from that guy. Did Conor know his coworker was kind of a creep? “I’ll be okay. You can go back in.”

“I don’t want to go back in. I want to be right here with you.”

She blinked at him, too buzzed to be cautious with her words. “Really? You don’t look down on me because of...the stuff I told you?”

“What? Fuck no.” He looked so genuinely shocked that she believed him. “Did it seem like I did?”

“I haven’t heard from you since then.”

“That’s because I wanted to bring you info about Coach Peters on a silver platter, and I don’t have any leads yet.”

“Oh.” She frowned thoughtfully. That seemed to make sense.

“I actually did text you today but you never answered.”

Really? She hadn’t seen a text, but maybe her phone had run out of juice. It happened all the time. It didn’t matter anymore, because the longer she stared into Kirk’s warm hazel eyes, the less anything mattered except him and her, standing here together.

Wherever her touched her, from her shoulders to the sensitive skin just above her elbows, then back up, warm tingles spread. Outside, inside, through her heart, into her veins.

A deep tremor rose from her core and ran through her body.

Without giving herself a chance to second-guess, she looped her arms around his neck, pulled him close, and kissed him on the lips.

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It took a moment for Kirk to catch up. One second he’d been trying to reassure Gina, the next she was kissing him like a woman who knew exactly what she wanted. He wanted to kiss her back, and in fact he couldn’t help

himself for one intoxicating endless moment. The touch of her lips sent fireworks through him. The rich flavor of mulled wine and sensual woman sent heat charging to his groin. His cock hardened so fast it was almost comical.

He moved his hands to her back, so he could stroke her firm velvet-covered curves and experience, however briefly, the wildly sexual thrill of holding Gina in his arms. It was like embracing a ball of fire.

Then he gently pulled away.

“What’s wrong?” She blinked up at him, pupils dilated, eyes even darker than usual. “Oh no. You didn’t want me to kiss you, did you? Crap. I’m an idiot.”

“No no, I wanted it. Don’t get me wrong. But you’re...you were pretty shaken up back there. I don’t want you to regret it tomorrow.”

“You think I’m drunk?” Color rose in her cheeks, and she pressed her hands to them, staring down at the worn floorboards of the cafe’s back entryway. “I might be,” she admitted. “Oh God. I’m so embarrassed.”

“Don’t be. Look at me.” He touched her chin, tilting her face upwards. “Do you know how hard it was to stop kissing you?” To get the point across, he glanced down at the front of his pants, where his erection still bulged impressively.

“Oh.” A smile played across her lips, so full and lush that his mouth watered. She moved closer, so her fragrance surrounded him—heady and spicy, like oranges and cloves and wine and everything that made life worth living.

“I should go,” he said in a strangled voice. “Let me drive you home.”

“I live right around the corner, don’t you remember?”

No, actually, he’d pretty much forgotten where they were. There was a party going on, lots of people in a coffee shop, and oh yeah, they were at the SweetBitter. Her place was probably a two-minute walk in the snow.

“Want to come over?” she asked, fake-innocently.

“You’re trying to kill me, aren’t you?”

She took his question seriously. “I’m definitely not trying to kill you. Actually, I think I might...” She paused while his mind went wild with possible endings to that sentence. Want you? Like you? Love you? “Trust you,” she finally said.

That word—great as it was—acted like a cold shower on his raging desire. If she trusted him, the last thing he wanted to do was destroy her trust. He needed to get his hands off her and stop pawing her like a teenager with his first crush.

“I’ll walk you home,” he said.

“But your...hey, your crutches are gone!”

“Yeah, I graduated to a cane, but I left it inside when I came after you.” He tested his leg and felt it throb. Abandoning his cane hadn’t been the smartest move.

“I’ll find it. I have to get my coat too.”

“I dressed it up like a candy cane, you can’t miss it.”

As she headed down the passageway, he called after her, “Watch out for setups. The damn party’s full of them.”

She tossed him a laugh over her shoulder. “The whole town is, haven’t you noticed?”

“Yeah. It’s getting on my nerves. ”

A few moments later, Gina reappeared with their coats and George, who was toting Kirk’s cane. The red ribbon looked a little tattered.

“I rescued it from the dance floor,” he said, handing it to Kirk. “It’s had a rough night.”

Kirk nodded in thanks, then pulled on his coat. “I’m walking Gina home. No one needs to know.”

“Want me to take her?”

Kirk shook his head. “Nope. I got it. If anyone asks, Gina went to her place, I went back to mine. Which is exactly what’s going to happen.”

“Sure, kids.” George’s smug smile irritated him.

“I’m serious.”

“Didn’t say you weren’t. Have fun.”

“We’re not going to have fun, we’re just going home. Two different homes.” Kirk called after him as he slouched back to the party, hands in the pockets of his fringed leather disco pants.

“You’re being weird,” Gina told him as Kirk ushered her out the door. “I don’t care what anyone thinks. It’s my life.”

“That’s not the point.”

The cold winter air blasted their faces as they stepped outside. Ice crystals seemed to hover in the air, illuminated by the sensor light activated by their movement. They looked up at the sky, where the crescent moon seemed to smile down at them. The sight captivated Gina into silence.

Just as well, because if she’d asked him what the point was, he’d have to tell her the truth. That he wanted to tell everyone to shove off with their setups, that he was staking a claim, right here, right now, and Gina was his. He felt so alive with her, and so right at home.

But this wasn’t home...Lake Bittersweet was his past, not his future. He’d worked hard to leave this place behind, along with the rest of his miserable past. But Gina would always be connected to Lake Bittersweet. If he gave in to the raging temptation of his attraction to Gina, it could only be for a short time. He couldn’t do that to her. She deserved better.

Nope, one drunken amazing kiss would have to be the beginning and the end of it.

## *nineteen*

The next day, Gina sent him a text thanking him for walking her home.

She added, *Can we agree that nothing else happened?*

*You got it.*

*I'll be over soon to do more laundry.*

*I can do it now that I'm off the crutches.*

She sent him a thumbs up emoji. *If you need anything else just text. I can squeeze in another cleaning sesh between Christmas preps.*

*Will do.*

Will *not* do, he thought to himself. He needed to put some distance between him and Gina. She was too tempting, he couldn't trust himself to keep things either friendly or brotherly.

To chase the image of her in that Santa dress from his mind, he swam lap after lap in the pool. The physical therapist hadn't put a limit on how much time he could spend swimming, so he swam until his arms ached and he could barely feel his legs.

Then he went outside in the snow and chopped some wood. That action required bracing himself on both legs, so he found it to be good training, and useful too.

But no matter how hard he swam or how much firewood he chopped, he still tasted the rich wine flavor of Gina's lips and felt the almost feral

excitement of being close to her.

He thought about leaving. Obviously Sassy wasn't going to "meet him in Lake Bittersweet." Every hour that he was here, he wanted Gina more. What if he went back to Boston and escaped temptation that way?

But he didn't want to leave. The holiday spirit taking hold of the town was working its spell on him. Every day there was a tree-trimming or a menorah-lighting or a cookie swap.

He decided to work on finding a topic for his next book. The Mason house had a fireplace in the den, so for the next few evenings, he made a cozy fire and stared at his laptop, willing an idea to come.

But nothing did.

During his time in the Army, he used to jot down notes and email them to himself. He pulled up the folder that held all those emails and scanned through them for inspiration. He'd used many of those stories in his first book, but there were plenty more. Great stories, but none of them sparked any ideas. It was almost as if his stubborn brain refused to think about his Army days.

Then, finally, one of his old notes caught his attention. It wasn't a combat story, it was a conversation he'd had with three other soldiers during guard duty one night.

He hadn't included this particular convo, but Stovack, Dion and Boynton had all appeared elsewhere in the book. Dion was a close friend, while Stovack was older, with a penchant for rants that reminded Kirk of his father.

On a still night in the desert when the only movement was the slow drift of the stars overhead, they'd been talking quietly, so their voices didn't carry. They'd gotten onto the topic of fathers.

*"My father's dope," Dion said. "He used to wear a straight-up tailored suit to his janitor job. Then he'd take it off and keep it in a locker until he was done. He started as a janitor at a high school and ended up head custodian. And that suit was the key, at least that's what he said. He told me don't let*



anyone tell you who you are. I said, what if I want to bake motherfucking pies for a living. He said, then bake motherfucking pies, so long as some are sweet potato, cuz that's his favorite."

"My father told me if I didn't join the army, he'd hunt me down and shoot me himself," said Boynton. "I didn't really have a choice. That's what men do. That's what we're good for, fighting. I don't know what I'm gonna do when I get out."

"Police?" Kirk suggested. "That's what a lot of guys do afterwards."

"Maybe." He let out a long sigh. "I want to show something else to my kids. Like, you can be a man without beating on people. I want to be the dad who plays with his kids. But my pop says I gotta be a hard-ass so they respect me."

"I have a son," Stovack said, surprising them all. "Can't say I really know him. I'm better at being a soldier. I keep re-upping and his mom yells at me. Whatever, I'd rather be out here. The kid's fine, his mom's a pain in my ass with the child support and all, but she does a good job."

They all fell silent, digesting that.

"How about your dad?" someone asked Kirk.

"Not much to say. He got injured on the job and got hooked on painkillers. He ran heavy equipment for a road crew. He got worker's comp for a while. Then they cleared him to go back to work but he never did. So he got let go. All he did was sit in front of the TV and drink beer. I don't remember hardly a conversation with him after about the age of ten."

"So who paid the bills? Your mama?" asked Dion.

"Yeah, for a while, but then she ran away with someone she worked with at the Safeway. I think my dad got disability payments. Must have, because he never worked again, not until I left. He'd either sit in front of the TV complaining, or just stare at nothing. He hardly ever talked to me. The house was like a damn black hole."

"What'd you do?" Stovack asked.

*“Stayed at my best buddy’s house. Enlisted. Came here. Why else do you think I’d be out here with you idiots?”*

*They all laughed and toasted to their fathers.*

Now that he was an adult, and had seen more of the world, Kirk wondered... had his father suffered from depression? Was that why he’d basically crawled into a hole and never come out? He knew it had been hard on his father to lose his job. But he’d still had a wife, two children. A man was more than his job, right? Why had he let the rest of his life disintegrate? If he was depressed, why hadn’t he asked for help? Or had he asked, in his own way, but no one listened?

His father came from a stoic Minnesota family of Norwegian descent, the kind who didn’t talk about emotional shit. His mother was maybe Scottish or English, she didn’t really know. He’d never heard either of his parents say, “I love you,” not to each other and not to him. That was why the Morettis were such an oasis for him. They expressed emotions—out loud! Sometimes angry ones, sometimes joyful ones, but whatever it was, they put it right out there.

For the young Kirk, the Morettis had been like water to a thirsty seedling. And now, one particular Moretti had taken over his mind.

*Focus.*

He stared at his laptop, at the sketchy notes about that conversation in the desert. Four soldiers, talking about fathers, trying to sort out what it meant to be a man. Maybe he should get in touch with them and see where their lives had taken them.

He abandoned his email and logged into Facebook. He hadn’t checked it for messages from Sassy yet today.

Almost immediately, a message appeared. His stomach lurched with excitement, but then he saw that it wasn’t from Sassy. The message came from an anonymous “Facebook user.”

*Surprise! I know where you are and I need to talk to you. Did you think I wouldn't figure it out?*

A sharp chill whipped down his spine. Who the hell was this? He didn't usually get strange messages and emails when he hadn't been on the air for a while. He certainly wasn't going to answer someone from an anonymous account. Even though the message didn't sound threatening, exactly, wouldn't an actual fan use their real name?

He was in the middle of logging off when one more message pinged through from the same account.

It was an emoji of a candy cane. Then another, and another. Five candy canes.

He took a quick screenshot, then stabbed the shut down button and his laptop went dark. *Candy cane*. Did that mean that this anonymous person had seen the way he'd dressed up his cane with red ribbon? Was he *here in town*?

No. Not possible. Maybe he was just adding a random festive touch to his creepy message.

But if it did mean he was here...what then? If the message meant the guy had seen his cane, then he could narrow down the suspects to people who'd been at the SweetBitter party.

*No, he couldn't.* The cane had been such a hit at the party that Kirk had kept the ribbon on ever since, his little festive tribute to Christmas. He'd brought it all over town. He'd used it while shopping, then during the skate party on Bluebird Pond, at the tree-lighting ceremony outside city hall. He'd taken it to his meeting with the mayor about receiving the keys to the city. He'd had it with him when he'd gone to the bank, when he'd had drinks with the Cooper brothers, when he'd chatted with Alvin Carter at the Blue Drake.

Everywhere Kirk had gone, his "candy" cane had too.

Basically, if Anonymous was in town, he'd had many opportunities to see Kirk with his candy cane. But Kirk had never noticed anyone lurking around, or doing anything remotely threatening, at least if you didn't count the

snowball that had gone astray from a kids' snowball fight at the skate party.

Should he leave Lake Bittersweet?

Even though he'd been considering it earlier, now the idea bothered him. If he left, it should be on his own terms, not because of some anonymous message. It wasn't even a threatening message. *I need to talk to you.*

Besides, where would he go that was safer than here? This house had the best security he'd ever seen in a private home. His place back in Boston didn't come close. The idea of traveling at this time of year, trying to find a place that wasn't already booked for the holiday season...forget it.

Face it, he didn't want to leave. More specifically, he didn't want to leave Gina. Whatever was developing between them, this half-step in, half-step out, friends-or-enemies, hot-and-cold—no, never cold, it could never be that between him and Gina, whatever it was, fire was involved—had him mesmerized. He didn't want to leave and he wouldn't leave, not unless he had to.

Besides, Gina needed him. She'd trusted him with her secret about Coach Peters and he didn't want to let her down.

But he should tell someone. He pulled out his phone and dialed his buddy Earl Granger.

He answered right away. "Hey, man. Good timing. I got some info for you."

"Info?" Kirk had forgotten that he'd asked Granger to check into that kid back in Boston. "Never mind about that. There's something else I want to run by you."

He described the Facebook message and sent him the screenshot.

"You're calling me about a candy cane?" The skepticism in his voice made Kirk wince. Out loud, it sounded ridiculous.

"He could have sent a wreath emoji or a Christmas tree. But he sent the candy cane after I've spent the past few days carrying around my own version. Maybe it's nothing. I'm just filling you in."

“Or the gift emoji,” Granger said thoughtfully.

“Right.” Kirk stifled a laugh. The contrast between Granger’s super-stern FBI agent manner and his goofy side always amused him.

“The snowman emoji’s my favorite,” he added.

“We’re getting offtrack. The emojis aren’t really the point here. Do you think I should be worried?”

“Hard to say. He didn’t put any threats in the message.”

“That’s true.” Kirk relaxed enough to add another log to the fire crackling in the hearth.

“But there’s something else. The kid you wanted me to check out. Someone at the shelter where he was staying said he left Boston and headed west.”

“You think he might be coming here?”

“Have you seen him?”

“Nope.” It would certainly be possible to hide out in Lake Bittersweet without being spotted, but not easy.

“Do you think he could have sent that message?”

“Maybe, but why be anonymous? It doesn’t seem like him. He’s usually kind of bubbly and happy.”

“Is that invitation still open?” Granger didn’t wait for an answer. “Good, because I’m coming the day after tomorrow.”

“*Day after tomorrow?* That’s Christmas Eve. Don’t you have holiday plans?”

“Yeah, I just told you what they are.”

“Do you really think it’s necessary? Like you said, it’s just an emoji. And if Timothy Price was behind it, I’m not worried at all. He wouldn’t hurt anyone.”

“Maybe. Look, I learned some things about him that triggered my spider-sense. I’ll fill you in when I get there. Or it could be someone else who isn’t bubbly and happy.”

The dry way Granger said those words make Kirk smile.

“Besides,” he went on, “there’s worse things than spending the holidays in a pretty lakeside community. Until I get there, don’t slack on the security. And check in with anyone who spends any time at your place. They might have noticed something.”

Gina was the only one who’d been inside the Mason house since he’d been here. And he knew exactly where she was going to be tonight. Happy for any excuse to see her, he clambered to his feet and went to damp down the fire.

## *twenty*

One of Gina's favorite holiday events was the "Candlelight Chorus" put on by the Lake Bittersweet high school singing group. If the weather allowed, everyone, students and residents alike, gathered after dusk in the little park next to city hall.

Under the stars and the twinkling fairy lights, people held candles in their mittened hands while the students led them in song. They sang "Silent Night," "Joy to the World," "Hallelujah"—the Leonard Cohen version—and other songs that weren't specifically for Christmas, but that resonated with a spiritual vibe. Every year they added at least one new song; this year it was "Someday at Christmas" by Stevie Wonder.

Gina could still remember the raucous town council meeting at which Steven Gault had challenged Lake Bittersweet to broaden their musical horizons and include songs that spoke to all faiths. Some had boycotted the Candlelight Chorus after that, but generally the town had adjusted and the event was more popular than ever. The fact that less-musically-gifted students roamed the crowd dishing out hot cocoa with marshmallows helped.

Gina always found the evening utterly magical, especially on a clear night like tonight, the stars so brilliant you could imagine reaching up on tiptoe and touching them. The divine sound of young voices harmonizing brought tears to her eyes. The flame of her candle flickered as she sang along. The cold air

nipped at her cheeks and nose, but she was toasty warm inside her black puffer coat, with a creamy white scarf wrapped around her neck. She probably looked like a penguin, but didn't care.

The only thing dimming her joy was that she was on a date—Emmaline's setup, Brady Chase. Brady stood next to her, singing just enough off-key that she wished he wouldn't bother. He was Emmaline's friend from her maple syrup cooperative; Emmaline kept shooting happy glances her way, eager for some sign that she'd nailed it with her choice.

Gina ignored her. How was she going to explain to her friend that while Brady was an excellent dude in every way she could name, he stirred not a single bit of intrigue in her?

She felt his arm brush against hers, and turned to smile at him. After the last few dinner-type dates, she'd arranged to meet Brady here because at least they'd be *doing* something instead of staring at each other over breadsticks.

Maybe she should have checked to see if he could carry a tune first.

*Ugh, don't be such a bitch, she scolded herself. Give him a chance. What if he's the one, and you shut him out before you find out? Bad singing is not a reason to reject someone.*

Someone brushed against her other arm, and before she even turned, she knew it was Kirk. Her body told her in the way her heartbeat quickened and a prickle of awareness flooded her nerve endings. Maybe she'd been unconsciously alerted by his smell, even though he was bundled up in a thick hunter's jacket and a cozy knitted cap. Pheromones could do that, couldn't they?

"Hey," she whispered to him under the flow of singing voices. "Where's your candle?"

He shook his head, scanning the crowd. "I'm not here to sing. I need to talk to you."

"Now? I'm..." She glanced to her other side, where Brady was enthusiastically bellowing the chorus of "Deck the Halls" an extremely



irritating half note off key. "...on a date."

Kirk scowled briefly. "Who's he?"

"That's not really your business, is it?"

If he said something about her being his best friend's little sister, she'd scream.

"But you know him? He's legit?"

Gina stared. "Did you want me to check his ID?"

When he didn't answer, she said, "You're being very weird, but if you really must know, he's a friend of Emmaline. Emmaline's right over there, hovering like a mother hen. That's enough for me."

Looking relieved, Kirk nodded. "Good."

"What's going on, Kirk? You seem a little paranoid about my perfectly innocent Candlelight Chorus date."

"I really need to talk to you. It'll just take a minute."

Reading the seriousness written on his face, she whispered to Brady that she'd be right back, then followed Kirk away from the crowd. She noticed that he was hardly limping anymore. Even though he still carried the cane, he barely leaned on it at all.

"Is your leg a lot better?" she asked him when they reached the brick side wall of city hall, where some evergreen shrubbery sheltered them from view. "You're walking almost normally."

"I've been swimming a lot. It seems to help."

"That's amazing. Good for you." She waited for him to say more. Whatever he had to talk to her about, it must be important for him to interrupt the Candlelight Chorus, never mind her date.

"How's it going with that maple syrup guy?" he asked abruptly.

"That's what you want to talk about?"

"No. Sorry. It's..." He hunched his shoulders inside his hunter's jacket. Kirk didn't ordinarily come across as nervous or unsure. Even when he was a kid, he'd held himself with an air of maturity. As an adult, he usually radiated

even more confidence. “My leg. I need to warn you.”

“About your leg? Is it about to go rogue?”

His serious expression eased as he laughed. “No, sorry, I’m explaining this wrong. I told you how I broke my leg, right?”

“Being a hero? Rescuing the baked bean heiress’ child?”

He looked embarrassed. “Yes. That. Anyway, there was tons of media about it, and lots of fan attention, and...I think I told you about that. Whenever I’m in the news, or even on the news, I get hate messages and a lot of love from fans. Sometimes it goes overboard. That’s one of the reasons I came here, to get away from it.”

“Right, you need some peace and quiet.” She patted his arm, felt the tension in his muscles. “Are the locals getting Kirk fever too? Need me to crack some knuckles?”

That got a laugh from him. “The locals are fine. But I got a message from an anonymous fan who made it sound as if he was here in town.”

He filled her in on the candy cane emojis, and his friend the FBI agent, and his suggestion about alerting anyone who’d been to the Mason place, until Gina’s head started to spin.

“Hold on, hold on.” She leaned her back against the wall to steady herself. He came closer, offering her support. “Are you in danger?”

“I don’t think so, but I can’t say for sure. Have you noticed anything at the Mason place that seemed off?” His hazel eyes were deep in shadow, but she could read the worry in the set of his jaw, the tilt of his neck.

She thought about it. “I haven’t been out there in a few days, as you know. Not since the SweetBitter party. But...” There was something, now that he mentioned it. “Yesterday I drove to the Kendall place because their heater alarm went off. I thought I saw someone in the woods along the road. A youngish man, not very tall, kind of skinny. I stopped, but then I couldn’t see him anymore. I just called out that it’s all private property out there and the deputies patrol it regularly. No answer. I ended up thinking I imagined

it.”

“Was it near my place?”

“Half a mile up the road. It was probably nothing.”

The thought of Kirk being the target of an obsessed fan gave her the chills. That area of Lake Bittersweet was so empty in the wintertime. Was he safe out there? Sure, he was a trained soldier and the house had insane security. But he was still recovering from a broken leg.

“Okay, thanks.” His eyebrows were still drawn together in a worried frown. He stood so close she could smell the faintest whiff of chlorine from all those laps he’d been swimming. And yet she wished he was even closer.

“So what now?” she asked.

“I don’t want you to come to my place anymore. It’s not worth the risk.”

“But it’s so isolated out there this time of year. You’d be all alone if something happened.” On impulse, she added, “You should stay with me.”

He straightened in shock. “What? No. Absolutely not. The point is to minimize any risk to you, not put you right in the thick of it.”

“But I live right in the middle of town with a hundred witnesses around.”

“No.” He shook his head flatly. “Out of the question. I can handle myself, I just don’t want you in danger.”

“Oh no, buddy. You told me about this, I’m in it now.” She chewed on her bottom lip. “Your friend, you said he’s going to stay at the Bittersweet Inn? That’s barely a block away from my place. There’d be backup right there. So close. If something happened and you were all the way across the lake, it would take so much longer for anyone to get there.”

“Not that long. It’s a small town,” he said dryly. “And the security out there is top-of-the-line.”

“Yes, but it’s remote and we don’t even really have a police force, we rely on the fire department and the county sheriff.” The more she thought about it, the more her anxiety grew. “I understand why you chose that house, but now that some obsessed fan might have followed you to Lake

Bittersweet, it doesn't seem safe."

He touched his gloved hand to her cheek. "You're really worried."

His tender tone sent shivers down her spine. "Of course I am. There's an FBI agent on his way here because he thinks there's something to worry about. Please, Kirk, don't go back there. You saw my place, it's plenty big enough. You need a key code to get into the building. Also, there's Jet. My cat can be vicious to strangers. I had to get a post office box because he kept scratching delivery people."

She felt a kind of triumph when Kirk laughed, even though she was very serious about her offer.

"Will you think about it?"

"It's really sweet of you." Noncommittal answer that she took as a "no."

Maybe he didn't want to spend that much time with her. That thought was like a dagger to her heart, but hey...this wasn't about her.

He seemed to pick up on her hurt. "It's not that I wouldn't want to stay with you. I'm just not sure it's safe."

She felt like screaming in frustration, even though she understood his logic. "Shouldn't I get a say in what risks I'm willing to take? I'm not a child. I can choose to help a friend if I want to."

He was already shaking his head. "How do you think I'd feel if something happened to you?"

"How do you think I'd feel if something happened to *you* and you were all alone out there?" she snapped at him.

"I'm used to being alone. I fucking grew up alone."

*"You grew up with us."*

Hot tension crackled between them. She realized they were so close together that she felt the warmth of his breath against her cheeks. His gaze bore into hers. The air seemed to vibrate around them.

"God, you're beautiful." His voice scraped like gravel across her nerve endings.

“Wh...what?” Her voice wavered because the forcefield from his body had such a powerful effect on her.

“Don’t you understand that if I stayed at your place, I’d never get any sleep?”

Her eyes went wide and heat pooled in her belly. “Why...not?” she whispered.

“Because every time I see you I get hard. I think about you while I swim. While I try to sleep. While I dream.”

Mouth dry, words failing her, she stared up at him. What was happening? Was this for real? She swallowed hard. “You do?”

“I do. It’s a fucking problem.” He crowded her against the wall, his body shielding her from any passing onlookers. From the park floated a jaunty version of “Jingle Bells,” incongruously cheerful compared to the thick desire vibrating between them. “I want you right here against this brick wall.”

“Oh.” Faintly, she thought that was probably a very bad idea, but so much wild energy was pouring through her system that it didn’t matter. “Maybe you should kiss me then. The last time you didn’t seem so—”

The rest of her words were snatched away by the force of his lips against hers. It was almost savage, that kiss, a fierce, firm claiming of her mouth. Hot sensation flamed across her skin and her nipples tingled against his chest. She pressed her hips against his, searching for the bulge she’d seen the last time they’d touched. There it was, just as hard and proud as before.

And she realized that she’d never stopped wanting this moment to happen, not for one second since that time in the SweetBitter Café. The last few days of running errands and taking care of Christmas preps...she’d just been marking time until now.

Her ears rang with lust, she could hardly bear the fact that they were plastered against city hall instead of somewhere inside the building, where they could rip each other’s clothes off. She ground herself against him, wanting and shameless, oblivious to anything else. They were in their own

world, where nothing and no else existed, and all they had to do was take a step forward off the cliff and...

A voice floated across the barrier between their world and that other one. "Gina? Has anyone seen Gina Moretti?"

Oh my God. Her date. She couldn't even think of his name.

She wrenched herself away from Kirk. "I...him." She made a vague gesture toward the park.

He nodded, tension straining his body, and took a step away from her.

"I'll be right there," she called to Brady. That's right. *Brady*. "I'm helping someone with something."

Lame. Good Lord. Get it together.

She waited until Brady had turned back toward the crowd. Kirk took hold of her hand. "What are you going to tell him?" he asked.

She shook her head, not sure. She didn't like to be rude, but things weren't going anywhere with Brady, with or without Kirk.

"Tell him things have changed." The intensity in Kirk's eyes made her feel faint. His phone buzzed, giving her the feeling of being saved by the bell.

He pulled the phone from his jacket pocket and peered at it. "Jesus. I think someone's at my house. I hooked up my phone to the perimeter alarm, and it just went off."

They stared at each other as the heady rush of desire drained away. Instead of hot, she felt cold and afraid. He swiped his thumb across the phone and pulled up a black and white video feed. They both peered at it, but couldn't see anything resembling an intruder.

"I think..." he said slowly. "Maybe I shouldn't go back there tonight."

"Do you want to call nine-one-one?"

"For what? It could be nothing. The house is locked up, no one can get in. Tomorrow I'll go back and look at the video. Check for footprints and so forth."

"The security cameras are set to record?"

He nodded as he focused on his task. “As long as there’s room in the servers, everything is recorded. It’s going through the feeds afterwards that’s a pain in the ass.”

“Could it be a deer or something?”

“Deer don’t set off the alarm. It recognizes humans. It could be just a kid sneaking around or something like that.”

She shivered, thinking of the young man she’d seen in the woods. The thought of some weirdo lurking around Lake Bittersweet made her furious. How dare someone go after Kirk—smart, strong, kind Kirk?

“I have an idea.” She snapped her fingers as a brilliant solution came to her. “I know somewhere we can stay tonight. We’ll be totally safe, absolutely no one will know where we are, and then tomorrow we can check out the house in the daylight.”

She realized that she meant that “we” very sincerely. There was no way she was letting him go through this on his own. She wouldn’t be freakishly loyal Gina Moretti if she did that.

## *twenty-one*

Gina ran to tell her date that she had to end the evening early. Kirk felt a little guilty, but not really. She'd only just met the guy, after all. He'd get over it.

Just in case someone was following—that perimeter alarm had made them both a bit paranoid—they played a bait-and-switch, pretending to say goodnight outside the front door of her apartment building. Then he got into his car and drove until he was sure no one was following. He left his car parked at the public landing, where Gina picked him up in her Leaf.

The “secret undisclosed location” turned out to be the private garage of the Blue Drake. Steven Gault, the rock star who had owned it until he died earlier in the year, was a car freak. He had especially loved vintage Cadillacs, and owned several along with an Aston Martin and a classic Jaguar. He'd built a private garage especially for them, and Gina had the key.

“As the manager, I have keys to everything in the place,” she explained as she nested her Leaf like a sparrow among the gaudier Cadillacs. She plugged it in to an outlet on the back wall.

He got it then. “The cabins.”

“Exactly. They're all shut down for the winter. Totally private. No one comes here, and no one would think to.”

“Won't they be cold?”



“The Ring-Necked Grebe Cabin is the most insulated and it gets a lot of solar gain. I stayed there once last winter and it was fine. My apartment was getting fumigated and I’d had a fight with my mom and didn’t feel like staying with them.” As she spoke, she led him out a side door of the garage, which looked more like a warehouse than a home for so many classic vehicles.

“What’s Carly going to do with all those Caddys?” he asked, a little wistfully. He too was kind of a car freak. One time, Gault had given him a ride home from a party in the mint-green one. He didn’t know what was better, being in that car or listening to Gault sing along to the Prince CD he was playing.

“I have no idea. Right now she’s planning her extremely last-minute wedding, so the cars are probably last on her list. Oh! Speaking of which, I had another idea.” As they reached the deserted back terrace of the Blue Drake, she dropped her voice to a whisper. “I’ll tell you when we get inside.”

They picked their way in the dark down the packed-dirt pathway that linked all the cabins. Winter winds had blown away most of the snow here, so they were able to walk without leaving tracks on the frozen ground. No streetlights or sensor lights lit their way, and the moon hadn’t risen yet. But Gina knew the place so well she was able to find her way in nothing but starlight. Kirk focused on not stumbling over the ridges of frozen dirt.

To his left, he felt the fresh cold breath of the lake. To his right, the empty cabins slumbered peacefully, like cozy, dark little A-frame monopoly houses scattered along the lakeshore. Boards covered their windows.

It was still and quiet and felt utterly secure.

When they reached the dark bulk of the Ring-Necked Grebe cabin, Gina used a giant ring of keys to unlock it and they slipped inside.

“Stay here,” she whispered. “I’m going to pull down all the blackout shades.”

“Aren’t the windows boarded up?”

“Yes, but light might get through. I’ll be right back.”

While she used the light of her phone to make her way from one window to the next, Kirk’s eyes adjusted to the dimness. He smelled mothballs and lemon polish, and the faint scent of ashes, probably from a wood stove.

When Gina had finished drawing all the blackout shades, she moved to the kitchenette. She came back and handed him a candle the size of a grapefruit and a lighter, playing the light from her phone over them so he could see.

“I’m going to go outside. As soon as I close the door, light this candle. I want to know if you can see any light from outside. If anything would catch someone’s attention, it would be light where you don’t expect it. I don’t want some volunteer fireman bursting in on us.”

“You’re kind of good at this cloak-and-dagger stuff, you know that?”

“Probably because I grew up spying on my older brothers.”

She slipped past him, then he felt a breath of cold air as she opened and closed the door. As soon as it clicked shut, he lit the candle. A moment later she tapped on the door. He blew it out, and she slipped back inside.

“The candle’s good to go. I couldn’t see a single speck of light.”

He flicked the lighter again and a flame sprang to life on the wick. It was a large candle, a three-wick, so he lit the other two and set it down on the coffee table, which had been carved out of one large burl. The rest of the shadowed space came into view; simply crafted furniture, carved loons on the walls, a laminated map of this part of Minnesota, the wood stove he’d smelled.

“Should we start a fire?” he asked.

“No, someone might notice the smoke. Are you cold?”

They both still wore all their winter gear, and he was actually starting to sweat. “Not at all. I’m getting overheated. Might need to strip down.”

The word “strip” felt too intimate. Or maybe just intimate enough, because she smiled. The candlelight gave her eyes a deep sparkle and brought

out the shadows under her cheekbones.

“You look beautiful in the candlelight,” he said softly. “Even more beautiful, I mean.”

The compliment seemed to fluster her. Now that they were alone, a kind of nervousness fluttered between them. “Candles are always so flattering. Especially,” she rotated the glass container that held the three-wick column of wax, “Mango Tango.”

“Is that really what it’s called?”

“Read it and weep. Actually, smell it and weep. Or enjoy, depending on how you feel about mangos.”

He sniffed the very faint tropical fragrance. His stomach growled. “I could go for a mango right now.”

“Obviously there’s no food here, sorry. Shoot, we should have thought of that.”

“That’s all right. I’ll skip the mango, how about a tango instead?” He held out his hand in invitation. Maybe dancing would make her relax. Besides, he really wanted to touch her again. It felt like it had been so long since city hall.

She came toward him, moving her hips in a conga-type rhythm, swaying back and forth. They didn’t tango—there really wasn’t space. But he put his arms around her and she cuddled against him.

They stayed like that for a long, quiet moment, the only sounds the beating of their hearts and the brush of their clothes as they moved against each other. The candle quietly flickered, sending out its sweet fruity scent like a cheerful invitation. *Have fun. Life is good.*

“You know something?” he murmured in her ear. Her black curls brushed his lips and he breathed in her fresh-from-the-cold scent. “There’s nowhere in the entire world I’d rather be than right here.”

“Really? Because I was just thinking I’d rather be in that bed back there.” She gestured with her head toward a half-closed door behind her. “But I’d have to make it up and this feels so good I don’t want to move.”

*Bed* sounded phenomenally good to him, not just because of her, but because his leg was tired. “We could do it together. I’m good at making beds. Army style.”

“If we make the bed together, we have to lie in it together. Isn’t that how the saying goes?”

“Never heard that one, but I’m not arguing.”

He felt her warm breath against his neck, her curves fitting against his body. They both still wore all their outer gear, but all those layers didn’t stop his cock from hardening. Could she feel it? Feel how much he wanted her?

Yes—she slid her hand between them to run her fingers over the front of his pants, molding the shape of his erection. His eyes half-closed as he leaned into her touch. God, he craved her. Deeply. Feverishly. His erection swelled under the clever movements of her hand.

His own hands found their way under her coat and caressed the curve of her back, cupped her ass. Goddamn all these winter clothes. He wanted to feel her flesh, but there were so many clothes in the way.

“I want you naked,” he told her in a hoarse voice. “I want to see you. Feel you. I want to get into that bed and make you scream.”

Her breath caught. “What about this?” She touched his left leg gently.

“I don’t fucking care. It’s not the only body part that matters.” He thrust his bulge against her hand with a groan.

“I care. You have to promise me that if anything hurts your leg, you’ll tell me and we’ll work around it.”

“That’s fair.”

Her hand left his erection and wrapped around his wrist. His erection pulsed, missing her touch already. She led him toward the bedroom. He picked up the candle with his other hand, because that Mango Tango scent really did something for him.

“Is mango an aphrodisiac?” he wondered out loud. “Or is it just you?”

“It must be the mango because I’m feeling it too.”

“No, I think it must be you because that candle just entered my life, but I’ve been lusting after you since—” He broke off, almost embarrassed to say since when.

Inside the bedroom, he set the candle on a low bureau. A large king-size bed with a bare mattress took up most of the room. There might have been more furniture, but it was all a blur to him. That bed and Gina, that was all that mattered.

She turned, lifting her eyebrows as she unwound the scarf from her neck. It seemed to take forever, endless loops of wool unfurling until finally her skin appeared. He pulled her close and pressed a kiss into the warm flesh of her neck.

“Are you going to finish that sentence?” she asked, a little breathless, when he eventually pulled away. He wanted to kiss more of her, but he couldn’t do that without giving her space to get her clothes off. He helped her unbutton her coat.

“Yes. Don’t be mad though. When I first saw you at the Loon Feather, in that red dress, it hit me like a shot of whisky on a stormy night. Just pure, one thousand proof lust, injected right into my veins. But I didn’t know it was you.”

“I’m sorry?”

He winced, since he didn’t like how this sounded either. “I told you I didn’t recognize you at first. I saw you, I wanted you, then I realized who you were and felt like a shit.”

“Because I was your friend’s little sister.”

He shrugged. “I wasn’t ready for grownup Gina. Not in that dress.”

“So why did you send me a drink?”

“Because you looked like you needed it. Also I thought it over while I finished my drink. You’re not *my* little sister. I wasn’t breaking any rules by wanting you.”

“Well, if you ask Frankie, he might say different, but he’s wrong.

Brothers don't get a say. I sleep with who I want, as long as you're not breaking any of *my* rules."

Their coats were gone now, flung onto a chair in the corner of the room. Gina was wearing a cream-colored sweater with a dark green holly pattern around the neckline.

"What are your rules?" he asked.

"Just don't..." She paused, biting her lip, her dark eyes vulnerable.

"Don't what?"

"Don't lie to me." In the softness of her voice, he thought he could hear the scars of her past, of that damn coach he still hadn't located. Of her ex-husband.

"Okay." It seemed inadequate, so he added, "No lies."

"I mean, about anything. Don't say I'm beautiful if I'm not. Don't pretend you feel something you don't. I can handle anything as long as I know what it is."

He nodded his understanding. "I can follow those rules. But you know what that means?"

"What?"

"That when I say you're beautiful, it's because I mean it. If I say I want you to get the rest of your clothes off in the next three seconds so I can lick every inch of you, I mean it."

He sounded more bossy than he'd intended, but she didn't seem to mind. Fire flared in her eyes. "Every inch?"

"Every inch. The good inches get extra licking."

"Oh baby," she said faintly.

He grinned at her, tossed his cane aside, and marched toward her.

## *twenty-two*

Gina could hardly breathe as Kirk drew her sweater over her head. It felt so soft against her face, and the temporary darkness had a sensual feel to it. Then it was gone, and he was sliding his hands under the silk thermal shirt she'd worn for extra warmth.

She arched her back and sighed as those big hands took command of her body. Thumbs brushed against the sides of her breasts, outside her bra. Right now she hated that bra, even though she'd loved it when she bought it, such a bold and sassy red.

The shirt didn't last any longer than her sweater had, and a moment later she stood before him in just her bra and fleece leggings. He paused then, hands on her breasts, cupping them, flicking her nipples with his thumbs until she bit her lip to contain her excitement.

"Nice bra," he murmured.

"Right? I love it too. It's so festive. Perfect for the holidays." God, she sounded like a lingerie saleswoman. *Chill out.*

He slid his fingers under the fabric and pinched her nipples. It was a sudden move that caught her by surprise. Her breath clogged in her throat and a bolt of heat tightened her pussy. Her heart beat fast and then faster still as he peeled the fabric away from her breasts.

With her nipples exposed in all their eager glory, she quivered in the

winter chill of the room. The contrast of the room temperature and the heat of his hands made everything more intense. He squeezed her nipples again, causing her to lean forward, as if she was offering more of herself, more of her flesh, more of her response.

He glided one hand to the back clasp and unfastened it. Pulling the fabric away from her body, he murmured, “Getting rid of it, sorry. You can reunite later.”

She didn’t resist as he flung the bra with the rest of the cast-off clothing. She ought to be cold, but how could she be, when he was looking at her like that? There was so much heat in his eyes that her skin flamed in response. They could have set a forest on fire with the sheer heat they were generating.

“Hang on a second,” he told her. “Right where you are, looking like a wine goddess.”

“A wine goddess?”

“Your nipples.” He cupped her bare breasts in his hands and touched his tongue to each nipple in turn. She wanted to howl at how good it felt. “They’re the color of Cabernet.”

“That’s very specific,” she said faintly.

“It’s the only wine I could think of off the top of my head. Your beautiful nakedness is stealing my vocabulary.”

“You’re so silly.” She giggled like her fifteen-year-old self.

“That’s what happens when I get horny. I say stupid shit that I don’t even remember later.”

He took his own clothes off next, struggling just a little with the left leg of his trousers. She made no move to help, because he didn’t seem to want her to. Besides, she was entirely enraptured by the light and shadow of candlelight against his skin and the flow of his muscles underneath.

Kirk was one magnificent male. And he was here, getting naked with her in the mango candlelight and it was like a dream.

She slipped out of her own leggings and underwear, so that by the time



Kirk was finished, they were both naked. They stood facing each other in the quiet room, where nothing existed besides the two of them, a bed, and a candle.

Her gaze slid down his body and she remembered the many times she'd jumped off the bait shop pier with him and her brothers. One time in particular, when she was maybe thirteen, shortly before he left for the Army.

*It was a midsummer midnight, a full moon filling the lake with silvery light, and her parents were out of town. Her brothers had broken a bunch of rules and thrown a party. Kirk was there, Frankie's hockey teammates, and a bunch of girls. Her brothers had tried to bribe her to stay at Kendra's house, but she'd flat-out refused. No way was she going to miss this!*

*She'd even snuck a can of beer when her brothers weren't looking, even though the taste of it was heinous. Everyone else was drinking and laughing and her brothers forgot she was there. Then the truth or dare game began, and someone dared everyone to jump off the pier.*

*Half the party—mostly boys, but some girls—went racing out of the house, stripping down to their underwear. Gina followed after them. She wasn't going to jump, because then her brothers might remember she was there and send her home. She just wanted to be part of it all.*

*She hung back by the bait shop, where Liz, her brother Mario's girlfriend, spotted her. "Are you supposed to be here? Never mind, I won't tell. I'll keep your secret, you keep mine." She stripped off her denim jacket and sundress and stuffed them into Gina's arms. "And hang onto these, would you?"*

*"Wait, what secret?"*

*"I'll give you a hint. Who's the cutest guy in that crazy bunch?" She gestured at the group of guys at the edge of the pier, shoving each other and hooting with laughter.*

*"Uh...Mario?" She figured that was the right answer, since Liz was his girlfriend. But she didn't think of any of them like that. To her they were all*

idiots who didn't know how to wash a glass after drinking from it or how to press "start" on the washing machine.

"Nice try, lil sis. But no. Try again." She tilted her head toward the boy climbing onto one of the pier posts. He reached the top, thrust his arms in the air and yelled something about "king of the world."

Kirk.

In that very moment, it clicked. Kirk was cute. His lean young body balanced on the post, his muscles silvered by the moonlight. He wasn't just an obnoxious older brother type. He was...beautiful. Crushworthy. And older than her. Utterly out of reach.

He cannonballed into the water, splashing everyone around him, and that set off a frenzy of leaps. Liz raced down the pier and joined the melee. Gina watched her jump off the dock in the same direction Kirk had jumped.

Screw her clothes. Gina dumped them in a puddle by the bait shop and ran down the dock. She was wearing a tank top and cutoffs, and didn't mind getting them wet. She leaped into the dark water, avoiding the heads bobbing up and down. In the cold water, she frog-kicked her way toward Liz and Kirk. Mario might be a pain in her butt, but there was no chance she was letting his girlfriend make a fool of him.

She surfaced, spluttering, right next to Kirk. "Gina?" he exclaimed. "You aren't supposed to be out here."

"I know, but I wanted to swim with everyone, but..." She panted, pretending to be out of breath. Which was ridiculous and no one should have believed that. She could swim for hours without getting tired. "Now I want to get out and I think I cut my foot and I don't want my brothers to know and..."

As Liz scowled at her, Kirk took her in a lifeguard hold and swam with her toward the ladder on the side of the dock. When Gina looked back, Mario was swimming with Liz and she relaxed. "It's okay, I can make it from here," she told Kirk, pulling away.

He looked at her funny, but she ignored him and struck out toward the

*ladder. Being so close to him in the water was doing strange things to her insides. She shoved the whole thing out of her mind and focused on the main point. She'd fended off a very uncool threat to Mario's relationship. That was why she'd jumped in the water. No other reason. Definitely not because she didn't want stupid Liz getting Kirk's attention. Why would she care about that?*

Kirk was saying something, and she snapped out of her trance in time to catch the words, "second thoughts."

"No. Me? No." Did she used to have a secret little tween-age crush on Kirk? One she'd buried so deep she'd literally never thought of it again? Or was it just a normal hormonal reaction to such an attractive boy being part of her everyday life? She looked at him again, and saw the questions on his face, and noticed that his erection had faded. Oh hell no. She wasn't going to let anything get in the way of this moment.

"Not a single one," she said firmly and stepped toward him.

As she reached him, he put both his hands on her waist, shaping the curve down to her hips, and then sliding his hands around to her ass. She felt his cock stir and harden again and a sense of elation flooded her.

This was it. This was the kind of physical desire she craved, the kind she'd tried to find but only rarely had. Forget romance; she wanted *passion*.

She reached for his penis and wrapped her hand around its warm thickness. He shuddered with pleasure as she stroked him lightly. His hands were all over her as well, a greedy exploration of her hips, her thighs, the wetness between her legs.

"Get on the bed," he said gruffly. "I'd pick you up and put you there myself but my PT would murder me."

She backed up, pinned by the heat in his eyes. When the backs of her knees hit the bed, she remembered it had only a bare mattress. "Hang on."

Feeling his eyes on her, she moved toward the cedar chest where the bedding was kept.

It was delicious, knowing he was looking at her and desiring her. As a former athlete, she knew her body and was proud of it, even though she wasn't in training shape anymore. Her stomach might be more flabby that it used to be, and her arms not quite as toned. But in her opinion, human bodies were basically beautiful and they did incredible things.

How could a heart never stop beating, not even for a nap now and then, until a person died? Nonstop, day in and day out. And digestion...it was wild, when you thought about it, all those millions of enzymes and bacteria busy at work, all for the greater good of the body they inhabited. Bodies were an amazing gift and she had very little shyness when it came to hers.

And maybe...yeah, maybe she was a bit of an exhibitionist, because she was turned on just by the way he was looking at her. As if she was the sexiest, most tempting thing on the planet. Her skin tingled and her lower belly clenched with simmering liquid heat.

“What are you thinking about?” Kirk asked as she pulled a soft hunter green blanket from the chest.

“Bodies. You?”

“Uh...same.” She caught his wicked glance. “Hard not to, with you right in front of me, all naked and spectacular.”

She shook the blanket over the mattress, then crawled on hands and knees onto the bed, moving like a panther, or whatever the sexiest member of the cat family might be.

He gave a low moan.

“Well, are you coming?” she asked. A kind of giddy cockiness filled her. This part, she could do. She loved sex, loved the intimacy and the physical pleasure. Relationships were her downfall, but she and Kirk weren't talking about a relationship. They were just admitting the obvious, that they were attracted to each other, that they liked each other...and she trusted him.

Sitting on her heels, she opened her knees, just a bit, a tease to inspire him, and crooked her finger at him. He practically stumbled onto the bed, using his hands to get his left leg onboard too.

And then he was with her, against her, on top of her, and her moment of being in charge was over. He took command, or she let him, or both... she didn't care which. He plunged a hand between her legs and took her pussy in a ruthless grip that had her back arching and a cry of pleasure bursting from her lips. She was already wet, had been since she'd gone for the blanket, but he seemed to consider that just a starting point. He stroked through her folds, seeking the most sensitive spot. That jumping bundle of nerves that craved the friction of his touch.

There it was. She gave a loud moan as he found her clit and circled it gently. When she pushed her sex into his hand, he got the message and gave her more pressure, enough to get her gasping, but not enough to come. Her inner thighs trembled and her legs fell open even farther. With one hand still firmly planted between her legs, he used the other to pin her arms over her head. His mouth went to her nipples and it was so greedy, so arousing with that rough tongue, those warm velvet lips, oh my God...she felt convulsions coming on, and fought to stop them. She didn't want to come yet, didn't want it to be over.

But he tightened his grip on her wrists and didn't let up his diabolical stroking of her clit and with a sharp cry she surrendered to the flood and lost herself in the rough-and-tumble of her climax. A shining light burst across her vision and she let out a yell of release. Even though her entire body clenched tight, he held her in place, refusing to let even a microsecond of that incredible orgasm slip away.

She experienced a moment of sadness that it was over. Followed by joy—because it wasn't. Not even close. In the next moment he was pushing her knees up and positioning himself between her thighs. She had no idea where he'd gotten a condom, but there it was, getting unwrapped by his fumbling

fingers.

“Where did that come from?” she asked, still panting.

“I had some in my car. I figured it wouldn’t hurt to bring one.” He slid it over his rigid penis.

“One?”

“Five,” he said with a grin. “I’m optimistic.”

And he slid inside her, slick and deep and absolutely perfect.

## *twenty-three*

Kirk had wondered if it would feel wrong somehow to make love to Gina, considering how close he was—or used to be—to her family. It didn't. Not one bit. Being inside her firm, compact body, feeling her muscles clench around him, watching her cheeks flush with heat, listening to her quick breaths...every single sensory detail gave him deep pleasure.

When his leg got tired, he rolled onto his back, swinging her on top of him. Gina made the move look as graceful as a gymnastics trick. She was so physical, so fully in her body. With her strong thighs gripping his hips, her body riding his, she was a fantasy come to life.

When his climax came in a long, rolling thunderclap of release, it felt... different. Deeper, more piercing, not your regular any-old orgasm. Because this strong, lithe body flexing over his belonged to Gina. Fiery, feisty, funny Gina.

He closed his eyes as the last spasms shuddered through him. A moment of still, perfect joy.

And then the thoughts came flooding in.

This was huge. He and Gina had crossed a line that he never would have imagined when he was a kid. They'd had sex. And he wanted to do it again and again. What would the Morettis think of this? A memory flashed to life.

*He was heading for the front door of the house in Edgeview when his*

*father called to him.*

*“Where ya going, kid?”*

*Did he even remember Kirk’s name? Kirk turned back and saw his bloodshot eyes, his loose jaw, the beer can in its coozie.*

*“Friend’s house.”*

*“Them Morettis?”*

*Kirk didn’t answer. He was seventeen and didn’t think he owed his father an explanation.*

*“Get some hamburger at the store. I’m making meatloaf.”*

*Meatloaf? Dad hardly ever cooked. Kirk had gotten in the habit of making dinner years ago.*

*“Sure, Dad. I’ll see you later.”*

*“Don’t know why you bother with the Morettis. They look down on folks like us.”*

*“No they don’t.”*

*“Any of ‘em ever come over here?” At Kirk’s silence, he said, “Like I said.” And clicked the remote, diving back into the flood of angry voices he seemed to live on.*

Maybe the Morettis didn’t think of him like that. But it was just more jet fuel for the rocket propelling him out of Lake Bittersweet and into...anything else. The Army. Respect. Success. *Anything but feeling like nothing.*

Gina didn’t seem to notice his sudden preoccupation. She flopped onto her side and stretched, cat-like, with a long sigh of satisfaction. “Now that’s what I’m talking about.”

She didn’t seem at all worried—about anything. He decided to probe deeper. “This should make Christmas more interesting.”

“Right, Christmas. Dinner’s at three. I was supposed to tell you earlier but I forgot. I can’t believe it’s the day after tomorrow! I still have so much to do



and my mom's already melting down. She sent me sixty-two texts yesterday. I counted."

Her flood of Moretti chatter relaxed him. It felt so normal, so cozy.

"Okay. Cool. I'll be there. Are we, um, telling people?" He waved at their two bodies. One of her legs was hooked over one of his, and some of her dark hair clung to his sweaty shoulder. "About this?"

"You mean that we had sex? No. Definitely not. That sort of thing is on a need to know basis and there's no reason anyone needs to know."

He brushed her curls away from her face. "I don't mind if they know."

"I don't mind either, but they'd just get nosy and it's no one's business. It's just sex." She said it so airily that he frowned.

"Ouch."

"I don't mean that in a bad way. I just mean, it's private. It's between you, me and that candle." She gave him a sassy smile. "And the candle swore it wouldn't say a thing."

He nodded, and rolled out of bed so he could dispose of the condom. They'd have to take the trash out with them when they left this little haven.

Was she right? Was it "just sex?" It didn't feel that way to him. It felt more significant. He wasn't exactly sure how or why, but it did. Since he'd gotten out of the Army, he'd had a few serious relationships, but part of him always felt that he was putting on an act. None of them knew him the way Gina did. They only knew the semi-celebrity Kirk Williams. Gina knew all of him...but did she, when she'd never even been to the house he'd grown up in?

And did he know her? "So this guy you got married to..." he said as he climbed back into bed. Gina rolled onto her side and spread her hand across his chest.

"Eddie Jorgen. Motorcycle aficionado, binge-drinker, gravel truck operator. He came on super-hard, even fooled my mom into thinking he was a real romantic. Brought me tulips, brought her roses. I was still reeling from

the Coach Peters fiasco, so I didn't do my due diligence. Just dove right in."

"And then what?"

"Then it turned out he had some real old-school ideas about marriage that we should have talked about first. Two months later, we called it quits and he went to California."

"Were you in love with him?"

She was quiet for a moment. "In a way. He took my mind off all my failures. He made me feel wanted. He was exciting to be around, at least at first. Then I got tired of his drinking and caveman attitudes. We both agreed it was a mistake. I was definitely not the kind of wife he'd had in mind. Why aren't you married, hottie war hero?"

The question caught him by surprise; then again, it was only fair. The answer probably had something to do with bad memories and bad role models. "Damn good question. Think I can get this town to set me up with anyone?"

"I don't know, they're pretty busy with the Gina-stakes."

He glanced over and caught her teasing smile.

He shifted their bodies so his right leg, the good one, snagged her lower body and tugged her close. He was growing hard again. Whatever this itch Gina scratched for him, it seemed to be deep and endless.

"I've heard about enough of the Gina-stakes. Call them off." He nipped the soft skin between her shoulder and her neck. From there he nibbled his way along her arm to the moist crook of her elbow. He inhaled deeply, smelling woman and...well, mango.

"Wh...why?"

He smiled, the movement of his mouth making her shiver. Her hips moved, undulating under him. "Because of this." He kissed her wrist, her palm, then headed back up the inside of her arm. "And this." Halfway up, he shifted his attention to the curve of her ribcage. He tasted her skin just there, that shadowed territory under her breast. "Not to mention this." He touched

his lips to the dark areola around her nipple.

She was shivering by now, and he could see goosebumps on her skin, the little hairs rising on her arms. He was glad Gina didn't wax her dark hair away. He touched the soft, downy curls that covered her mound and found new moisture.

Instead of focusing there, he trailed his fingers along her inner thighs, teasing, testing. With his lips, he continued to sample the incredibly tender skin of her breasts. She tasted like pears.

"C...condom number two?" she asked, tugging him closer. He resisted, because he wasn't done with his exploration.

"We don't want to go through them too fast, do we? You can't have your cake and eat it too."

"Yes, you can. That's a big lie. Because you can always make more cake." She reached for his cock, which was, in fact, half-hard already. Her warm soft hand brought it all the way there.

He kissed her nipples until they swelled plump and engorged. Then made a trail down between her breasts, across her quivering belly, down to the soft mound where the sensual scent of woman activated some primal part of his brain. His mouth watered with the need to taste her most intimate secrets.

He pushed her legs apart and delved into the heat and juice of her. Dimly, he felt her arch as his tongue found the little perky nub—just as feisty and passionate as Gina herself. He lost himself in her, lost track of time, of place, of everything except taste and smell and the silky sensations on his tongue.

Then her hands dug into his hair, dragging him up and away.

"I can't," she gasped. "Please. Condom."

Obedying her desperate plea, he lifted his head from between her legs, trying to remember where the condoms were. But she was way ahead of him, springing off the bed and pouncing on his jacket.

He lay on his back, arms spread wide, while she rolled the condom onto his fierce, fully erect cock. As soon as it was on, he pulled her under him and

blanketed her body with his. He thrust inside her hot channel, too turned on to take it slow, especially because her hands gripped his ass, urging him to go harder, faster, wilder.

It was even better this time, because he already knew things about her. He knew how strong she was, how her body could clench him like a fist, what pace she liked, how quickly she could make him come. Because that first climax had taken the edge off, now he had his stamina back.

And he put it to full use. When being face to face got him too aroused, he turned her onto her stomach and took her from behind, lifting her hips in the air until he found the angle that made her cry out. He licked his fingers, reached around and found her clit again, and that was it...she came in a shudder of moans. But there was more, he felt it, the fluttering deep in her core.

She lay on her stomach, panting, still speared by his cock. Her back was so beautiful against the dark green of the blanket, its shape so curvy, like a violin. The candlelight gave her damp skin a pearly sheen, and created the most lovely shadow in the dip between the two globes of her ass.

If only he was a painter so he could convey how radiant and sensual she was.

But he was just a man filled with awe and lust, so all he could do was show her what she did to him. He gripped her hips and flexed his cock inside her, each stroke expressing want, need, yes, more, up, up, here I go, so good, so fucking good, until light spangled his vision and the tight clench at the base of his spine exploded.

Releasing inside her body, even with protection, gave him a feeling he'd never experienced before. Fucking ecstasy, sure. He'd expected that. But there was more. It felt almost sacred. As if this woman, and no other, was the one he needed.

The thought fled from his mind almost immediately, drowned by the flood of pleasure.

He relaxed as the climax subsided, and adjusted the position of his leg, which was cramping. As she panted underneath him, quivering with the aftermath of her own orgasm, he trailed his fingers over the pale skin of her ass. She still had a faint trace of a tan line from the summer, when she must have worn a high-cut bikini. He wondered if she ever lost that tan line, and knew he wanted to be around to find out.

She said something that got smothered by the blanket. He figured she was probably asking him to get off her, so he carefully rolled away and stretched out next to her. As his leg protested with a sharp twinge, he winced.

“Leg?” she asked sleepily.

“Yeah.”

“Sorry.”

“It was worth it. It’ll be fine. It’s just being a whiny bitch.” He sighed as an extremely satisfied fatigue came over him.

She chuckled in a drowsy kind of way and scooted closer to him. She kissed him on the lips, long and lingering, and he’d never felt so at one with another human being. “Stay right there. I’m getting us another blanket.”

It only took her a moment to find a comforter for them to nestle under. It smelled of laundry detergent and cedar, and he thought dreamily that “comforter” was the perfect word. Being here, with Gina, tucked away in this tiny cabin, gave him a sense of comfort that he never knew he needed.

He dropped into sleep as if he was doing a cannonball off the Lake Bittersweet pier.

## *twenty-four*

The beeping of Kirk's phone woke them both up. Gina panicked, sitting bolt upright and nearly shoving Kirk off the bed in the process. She'd been dreaming about mermaids and the beeping had come into her dream as a fishing boat dragging a bomb.

"What? What's going on?" Still half-asleep, Kirk grabbed the mattress to keep from sliding off. "Are you kicking me out of bed? You could just say so."

"No. Sorry. Your phone woke me up. Where the fuck is it?"

They both fumbled around for the beeping thing, and finally Gina found it at the foot of the bed. She handed it to Kirk and adjusted the blanket while he scanned it.

"It's the alarm again at the Mason house. It must be light outside now. I can see more clearly. Holy shit."

"What? What's going on?"

Gina blinked the sleep out of her eyes. Why did such a serene and wonderful post-sex slumber have to get interrupted by reality?

"There's someone sitting on the front steps."

Gina scooted closer to peer over his shoulder. She rested her chin on his warm shoulder. "Looks like a young person. A teenager." A small figure was perched on the top step, arms wrapped around their knees. She couldn't make

out anything else. It could have been a boy or a girl, impossible to say.

“It sure does.”

“Do you recognize him? Or her?”

“No, and they don’t look threatening. I’m going to head over.”

“I’ll drive you out there,” Gina said right away. Whatever the situation was, harmless or not, she didn’t want Kirk to face it alone.

He shook his head. “I need to get my car from the public landing.”

“Then I’ll follow you.” She saw from his phone that it was still early. Dawn was just getting underway, and the town was still fast asleep. “Do you know any kids around that age? Who could it be?”

“It’s hard to say. There is a guy who follows me around a lot, but he’s at least twenty.” He pulled on his thermal shirt. “I think Jerome Mason has kids. Maybe it’s one of them.”

They both dressed quickly, and Kirk helped Gina fold the bedding and stow it back in the cedar chest. The entire atmosphere had changed from sensual to tense, and as they slipped out of the cabin into the dove-gray dawn, she wondered if they’d ever get it back. Maybe their magical night was just a brief moment in time, never to be repeated. She had to be okay with that. And she would be, once she wrestled all these unexpected emotions back into their place. *He’s not for you. He has a different life somewhere else. It was just sex.*

She drove him to the public landing, then followed him to the Mason place. It was probably unnecessary; Kirk was a former soldier, after all, and the mystery visitor was a teenager. But she was curious, and to be perfectly honest, not quite ready to end this interlude with Kirk.

As the two cars drove down the Mason driveway, a small figure rose to her feet. Gina saw now that the visitor was a girl. She wore a vintage black tweed coat that screamed thrift store, and a knit hat with a red pompom.

How had she gotten all the way out here? And why?

Gina parked behind Kirk, who climbed out of his car and snagged his

cane. She noticed that he was limping more than he had yesterday. Had they been a little too enthusiastic last night? She felt her cheeks warm at the thought. She rolled down her window to listen.

“Hey there,” Kirk called to the girl. “Are you looking for someone?”

“Are you Kirk Williams?” The girl might be on the small side, but she sounded plenty confident. Maybe it was bravado as she faced the tall man striding toward her.

“I am. Who are you?”

“I’m your niece. Merlin.”

Gina’s mind raced. As far as she knew, Kirk only had one sister, who was much older. Sassy Williams had left Lake Bittersweet when Gina was little. She couldn’t even remember what she looked like.

Kirk stopped in his tracks. “Niece? You mean...”

“My mother is your sister. That’s the usual definition.”

So far, Sassy’s daughter lived up to her mother’s name.

“Yeah, my mom sent you a message.”

Kirk tucked a hand in the pocket of his hunter’s jacket. “She did, but then she stopped answering.”

“I know. I’m the one who sent the message, not her.”

“Why? Is Sassy okay?”

The girl chewed on her lip for a long moment as she eyed Kirk. Gina got the feeling she didn’t trust people very easily. Finally, she shrugged. “I guess.”

A long silence stretched between them.

“I’m not surprised Sassy named you Merlin. She used to read the Hobbit to me,” Kirk eventually said, as if he didn’t know what else to say next. Poor guy. This was definitely a wild curve ball.

“She didn’t name me that. Merlin’s the name I chose.”

Okay then. This girl clearly had a mind of her own. Gina decided she liked her already.



Kirk, judging by the tension in his shoulders, wasn't so sure. Gina got out of her car and joined him. She hadn't wanted to overwhelm the girl at first, but now it sounded like Kirk could use some help.

Up close, she saw that Merlin had black hair that fell to her shoulders and pretty green eyes. Her skin was dark, as if maybe she had an Asian parent. Father, presumably, since Sassy was just as Scandinavian as the rest of the Williams family.

"Hi Merlin," she said in a friendly voice. "I'm Gina."

"Are you his girlfriend?"

Right to the point, this girl. Was it any of her business? Gina decided it wasn't. "Are you a runaway?"

Merlin's gaze slid from one to the other of them. "No," she said defensively. "Not exactly."

Kirk glanced at Gina. She read shock in his eyes. What would it be like to find out you had a teenage niece you never knew about? She nodded to him, acknowledging his confusion but urging him to keep interacting with the girl.

He turned back to Merlin. "Why did you come here?"

"It's Christmas, isn't it? Time to gather with your long-lost family members that you didn't even know existed until last week?"

Kirk shot Gina another glance. This one, she read as a plea for help. He was used to being alone. But after all these years as a Moretti, she could navigate family drama in her sleep.

"How about we go inside and get Merlin something to eat and drink," she suggested.

"And call your mother," Kirk said. "She's probably worried."

Merlin folded her arms across her chest and stuck out her chin. Gina noticed she had a nose piercing, but no jewel in it. "I hope you have her number then, because I don't even have a cell phone."

"No, I don't have her number. I don't even know where she lives. Or where you live. Or how you got here. Or what you're doing here." Kirk

scrubbed a hand through his hair, adding to the bedhead style he'd been sporting since they left the cabin.

The girl's expression hardened, so Gina said quickly, "Let's not get into all that yet. It's cold out here. Are you hungry, Merlin?"

The girl nodded, still locked in a stare down with Kirk. Gina elbowed him in the side to nudge him toward the front door. "Come on," she whispered. "Snap out of it."

That did the trick, and he limped to the keypad next to the front door.

A moment later they were all inside the warm house. How long had Merlin been waiting outside in the cold? Actually, Kirk must know exactly how long—ever since his alarm had gone off.

"Were you at the house last night?" Gina asked her as she led the way to the kitchen.

"Yes. But I didn't see any lights on, so I left. Then I came back because there was nowhere else to go. Could this house be any further away from civilization?"

Gina met Kirk's gaze. So the intruder had been Merlin all along. That was a relief. They hadn't needed to hide out in the Ring-Necked Grebe cabin.

But she sure was glad they had, and she wished they could do it again and again and again until spring came and it had to be opened up for guests and...

She shook herself out of the oncoming sex dream haze.

In the kitchen, Gina put some water on to boil and gestured for Kirk to sit down and take weight off his leg. "You guys get to know each other. I'll make some breakfast. Do you drink coffee, Merlin?"

"No, it's disgusting. Do you have orange juice?"

Gina set her jaw so as not to overreact to the girl's rudeness. She wouldn't be here if she wasn't under some kind of stress. Maybe that explained her attitude. Or maybe she was just a little brat. Time would tell.

She opened the refrigerator and took out a carton of orange juice. Kirk and Merlin each claimed a barstool at the kitchen island. Neither said

anything. Gina sighed. Normally Kirk had no problem conversing with anyone. But this teenage niece obviously had him stumped.

She broke the silence herself. “Let’s get this rolling. Merlin, why’d you pick the name Merlin?”

“Why wouldn’t I?” she lifted her chin. “Because it’s a boy name? Why do you have to be so gender-normative?”

“What?” She looked at Kirk for help, but he just shrugged. “I like the name Merlin. I’m just wondering why you chose it. When people get to pick their names, there’s always a reason. If I ever changed my name, I’d go for something sexier than Gina. Like Solange.” She exaggerated the S and soft G, making it extra-sexy. “‘Gina’ is like the girl next door who’s always chewing gum. Solange sounds like some kind of French lingerie.”

Her flow of silly chatter made Merlin relax, and finally answer the question. “I like wizards. The name Merlin makes me feel protected. It’s like a magic talisman.”

For the first time, Gina saw a scared girl underneath the bravado. “That makes sense,” she said gently. “It must work, since you made it all the way from...where did you come from?”

Merlin glanced between the two of them, clearly hesitant to reveal too much too soon.

Kirk said, “You don’t have to worry, I’m not going to send you anywhere until I know what’s going on.”

The girl bristled. “Send me? You couldn’t even—”

“I won’t tell anyone,” he corrected. “Sorry.” He gestured at his leg. “Obviously I couldn’t chase you if you ran. But please don’t do that. You came here for a reason, and I’m very interested to know what it is. Sassy... well, you probably know that we don’t even talk.”

“Yeah.” She drank down half of her orange juice. Now that they were talking, Gina took a carton of eggs from the fridge. Scrambled eggs were easy, and she’d stocked some bacon in there too. As she set to work, she

listened closely to their conversation.

Merlin explained that she and her mother lived in St. Paul. She'd taken a bus to Lake Bittersweet.

"How did you know I was here?"

"I wasn't *just* looking for you, big shot," Merlin said. "Arrogant much?"

"Okay, then why'd you come here?"

"Because this is where Mom grew up."

Kirk waited, but she didn't add anything to that. It sure didn't seem like much of a reason. Gina figured there had to be more, but maybe they'd find out later.

"Did you see my Facebook message that I was in Lake Bittersweet? I sent it over a week ago."

"No, not until—" She broke off, clearly not quite ready to tell the entire story.

Kirk waited, but when she didn't say more, he continued with his questioning. "Okay, so you made it to town. How'd you end up here at this house?"

"When I got to town I was super-hungry and so sick of fucking granola bars." She stole a look at Kirk, as if checking on his tolerance for the F word. "I went into that pizza place, Mariano's, and got a slice of cheese pizza. I overheard some guys talking about you. They said something like now you're kind of like a summer person, renting one of the big places on the lake. I knew about the summer houses from Mom, and I knew the road was called Lakeshore Lane. So I hitchhiked out here. After I finished my pizza," she added.

Maybe that magic name "Merlin" had worked for her, Gina thought. Finding out within a few minutes of her arrival where she could find her uncle? That seemed pretty magical to her.

The bacon sizzled, and she flipped the strips over.

"How did you know which house?" Kirk asked. "Did the guys at

Mariano's mention this one? Why didn't you just send me a message on Facebook?"

"Duh, no phone. I checked all the houses. I walked up and down driveways and peeked in windows until I saw a house that had stuff laying around, like someone was living here. This was the first one that did. But no one was here, so I left and checked some others. Then I came back here. I didn't know for sure until you showed up."

After a pause, Kirk asked, even more gently than before, "Did you get any sleep at all?"

"On the bus," she said. "A little bit. I tried to sleep on the porch here, but it's pretty cold. And then you came."

"My perimeter alarm went off. It did last night too, but I didn't see you on the camera feed. If I had...I mean, I'm sorry you had to stay out all night. But I'm glad you found your way here. I'm serious, Merlin. You're very resourceful. Whatever the reason is, it doesn't matter. I'm happy to meet you and really fucking relieved you made it here safely."

At his use of the word "fucking," she broke out in a smile. "Now I know we're related."

## *twenty-five*

After Merlin had gotten some food in her and Kirk had reassured her that she could stay, he managed to pry Sassy's phone number out of her.

He took his phone into the home gym while Gina kept feeding Merlin—toast, blueberry mini muffins, hot chocolate. As he left, he stole one last look at the girl, picking out familiar features: Sassy's nose, which she used to compare to a ski jump, her long neck, which she used to call a gooseneck, and her equally long legs. She hadn't complained about those.

It was surreal that for fifteen-ish years, he'd had a niece and not even known it. Yet another Williams family dysfunction.

His memories of Sassy were fuzzy, since she was ten years older than him and had left when she was seventeen. He remembered lots of flying red hair and screaming matches and broken rules. Before she'd left for good, she'd run away a few times. Once, when he was six, she'd taken him with her. She'd packed a knapsack for him and stashed it in the old Saab that no one used anymore.

*"I'm leaving for good, and I can't let you stay here by yourself, can I?"*

*"What about Momma and Poppa? Will they be there?"*

*"No, dummy, that's the whole point. We're running away." After three tries, the Saab finally started and they rolled down the driveway.*

*"You're supposed to be babysitting me," he pointed out. "You said we'd*

*play a game.”*

*“God, Kirkie, you’re such a pest. Why am I even...ugh, fine, think of this as a game.”*

*“What game?”*

*“Hide and seek. We’re playing hide and seek from our so-called parents.”*

*He didn’t understand anything of what was going on, but it was so rare that anyone in his family played games with him that he didn’t mind. “Where are we going to hide?”*

*“We’ll hide in the Twin Cities.”*

*“Where’s that?” He’d heard vague references to the Twin Cities but had no idea where a city full of twins might be located.*

*“You’ll see. But you can’t tell anyone. I’ll get a job. I’m almost eighteen, or I will be in two years, and I can fake it until then. There’s lots of jobs there. We can live in the Saab until winter, and I’m sure we can find a real place before then and you can go to school there and...”*

*A sharp crack rang out and the Saab lurched to a stop. He turned to see their father lumbering after the car, a shotgun aimed right at them. He scrunched down in his seat, because he recognized the blind rage on his father’s face and knew the only thing to do was hide.*

*After that there were screams, and Sassy getting dragged from the car, and shouting and some other sounds that made him bury his face in his knapsack.*

*Then he too was yanked from the car and marched back to the house. The worst part was the interrogation. Poppa kept asking him questions with that mean and terrifying scowl. Kirk didn’t know what to do. Sassy didn’t want him to tell anyone. But lying was wrong, especially to your parents. So he just didn’t say anything. Eventually Poppa got fed up and hauled him off for his punishment. His rear was sore for days afterwards.*

He and Sassy had never talked about any of it, and the next time she ran away, she didn't try to take him with her. She left in the middle of the night and he hadn't seen her since.

After he joined the Army, he'd tried to reach her. From Galen Cooper, one of her friends, he found out where she worked—she was tending bar in a Minneapolis suburb—and called her up. She hadn't said much, just wished him a safe deployment. At the end of the call, she said, "I don't think I'm stable enough for this kind of contact. Sorry, Kirkie. You stay safe, though, okay?"

Wounded, he'd given her what she wanted. No contact.

But now he had to break that promise. She would definitely want to hear that Merlin was safe, and the girl refused to call herself.

Sassy picked up on the first ring. "Hello?"

He could tell from her voice she'd been crying.

"Sassy, it's Kirk. Merlin's here. She's fine."

"Oh my God. Where's here? Why is she with you? Put her on."

"She's eating breakfast, and she says she doesn't want to talk. But she didn't want you to worry so she gave me your number."

"Not worry? Jesus. I haven't slept all night. Where are you?"

"Lake Bittersweet."

"Lake—oh for Jesus' sake. *Why?* Never mind. I know why." Sassy gave a low groan. "Ugh, I should have known. She has this fantasy about Lake Bittersweet, that it has healing waters or some shit. There's some Ojibwe legend about it. I should never have told her I grew up there. She learned about it in a native history course she was taking."

"We have healing waters?" That was news to him. And why would she need them? Was Merlin sick? "What's going on, Sassy? Why'd she come here?"

Sassy didn't answer any of his questions. "Listen, I can't get there until tomorrow. I don't suppose you can bring her back here...no, forget it, I can't



put you in that position.”

“You mean, the position of forcing the niece I just met to do something she doesn’t want to do? Yeah, not likely.”

“Will you please just watch out for her until I get there?”

“Of course.” His voice was stiff. Since she’d blown him off for so many years, she obviously didn’t know him. “That goes without saying.”

“Kirk...” She let out a long sigh. “I’m sorry. Sorry I didn’t ever reach out. I just...it was easier for me to keep a red line between me and the past. But I...I’m glad you’re there with her. Thank you.”

“Wait, before you hang up...you’ll be here tomorrow?”

“Yeah, at the latest.”

“Tomorrow’s Christmas.”

A short pause, then, “Surprise. Just what we all wanted, a Williams family Christmas reunion.” Her dry tone revealed what she really thought of that. So much for the holiday spirit. “Okay. See you tomorrow. I have your number. I’ll find you. Tell Merlin to be good...you know what, don’t bother. Just tell her I love her and I’ll see her tomorrow.”

The call ended. Kirk stared at his cellphone, then lifted his head to look out the sliding glass doors that let onto the snow-covered back yard. It was snowing again outside, and the wind was hurling the icy crystals against the glass. Was he really going to see Sassy...*tomorrow*? He did some quick math. He was thirty-five, which meant that she was forty-five. Merlin was about fifteen, he guessed. She’d been thirty when she had Merlin.

That meant even at thirty, a grown woman, she still hadn’t felt “stable” enough to reach out to him when she had a child.

It hurt. It made him feel as if he was the enemy. But how could he possibly be that, when he’d only known her for the first seven years of his life? If anyone should be angry, why not him? She’d abandoned him and never looked back. After Sassy left, his father got even more bitter and morose. Kirk’s childhood from then on had been a treacherous and

unpredictable minefield. He'd kept his head down and mouth shut—unless he was with the Morettis, where keeping your mouth shut wasn't really an option. Thank God for that family.

He went back into the kitchen, where Merlin was demonstrating how loudly she could burp to a laughing Gina. A Moretti was working her magic again.

“Sassy’s coming tomorrow,” he told her. “She said to tell you she loves you.”

Merlin rolled her eyes. “That’s not the point.”

“What do you mean?”

She brushed her straight black hair behind her ears, and Kirk noticed for the first time that she had a streak of green running through it. “How is it love if she won’t even try to—” She broke off and pressed her lips together. “Forget it.”

Kirk thought he might explode with frustration. A hand touched his arm, Gina warning him to stop. He clenched his teeth and said nothing.

“Hey, don’t worry about it,” Gina told Merlin. “You don’t have to talk until you’re ready. But if there’s a chance we can help, we’re here.” She jabbed a thumb in Kirk’s direction. “He’s a good ally. I speak from experience. When I was twelve he helped me carve a new canoe paddle after my brother sat on mine and broke it.”

Kirk had to admit it was nice to hear Gina mention his good deeds along with his friend-of-annoying-brother status. “You mostly carved it yourself. I think my biggest role was making sure you didn’t turn that knife on Frankie.”

“Good point.” Gina grinned at Merlin, who eyed her with new respect.

“You had a knife? Can I see it?”

“Let’s move on,” Gina said quickly. “This isn’t about me. Is there anything you want to tell us about your mom? Did you have a fight? I used to fight with my mother a lot, so I get it.”

“Don’t say you get it when you don’t know.”

“Okay. That’s true, I don’t know. But you can fix that.”

How the hell was Gina so patient with this uncooperative girl? She must be used to teenagers, Kirk realized, since she taught canoe and volunteered at the high school.

“It’s...ugh.” She slouched against the back of the booth, until she was practically sliding under it. “All that happened was that I borrowed my mom’s Facebook account and found out I have an uncle. So I sent him a message. I wanted to meet him. Then my mom deleted Facebook. I wanted to see where my mom grew up because she always refuses to bring me here. It just seems wrong.”

“She has her reasons,” Kirk told her. “It took me a long time to come back too.”

“So why did you?”

“A few reasons.” He didn’t want to get into the details of the rescue and his broken leg. “I still have friends here.”

“Maybe my mom does too?” Merlin’s voice tilted up in hope; he wondered why that was important to her.

“Maybe.” He had no idea if Sassy still had friends here. He hadn’t gone back to the Edgeview neighborhood once since he’d been back. To be honest, he was avoiding it.

“It was probably stupid to come here.” Merlin hunched one shoulder. “My mom is such a lone wolf.”

“She always was,” Kirk said. “She was named ‘Most Likely to Tell You to Fuck Off’ in her high school yearbook. Which was impressive because she left when she was a junior, but she left her mark anyway.”

“Ooh, do you have a copy of that yearbook?” Merlin sat straight up, excitement lighting up her dark eyes. “Maybe I can find her friends in there.”

“I don’t. I didn’t even keep my own yearbook.”

“I’m sure I can find a copy,” Gina told them. “I know a few teachers at the high school. They probably have it in their archives.”

“Thanks. Are you a couple, by the way?” Merlin looked from one to the other of them. “Like, are you my aunt?”

“No,” Gina said quickly. “I’m not your aunt. Kirk and I have known each other for a long time, that’s all.”

“And now you’re boning?”

Kirk nearly choked on a snort. “Not the kind of thing you ask your uncle.”

“Sorry. I mean, it’s great if you are,” she added. “You make a good couple.”

“Thanks.” Stealing a sidelong glance at Gina, he saw color creeping up her cheeks. “It’s always nice to get good reviews from teenagers. They’re usually so hard to please.”

Gina’s phone buzzed and she pulled it out of her pocket. “You guys, I have to get going. My mom just texted. I have to pick up the ham...” she scanned through the lengthy message that had just come in, then showed them her phone...”and about a zillion other things for tomorrow. Which reminds me.” She pointed a firm finger at Merlin. “You are coming to Christmas dinner tomorrow, young miscreant. That’s an order.”

“You can’t order me.” The girl turned to Kirk, “Can she order me?”

“Then it’s an invitation,” she said before Kirk could answer. “Sassy too, when she gets here. You’re all invited. I hope you come because otherwise I’ll be in the line of fire.”

“Line of fire?” Kirk frowned the question at her.

“Yup. My mom is threatening to invite two possible dates to dinner tomorrow. And get this—one of them is a woman. Yes. That’s how desperate she is, she’d rather I turn lesbian than be alone.”

“You mean, that’s how open-minded she is?” Kirk teased.

Merlin looked impressed. “I think I like your mom.”

“Then you should definitely come to dinner tomorrow.” Gina got to her feet, so Kirk did as well, moving aside so she could slide out of the booth. He

didn't want her to leave, didn't want to be without her warm presence. As she brushed past him, he felt that ever-present tingle of awareness, as if the cells in his body were magnetized in her direction. With him and Gina, there was always an undercurrent of connection just waiting to spark to life again.

He touched her hand with an unspoken message. *I want you. I'll see you soon. Can't wait until the next time we're naked together.*

"Tell your mom there won't be room at the table for any more dates," he murmured as he walked her to the front door.

"I'll try, but you know my mom."

"Fine. I'll tell her."

"Really? What are you going to say?"

He shot a glance behind him to make sure they were out of Merlin's sight, then yanked her against him. Pressing her hard against his body, he said, "I'll tell her the truth. That we're too busy fucking each other's brains out to bother with anyone else."

A smile quivered across her lips, and he captured it in a kiss. A long, deep, powerful kiss that felt like a gauntlet laid down before the world. *Me and Gina. Together. Just try to stop us.*

## *twenty-six*

As Gina buzzed around town taking care of her mother's errands, she dropped a question here and there about Sassy Williams. She didn't find out much, since Sassy had completely cut ties with everyone from Lake Bittersweet. Her closest friend had moved away a few years ago. Her boyfriend had married someone else and had five kids now. Gina didn't want to bother him so close to Christmas.

Besides, if Merlin was so anxious to connect Sassy with old friends, she should really start with her brother. Sassy's issues with her parents had nothing to do with Kirk. Once Sassy got here, she'd see that Kirk had grown into a wonderful, thoughtful, smart and amazing man. She'd probably be thrilled to reconnect with him, and kick herself for not doing it earlier.

*You sound like you have a teenage crush. You're being ridiculous.* Gina argued with herself as she picked up mushrooms and apples for the turkey stuffing. *But he's so crush-worthy.*

*Doesn't matter. You'll screw it up.*

*Not this time.*

*Yes this time. Every time. Unless you get your ever-loving shit together. Which means you have to find that bastard Ralph Peters. Tell him what you think of him. Shake him off. Get it together.*

"Gina, are you okay?"

Gina jerked her head up to find Kendra standing on the other side of the bin of apples. “Yeah. Why?”

“You were muttering at the Honeycrisps.”

“Well, they...uh, they started it.”

Kendra blinked at her, then cocked her head to the side. “Now I know you’re lying, because Honeycrisps are nothing but love. If it was the Frostbites, maybe I’d believe you. But not the Honeycrisps.”

Gina had to laugh. “I’m just thinking out loud, okay? I’ve got a lot on my mind.”

“Then talk to me, not some apples. Is it all the setups driving you over the edge? I keep telling people they need to stop.”

“Is that because you have your own guy to pitch? What’s the pool up to, anyway?”

“No, that’s not the reason. My guy’s a bust.” She admitted it with a smile as she selected apples and dropped them into a bag. “He just got a new job in London, and I know you’re not interested in long-distance.”

“Thank you. I’m not.” Gina let out a yawn. The late night was catching up with her, not to mention all the up-and-down emotions of this time of year and the intensity of whatever was going on with Kirk.

“Maybe someday I’ll understand why you have your pick of men, but none of them hit your sweet spot. Not *that* sweet spot,” she added quickly. “You know what I mean.”

Gina picked up another apple and wondered why she’d never told Kendra, one of her very best friends, anything about Coach Peters. Now that she’d told Kirk, maybe she should share the story with her other friends. Kendra wouldn’t judge her or make her feel ashamed.

She took a breath and dove in before she could second-guess. “Do you have time to get a coffee? I’m only halfway through my list and I need sustenance.”

“I would, but I’m being Secret Black Santa today. I have a van-load of

presents parked in a loading zone and a list of kids getting deliveries.”

“Coffee to go, then. Do you have an extra Santa hat?”

Kendra danced with delight. “I have an elf cap I can spare. Let’s do this! It’s more fun with company.”

It was a little surreal to alternate telling Kendra about Coach Peters with knocking on front doors with armfuls of wrapped presents. But the joyful expressions of the kids made her heart glow with happiness, and somehow that made it easier to release the secret she’d been holding onto.

“I knew you seemed different after you came back,” Kendra said gravely as she drove to the next neighborhood.

“Was I? I don’t remember. I was numb, I think. I used to be really full of myself, you know? After that happened, I started second-guessing myself about every little thing.”

“Full of yourself? That’s bullshit. You were good at paddling and you knew it. What’s wrong with that?”

She turned the wheel and they entered the most notorious neighborhood in town. This was where people moved when they had no choice, when they’d lost their jobs, or couldn’t make their mortgage payments. The houses were small, poorly insulated, often in disrepair.

This was where the Williams family had lived, Gina remembered suddenly. Edgeview, it was called.

Kendra pulled to a stop outside a trailer on blocks. She checked her list. “We have four kids here. It might take two trips.”

“Whatever it takes. I’m really glad we’re doing this. I’m usually too busy helping my mother.”

“It’s fun, right? I love it.”

They opened the back of the van to scoop up armfuls of presents. Gina had to prop her chin on top of her pile to keep it from spilling over.

“So what you’re saying is this bad seed coach got you all messed up all those years ago?” Kendra gingerly closed the van door with one hand, while



holding her precarious load with the other.

“I guess so. It’s like Coach Peters capsized me and I’m still trying to get back in my canoe.”

Kendra laughed over the shiny stack of presents. “Your love canoe? For real?”

They both laughed even harder. “It’s like I can’t move on and have a real relationship. Look what happened with Junkyard.” They moved toward the trailer. Smoke rose from a smokestack at one end.

“Everyone’s entitled to one disastrous romantic mistake.”

“Well, I’m way past one. I guess I’m an overachiever.”

Kendra snorted. “So is that why you keep dumping everyone who falls in love with you?”

“Is that what I do?”

“You know it is. I’ve been telling you for years. I didn’t know your canoe was upside down. It all makes sense now.”

They managed to get control of their laughter before they reached the house. Kendra amazingly managed to knock on the door without losing any of the packages. A small boy opened the door and stared at the two of them, back and forth, before shouting at the top of his lungs, “Santa’s here and she’s a *GIRL!*”

And there they were, laughing again. Gina laughed so hard she lost her grip on one of her boxes, and she had to lift a knee to stop it before it hit the ground. Kendra tried with all her might to hold onto her Santa smile without breaking character.

The boy’s family came running to the door—a mother and three other kids under the age of ten.

“And she’s Black,” whispered another boy, the oldest.

“That’s right, we’re honored to have a Black girl Santa bringing us presents, now what do you say, kids?” Their mother fixed them all with a firm look as they gave a chorus of thanks.

Gina realized she looked vaguely familiar. “Have you lived here for a while?” she asked after the kids had dispersed, carrying their gifts like trophies toward a Christmas tree bristling with tinsel.

“I grew up here, but I just moved back. My parents left me the place.”

“Did you know the Williams family?”

“Sure. They lived across the street. The place is abandoned now.” She gestured with her chin. Gina looked in the direction she was pointing and saw a small one-story house that was collapsing in on itself. The roof looked like it was sliding off, and a sheet of plywood took the place of the front door. Someone had scrawled graffiti on the wood. An atmosphere of sadness and neglect clung to the place.

It broke her heart that Kirk had spent his childhood in that house.

“Sassy Williams was a friend,” the woman continued. “So sad what happened to her.”

Gina and Kendra exchanged a surprised glance. “What happened?”

“Well, I mean, her dad had an episode. He kind of went crazy and chased her off with a shotgun. He told her to stay away from the whole family and if she ever came back, he’d shoot her for real. She came over here and she was just shaking. That man could be nuts. Not always, but you didn’t want to be near him when he lost it like that.” She leaned closer, lowering her voice. “He shoulda been on meds. That was what Sassy was trying to get him to do. She brought a mental health counselor to their house, you know, like an intervention? But all it did was make him madder than ever. That’s when he chased her away.”

Gina’s jaw nearly hit the floor. “I can’t believe I never heard about this. Kirk used to come to our house a lot, but he never mentioned it.”

“Things that happen around here don’t always get talked about outside this neighborhood. Kirk...he was still little. He probably didn’t understand. I tried to watch out for him after she left, but I didn’t see him much. He was pretty quiet. Nothing like Sassy was. The old man changed after Sassy left.

He hardly ever left the house anymore.”

Gina knew why Kirk hadn't been around; he'd been staying at their house. Funny how the part of people that you could see was just a tiny portion of what they were underneath. To her, Kirk had been another annoying brother taking up all her parents' attention. She hadn't known about anything else.

No wonder he'd been so driven to leave Lake Bittersweet and make a different life for himself. No wonder he had no interest in coming back here to live. Why would he? Even though his family was gone, splintered in different directions, so many bad memories must still live here.

That thought made her heart sink. She and Kirk had no future together, even if she could find the coach and confront him. Kirk would never want to stay in Lake Bittersweet. That meant her time with him was destined to be short. Just like all her other relationships. No surprise—she'd already been telling herself that. But part of her hadn't been listening.

She startled back to attention as Kendra said her goodbyes.

On impulse, she gave the woman a hug as they left. “I'm Gina Moretti,” she told her. “It's nice to meet you.”

“And here I thought you were an elf.” She chuckled. “Britt Jenkins. And I know who you are. The bait shop, right? The canoe star? My oldest is going to take your class this spring. The free one,” she added. “You provide the canoes, right?”

“I do. I'll look out for him. It's one of my favorite classes to teach. Kids love canoeing. You'll see.”

Back in the truck, Gina fell silent for a time, while Kendra checked her list for the next family who had signed up for a delivery.

“Do you think a person can live just fine without a family?” she asked abruptly as they backed out of the driveway.

“Why, are you thinking about ghosting yours?”

“Ha. I'd have to fake my own death to do that. No...I'm just thinking

about Sassy and Kirk and how they both left and really have no family anymore. It's hard for me to even imagine. You're close to your family too. What would it be like if we weren't?"

"Maybe they found their own families. Close friends, spouses. I don't know about Sassy, but Kirk probably has friends from the Army, and I know he and George still talk. Everybody has to have someone."

"Found family," Gina murmured.

"Right. Found family. It doesn't matter if it's blood or growing up together. It's good if you have that, and I thank God every day for my Pop. That man would lay down his life for me, not that I'd ever let him do that. But I know people who have a bad relationship with the families they were born into. Or maybe they just can't be around them, but they still love them. With Kirk and Sassy, I don't know. Sounds like old Mr. Williams didn't want them around. And their mom, I don't even remember her. She left so long ago. I try not to judge, you know? Like Pop says, you never really know what type of hard road someone's traveling."

"Trust a blues legend to say it so perfectly."

"You know that's right."

They drove onto the main road that led out of Kirk's old neighborhood; it felt almost like leaving the past and returning to the present. She took one last look over her shoulder at Kirk's house. For some reason, it felt important. The snow had started up again, and Gina watched the whimsical twirling flakes spin down from the sky.

"It's kind of funny how so much happened after that summer we all worked at the Blue Drake," she mused out loud. "Carly got her heart crushed by Thomas and went on tour with her mother. Trixie had that awful experience with Chase Owens and went back to Lost Harbor. I went to Olympic training camp thinking the world was my oyster, and came right back with my tail between my legs. Brooke got pregnant and then died."

Kendra blew a quick kiss upwards, toward the sky. "Love you, Brooke,"

she murmured. Gina took a moment to do the same, before returning to her original train of thought.

“What about you? Did anything momentous and life-changing happen to you that summer, or right after?”

Kendra shot her a mysterious look. “You mean something I’ve been keeping to myself all these years because I’m too afraid to tell my best friend?”

Gina wrinkled her nose in apology. “I should have told you, but I wasn’t *afraid*. It’s more like I was ashamed and just wanted to forget the whole thing.”

Kendra still didn’t answer the question, though. Gina was about to ask it again when she spotted Kirk strolling down Main Street with a stranger. At the sight of Kirk’s tall figure and halting stride, the question flew right out of Gina’s mind.

“Who is that with Kirk?” Kendra peered past the windshield wipers and through the snow, which was falling thickly now. The other man was tall and dark-skinned, though with his wool coat and fur hat, it was hard to make out much more than that.

“I’ve never seen him before.”

“He looks like military,” Kendra said. “You can always tell from their posture.”

It occurred to Gina that this must be Kirk’s friend the FBI agent. Then she looked back at Kirk and forgot all about the agent. She could stare at Kirk all day and all night and never get enough. Seeing his old neighborhood—that window into his past—had added another, deeper, layer to her feelings for him. It felt like new territory, some place she hadn’t gone in a relationship. As if whatever was between her and Kirk might be more than just sex...but was that really possible?

It was too much to sort out, but one thing she knew for sure—she couldn’t wait to be alone with him again.

## *twenty-seven*

In all the excitement of Merlin showing up, Kirk had forgotten that Earl Granger was due to arrive. When he called from the road, Kirk explained the situation with his niece and sister. Granger insisted on giving them space, so Kirk made some calls, then met him outside the Bittersweet Inn.

There, with snow falling around them, they exchanged a hug and some back-pounding.

“There’s another problem,” he explained. “But don’t worry, it’s already solved, pending your approval.”

“I generally approve of problems that are already solved.”

“There were no rooms left in town anywhere, except a suite that’s booked but not yet occupied. It happens to be booked by the sister of a friend who’s getting married on New Year’s Eve. Her name’s Bliss Gault. She’s not sure when she’s getting here, so she just booked it to be safe. I reached out to her and she’s fine with you staying in it on one condition.”

Granger’s eyes narrowed skeptically. “Hit me.”

“That you say you’re with her. She didn’t get into details, but I got the impression it’s a security thing. I told her that you’re FBI, and suggested you say you’re her bodyguard. She loved that idea.”

Granger snorted. “How about head of security? I’m not remaking *The Bodyguard*. It was a perfect movie as is.”

Kirk agreed to that on Bliss's behalf, and they headed inside.

"I'm here for a wedding," Granger told the woman at the desk at the Bittersweet Inn. Gray-haired, wearing a cozy red cardigan, she seemed to embody the spirit of the old-fashioned inn, just like the vintage rolltop desk that served as a check-in counter. "Earl Granger. Head of Security for Bliss Gault."

"Oh sure, I have you down right here." She clicked on her keyboard. "You two were lucky, you got the last room in all of Lake Bittersweet. You must be here for Carly's wedding, it's the only one happening that I know of. And I know everything that goes on here. That wedding's not until New Year's Eve. You got plans until then?"

No wonder she knew everything that was going on—because she came out and asked.

"I plan to relax," Granger declared. "You'll barely see me." Granger winked at her, a dimple flashing in one cheek. She blushed. Granger could really pour on the charm when he wanted to. He was good-looking, too, with smooth brown skin and a solid, fit build.

The suite, the most luxurious one at the Inn, filled the entire top floor and had two bedrooms. There'd be plenty of room for Bliss once she arrived. If they didn't want to share, Kirk would insist that his friend come stay with him.

Kirk relaxed on the sofa while Granger checked out the windows and sight lines. Must be standard procedure for an FBI agent.

"Good view right down Main Street," Granger said. "Mostly snow and Christmas lights right now."

"You got a problem with snow and Christmas lights?"

"Nope. It's festive and delightful."

The contrast between his words and his dry, deadpan manner amused Kirk. "Well then, welcome to Lake Bittersweet."

When Granger was satisfied with his exploration of the suite, he lowered

himself into one of the overstuffed armchairs and unscrewed the cap of a water bottle. “When’s my fake client getting here?”

“No details yet. Bliss is kind of...hard to pin down.”

“Bliss.” Granger snorted. “This should be fun. Let me guess, a hippie chick?”

“I really couldn’t say. Haven’t seen her in years.”

“At least I’ll have some time without anyone getting in the way. We’ll work out the security thing after she gets here.”

Already taking charge, in true Earl Granger style. Kirk wondered how Bliss would handle that. She was probably used to being in charge of things herself.

Oh well, he’d let them sort that out.

Granger took a drink from his water bottle. “So what’s this about a long-lost niece?”

“My perimeter alarm went off last night, and it turned out to be a niece I didn’t know existed. My sister’s kid. We haven’t been in touch so it was a surprise when she showed up.”

“Any chance she sent the candy cane emojis?”

Kirk hadn’t thought about that possibility. “No, she just got here. Or so she said. I guess I don’t know for sure, I’m just taking her at her word.”

“It was easy for her to find you?”

“Yes,” he admitted. “Pretty damn easy.”

“Which means it’d be easy for someone else, too.”

Kirk nodded slowly. “I guess that’s right, but they’d just set off the alarm like Merlin did. At least now I know the security system works.”

Granger drank more water, draining the entire bottle. “It works as far as it goes.”

The man of few words strikes again, thought Kirk. “What does that mean?”

He didn’t answer directly. “I told you I looked into that kid. Timothy



Price, your biggest fan.”

“Yeah, the one who mentioned Minnesota to someone?”

“I’m still working on getting more background on him, but the people at the shelter said he’s got a severe case of hero worship for one Kirk Williams. You might call it an obsession. They say he talked about you all the time and had elaborate plans to become part of your life.”

“Part of my life?” Kirk felt a shiver travel through him. “What the fuck does that mean?”

“I can’t say. But it set off enough alarms that I figured you might need backup.” He spread open his large hands. “Here I am. I already had this trip planned out, figured I might as well follow through. Enjoy some small-town winter fun if nothing else.”

“I mean, thanks, man. You’re going above and beyond here.”

Granger shook his head, pausing for a long moment. Then he said, “I never told you this before. My sister’s in the Navy and she used to deal with a lot of bad shit. People didn’t listen to her until your book came out. After that, she had commanding officers taking her seriously for once. If I let something happen to you, she’d have my ass.”

Kirk gave a slow nod. It felt good to know that he’d helped Granger’s sister in a roundabout way, even if he’d never known about it until now.

“What about Christmas? I can bring a guest to my…” He trailed off, not sure exactly how to describe Gina or the Morettis.

“No need. I celebrated with my family before I left. They’re used to my schedule. It’s not a problem.” The way his face closed up, Kirk realized the topic was no longer one he intended to discuss. Fair enough. Their friendship had always had certain boundaries.

“Well, if you change your mind, say the word.”

Granger barely nodded, and returned to the main topic. “So you haven’t seen this kid in town?”

“Nope. Gina thought she saw someone in the woods, but she never got a

look at him. Could have been nothing.”

“I’ll check it out. Send me the location.”

Suddenly Kirk was beyond frustrated that he’d come to Lake Bittersweet for a break and now he was picking apart his life looking for clues to something that might be a threat and might be a huge fuss about nothing. He could be in his Boston apartment right now, doing TV interviews about the situation in Singapore, whatever it was.

Not that he wanted that. He hadn’t thought about Boston much at all ever since seeing Gina in that red dress.

He let out a long sigh and scrubbed both hands through his hair. “Be careful, okay? I don’t understand what’s going on, if anything. But if it’s something, I don’t want you getting hurt. Your sister would kick *my* ass.”

“That she would. But don’t worry about me. This is what I do. Better get some shuteye now, though. Then I’ll start poking around.”

Immediately, Kirk got to his feet. “Be in touch if you need anything.”

“I will. But I won’t.”

They hugged again, and Kirk took himself off.

## *twenty-eight*

He didn't see Gina again until Christmas morning. Two o'clock Christmas morning, to be exact, when his phone pinged with a text.

*I'm outside but don't want to set off the perimeter alarm.*

Merlin was sleeping in the top floor guest room with the door tightly closed. He wouldn't be surprised if she'd set up her own perimeter alarm—some kind of hex to warn her if her mother showed up. She didn't seem to be scared of much, but she was nervous about Sassy's reaction to her running away.

Leaving the lights off, Kirk padded down the carpeted steps to let Gina in. A burst of whirling snow followed her into the foyer, leaving a scattering of white across the tiles. He didn't care if she carried an entire blizzard with her, he was so glad to see her, to touch her, to catch her radiant smile against his lips in a kiss.

Arms wrapped around each other, they stumbled against the entryway wall, where he slid his hand under her shirt, desperate to reach warm skin. She shivered and arched, then bit his neck. He lightly swatted her ass, then latched his mouth to her neck. A hickey, wasn't that what they used call it? He suddenly remembered a time in high school when a girl had given him a hickey and Gina had teased him about it.

He eased the pressure of his mouth—he didn't want Gina getting shit

from her brothers on Christmas—and moved to the sensitive skin under her ear. Tasting, teasing.

“Merlin?” she whispered.

“Top floor. You can’t hear a thing from up there. Let’s go in here.” He tugged her toward the home gym. In the dark, they picked their way past free weights and an elliptical machine. The pool’s underwater lights made it glow a soft inviting blue. Water, after all, was Gina’s natural habitat. He paused.

“The pool’s heated,” he told her.

“I actually came here to talk to you about something.”

Maybe so, but he heard the undertone of desire roughening her voice. “Damn. I thought you came here for my hot body.”

“Oh, I mean, always, dude.” The gleam in her eyes told him she was rallying to the moment. “Let’s see it, then.”

He stripped off his sleep t-shirt and the warm flannel sweats he’d pulled on upstairs. Naked, he stood before her. Naked and willing, if you asked his quickly hardening cock.

He stepped toward her and gently took off her coat, red wool with toggle buttons. She wore a long black sweater over thick leggings with some kind of swirling colorful pattern. She preempted him and wiggled out of her sweater herself. “This thing is so ancient it could fall apart if you breathe on it wrong.”

He made a show out of carefully placing it on a low table near the pool. “Now the rest of it.”

“Bossy.”

“Oh yeah. I want what I want.”

“Which is?” Her dark eyes twinkled at him over the edge of her body-hugging long-sleeved tee as she worked her way out of it.

“Right now it’s you, naked, in that pool. Then it’ll be me, inside you. After that, it’ll be the two of us naked in bed.”

“Sleeping?”

“Hell no. Okay, maybe a little sleeping,” he allowed. “You’ll need some time to rejuvenate.”

Down to her black bra now, she burst out laughing. “Damn, what is it that you write again? Erotic novels? *Playboy* articles?”

“I did write an article for *Playboy* once. It was about new definitions of masculinity. Not exactly sexy.” He couldn’t take his eyes off that black bra against her creamy skin. The light from the pool shimmered across her body. It gave them both an otherworldly sheen, as if their sheer desire made them glow from within.

“I think it sounds sexy. What’s the new definition? Because the old one has some problems. Men feel like they need to run everything. They’re fucking bossy.”

He stepped close and turned her body so he could unclasp her bra for her. The strong muscles of her back flexed; she was a work of art. “I try to keep my bossiness confined to the bedroom. Inside, anything goes so long as we both want it. Outside, different story. Everyone counts. Men don’t have to run everything, and obviously we don’t anymore. Sometimes I think we shouldn’t run anything until we get our shit together.”

He ran a finger down her spine, tracing the dip and rise of her vertebrae. She shivered, a long sensual tremor of her entire body. He glided both hands along the curve of her waist until he reached her hips, where her panties still hugged her ass.

Not for long, though. He dragged them down her thighs, skimming his fingers across every inch of sensitive skin he passed along the way. His healing leg kept him from crouching all the way down, but it didn’t matter because she nimbly stepped out of them herself.

She turned to face him, and they took in each other’s naked bodies. He felt her gaze slide across him. His cock responded to the visual attention. Or maybe it was to the sight of her magnificent nudity. Those firm athletic curves, that honed physique, that impression of being fully in control of her

body.

Maybe for the first time, he saw her as if he'd never known her in the past. As if she'd risen from that pool like Venus on an inflatable raft. A glorious, laughing, sensual, merry-eyed goddess who had his heart in the palm of her hand.

He drew in a breath as something shifted inside him. Before this moment, he'd known his path. It was about driving forward, succeeding, making his mark. Claiming his place in the world. Speaking up for what he'd witnessed. Hoping to right some wrongs. He hadn't thought about much beyond that. He'd avoided thinking about the past, about how he grew up, about the memories locked inside him.

But now, it all felt different. Nothing seemed to matter as much as the woman standing before him. The entire world seemed to reorient itself so that she was at the heart of it.

His trance snapped to an end when Gina took two steps toward the edge of the pool and dove in. Her body arced perfectly through the air and sliced into the blue water with barely a splash. She surfaced, sleek as an otter, blinking water out of her eyes.

He dove in after her, and they twined their legs together as they floated in the middle of the pool. Illuminated by the underwater lights, her dark eyes seemed to shimmer with mischievous secrets.

"Have you ever had sex in a pool before?" she asked him.

"No."

"Neither have I. There aren't a lot of private pools in Lake Bittersweet, at least not on our side of the lake."

He thought she sounded nervous now, but he couldn't imagine why. "I promise you won't drown."

She smiled and shifted her pelvis so her hipbone brushed his extremely hard erection. The plunge into the pool hadn't diminished it at all. "Condom?"

He shook his head. “You caught me unprepared. But I came up all clear in my last physical. Haven’t been with anyone since then.”

“I’ve been on a break too, and I’m always super careful. Not exactly a break,” she corrected. “Just lacking inspiration.”

“Are you inspired now?”

“I could be.” It was a tease, a challenge. He loved a good challenge.

He slid a hand between her legs, where feminine heat radiated. Surrounded by water, everything was so delightfully slippery and easy. She parted her legs to allow him more space to roam, and let her head fall back against his other arm, which he used to support her back. The sensation of floating, of being untethered from everything except each other, intoxicated him.

She reached for his penis, which seemed to float on its own into her hand. Her grip was hot and firm and made his back teeth clench together. “Damn,” he muttered.

For a timeless stretch, they floated together like that, stroking each other to the rhythm of the water lapping against them. He went into a kind of blissed-out trance, hypnotized by the lights shifting through the water, the sighs drifting from Gina’s wet lips. Would he ever smell chlorine again without thinking of her? Would he ever do anything again without thinking of her?

He worked a long finger inside her muscular channel, so tight, so silky. It was bliss to touch her there, to explore, to find the spot that made her body clench in pleasure.

“Oh shit,” she breathed. “I have a G-spot?”

“I don’t know about that, but it’s definitely a Gina spot.” He pressed harder, stroking as she gasped and squirmed, then spluttered out a laugh.

“A Gina spot. That’s funny.”

He slid another finger inside her and she came then, clenching around his hand, holding onto his shoulders and softly crying out. He let her ride his

fingers as hard as she needed to, as long as she wanted, until her body relaxed and went limp.

She'd released his cock in the meantime, but now her hand went back to it. "Come inside, you." She put her other hand on his ass and urged him toward her. "I'm on the pill, and we already settled the condom issue."

"Yeah?"

"Oh yeah."

Dropping the arm that had supported her back, he lifted her legs and wrapped them around his hips. "Lock your ankles together," he ordered her.

He felt her thighs tighten around him as she did what he said. He didn't want her floating away while he plunged his cock into her. Already he was getting so excited he was worried he might come before he even got inside her. Her chest was rising and falling in a quick rhythm, and he wondered if that first orgasm had merely taken the edge off. He slid a hand to her wet folds and found her plump and swollen clit. Pinched it between his fingers and felt it swell even more.

"I'm ready," she gasped. "But I'm not mad if you do that too."

He smiled to himself. The more orgasms the better, in every way possible. Of course Gina would be an eager and open lover. She'd always been so physical, and why would sex be any different?

He loved it. Loved the way her body opened for him as he slid his cock inside her. He was so engorged that he had to move slowly at first. Inch by intoxicating inch, until he was all the way inside her. Pelvis to pelvis, flesh to flesh, sealed together. Then he moved, deep and powerful, using the embrace of her legs as leverage. He loved the feeling of her surrounding him, not just his cock but his entire body. Her arms stroking his back, her legs holding him tight. All of her taking in all of him.

The tension built and built, spiraling tighter with every thrust, until his climax hit him like a bolt of lightning. He emptied himself into her body, and every speck of thought seemed to go too. He was a vibrating pile of nerve



endings, nothing but pleasure and contentment. A man who existed in this moment for one purpose only—to hold onto the naked woman in his arms. Peace filled him to the brim in this blue oasis, while outside the snowy world continued its slow spin to dawn.

Later, when they'd dried off and curled up together on the soft mats in the massage room, he remembered that she'd come here with something on her mind. "What did you want to talk about?"

"I went to Edgeview today. I talked to someone who was friends with Sassy. And I saw your old house."

He stiffened at the mention of the neighborhood he'd avoided since he'd come back. "And?"

"That's it. If Merlin wants to talk to one of Sassy's friends, I found one. Is she still trying to do that even though Sassy's coming tomorrow?"

"I'm not sure. She hasn't said much. Something's on her mind, but the hell if I know what. Every once in a while she starts to talk, but then changes her mind. We had pizza for dinner and even that didn't do the trick."

"Are you excited to see Sassy after all this time?"

He shifted uncomfortably. Talking about his family always made him twitchy. "I wouldn't say excited. Wary, more like."

She waited for him to say more, but when he didn't, she said, "I'd never seen where you lived before."

"You weren't missing much." He muttered it into the warm skin of her neck, which still held the scent of chlorine.

"I disagree. It's only fair, after you spent so much time at our house."

He lifted his head and frowned down at her. "I'm not that person anymore."

"What was wrong with that person?" She reached up and cupped his face in a tender gesture. "A lot of us really liked that person."

"I thought I was just another annoying brother-type."

"Maybe not quite." A glimmer of a smile broke across her face. "There

may have been a little bit of crushing going on. Just don't tell anyone. Especially that quiet, cute young Kirk guy. He might get a swelled head if he grows up to be famous."

Hmm, interesting. Gina had a kid crush on him? Even in the days when he felt like a big nothing?

His heart warmed as if she'd just filled it with mulled wine. Merry Christmas to him.

## *twenty-nine*

Until her two big romantic disasters, Gina had always loved Christmas. She'd even loved her mother's annual frenzy of errands and recipes and last-minute crises. Since her Olympic fiasco and her divorce, she'd struggled through the holiday season and only been able to breathe freely once she'd reached the week before New Year's. That time always felt like a pause for breath.

But this Christmas, she had a secret. That changed everything. Catching Kirk's eye as he passed the chestnut-mushroom stuffing down the table to her, she felt her cheeks heat. Could people tell that they'd stayed up most of the night, snuggled in each other's arms? Had anyone noticed when he kissed her under the hanging copper pan in the kitchen, as if it was mistletoe? What about when he touched her knee under the table, and left it there, warm and heavy, until thoughts of last night made her squirm?

Only Merlin seemed to notice.

This morning, she'd wandered into the kitchen and nearly caught them kissing.

"Still not your aunt," Gina had told her firmly.

Then she'd whisked her off to her apartment so she could borrow some clothes for Christmas dinner. Merlin had rummaged through Gina's closet and put together a punk-goth outfit Gina hadn't known her wardrobe was

capable of.

Now, the girl was digging into the honey-roasted ham and the dill mashed potatoes and the candied yams and the green bean casserole and the cloverleaf rolls along with the rest of the Morettis, Gina included.

It was a good thing she'd worked up a hearty appetite last night.

She stole another glance at Kirk as a fresh wave of desire passed through her. The way he made her body sing...she sighed. She'd never get enough of the way he touched her. Or anything else about him.

Ever since she'd gone to his old neighborhood with Kendra, her feelings about him had shifted. All of her old resentment was gone, and she knew how silly it had been to feel it in the first place. It wasn't his fault that her parents were more focused on their boys and that she'd had to fight for every scrap of attention. She'd wanted to be seen; he'd wanted to survive.

None of that mattered now, not with this soft sexual buzz linking them together. How no one else noticed it, she had no idea.

That all changed while they were exchanging presents—which, by tradition, they did after an early dinner. They all gathered in her parents' overly decorated living room, in which every inch of space held something evergreen or sparkly or velvet. Pine boughs tied with red ribbons adorned the fireplace, and glittery golden balls dangled from the overhead light fixtures.

Gina went around the room topping off everyone's glass of eggnog or sparkling cider. Mario Jr's kids took turns playing Santa, distributing gifts to the rest of the family. Before long, they sat in a rising sea of wrapping paper and Mama had a collection of gift wrap bows perched on her newly permed hair.

Merlin sat on the old yellow ottoman and watched the circus. She didn't say much, but Gina caught her smiling now and then. In between smiles, she looked nervous, more like the hostile girl who'd shown up at the Mason house.

Kirk had brought gifts for everyone, mostly generic things like a silk scarf

for Mama and a new type of hockey glove for Frank. Her present was equally impersonal—a beaded hair ornament shaped like her favorite flower, a tiger lily. But along with it, he handed her a piece of paper, then settled back onto the couch next to her.

She opened it and saw that he'd written an address and phone number on it, along with the letters C and P. Coach Peters.

He nodded when she looked up at him in wordless question. "I just got it this morning. After you—" Seamlessly, he adjusted. "After we spoke."

Merlin smothered a snort of laughter. Gina directed a glare her way. She got the message and buried her face in her mug of eggnog.

"Thank you," she told Kirk, then looked at the address again. "Holy shit. He's here in Minnesota?"

"Who is?" George craned his neck to look at the slip of paper.

"No one. Just an old...person."

"Why is Kirk giving you an old person's address as a Christmas present?"

"None of your business." Gina tucked the paper into the pocket of her red velveteen hoodie. "Someone open another present."

"I thought we could drive out there tomorrow," Kirk told her in a low voice, when it seemed everyone's attention had moved on. "If you want company."

"I do." She turned a smile filled with gratitude on him. "I would love that. You can stay in the car if you want. I just need to—"

"To what?" Gina jumped at the question from her mother, who was perched on the couch opposite her, dressed in a crimson sweater adorned with a sequined reindeer. Trust Mama to catch on to anything meant to be a secret. Maybe all those bows enhanced her hearing. "Mama, it's nothing. Don't worry about it."

"Are you sick? Is it a doctor? Oh my sacred Lord, you're sick and you don't want to tell us. What is it? Leukemia? Skin cancer? A tumor? I always told you to wear sunscreen."

“I’m not sick. Do I look sick?” Gina asked through clenched teeth. God, her family. Always turning everything into a drama. “If I was sick, believe me, I’d tell you because then everyone would have to cater to me and do whatever I wanted.”

“You could have one of those illnesses that doesn’t show. Something could be eating away inside you, like one of those bop flies that Peggy picked up when she was on vacation.”

“A bop fly?” George chuckled as he patted Mama’s hand. “Do they make you burst into song when they bite?”

“I don’t know, do they? Peggy does sing well, but mostly only in church.”

“It’s *bot* fly, Mama. But I didn’t get bitten by one. I’m not sick.”

As if she didn’t believe Gina, Mama looked at Kirk. He shook his head. “She’s perfectly healthy. Not sick. No bot fly. No tumor.”

A strange sound came from Merlin’s direction. Gina looked more closely at her. Something had seriously upset her. It couldn’t have been Kirk’s very gentle reproof.

“Hey, are you okay?” she asked under the noise of the conversation that swirled around the room. George had shifted the topic to Otto’s new job.

The girl turned her head away, but not before Gina noticed a tear rolling down her cheek. She nudged Kirk to bring his attention to his weeping niece.

He got up from the couch and crouched next to the ottoman. “Merlin, what’s wrong?”

Shrugging away from him, she squashed the tear as if it was an insect. “I’m fine. But you all shouldn’t joke like that.”

“Joke?” He looked at Gina for help, but all she could do was shrug. She had no idea what Merlin was so distressed about.

“Forget it,” Merlin muttered. She pulled down her borrowed black beret to hide her face.

“Did something offend you?” she asked. “Was it my brothers? They can

be a lot.”

“I said, *forget it.*” More tears were rolling down her cheeks, too many for her to keep up with.

“Was it the joke about the bop fly?” Kirk tried. “Are you afraid of... tropical insects?”

She gave a scornful snort through her tears. “Of course not. God. Why are grownups such idiots? Are you trying to make me laugh at your stupid jokes to distract me?”

“No, no, I promise. Something’s really bothering you. I want to know what. If you’re anything like Sassy, it takes a lot to make you cry.”

At the mention of Sassy, Merlin went pale and started crying in earnest. Gina jumped off the couch and knelt next to her and Kirk. She took Merlin’s hand in hers, and felt her tremble.

“It’s...it’s...” Her sobs kept her from finishing the sentence.

The entire room went quiet, even the Moretti matriarch recognizing that something serious was going on.

“Is it something about Sassy?” Kirk asked gently. Gina was impressed by how he was keeping it together, but on the other hand, she shouldn’t be surprised. He’d always had a sensitive side. If she had to run crying to someone as a kid, it would be him, not any of her brothers.

Merlin nodded miserably. “I’m not su-supposed to say, though.”

“I get it. But I’m family, right? You reached out on Facebook for a reason. You were looking for family. Well, here I am.”

Kirk’s manner was gentle, his eyes soft with concern, a comforting hand on Merlin’s back, his entire presence radiating patience and strength, and if Gina hadn’t already been half in love with him, she would have fallen right then and there.

Half in love?

*Okay, maybe five-eighths. Six-eighths. That’s the same as three-quarters, idiot. And you hate math.*

“Six months ago my mom...” Merlin forced the words out, one by one, while Gina’s imagination went wild. Had Sassy left? Abandoned her daughter? Was she missing? On a bender?

“She has cancer,” she finally burst out. And once she’d said that, she couldn’t seem to stop. “She won’t get surgery. I think she’s afraid of doctors. She says her father—your father—got hooked on pharmaceuticals when he hurt his back, and he was never the same, and that’s why he was so mean to her all the time. She’s afraid all that will happen to her too. She says she’d rather die than be an asshole like Jimmy Williams.”

At that point, she buried her face into her hands, knocking off her beret, and let her sobs take over.

Over Merlin’s head, Kirk met Gina’s gaze, and it was almost as if she could see right into his soul. The name Jimmy Williams echoed in the air. Kirk never spoke his father’s name, and now that Merlin had done so, the man rose like a ghost between them. Gina knew Kirk and Sassy’s childhood had been bleak, but she’d never seen the stark truth of it written on his face before. That hurt had never really gone away, she saw with a flash of insight. It was all still there, layers of loneliness and neglect. It left him speechless as his niece wept on his shoulder.

Gina stepped into the gap. “I’m so sorry. What’s her prognosis?” she asked Merlin softly.

“She won’t say. Also she won’t stop working and take care of herself. She’s being super selfish because if something happens to her, what about me? I don’t care if that sounds selfish because I’m a kid and it’s not like I can make the rent payments or whatever. I thought if I came here, I could find someone who would make her listen. Like you, Uncle Kirk.”

Kirk shot Gina a look of pure alarm.

“I thought if I could find one of her old friends, they could talk to her,” Merlin went on. “Lake Bittersweet has healing waters, too. I read about it.”

Just then, a knock came at the front door. There was only one more guest



they were expecting.

God, what awkward timing.

Gina jumped to her feet and hurried to the door. Sure enough, when she opened it, feeling the brush of the balsam fir wreath against her face and a rush of cold air...there stood a woman who had to be Sassy.

She had Kirk's hazel eyes, although hers were more thickly lashed and had dark shadows underneath. Her face was drawn and her mouth tight at the edges. She wore a thick sheepskin parka and knit hat with a John Deere logo on it. Shoulder-length red hair peeked from under it.

Behind her, Gina caught sight of a cab backing into the turnaround, its headlights lighting up the snowbank next to the driveway.

"I'm Sassy Williams. Kirk gave me this address, he said my daughter Merlin would be here."

"Hi, yes, come in. I'm Gina Moretti."

"The canoe kid. I remember you."

Since Gina couldn't say the same, she simply smiled and ushered the woman inside. Then she paused, realizing that Sassy might want to know that her health status had just been revealed to everyone in the living room.

"Listen, Sassy. You should know what you're walking into here. Merlin just...well, she just told us about what you've been going through. Your cancer diagnosis. I think she was very upset and it just boiled over."

Sassy's mouth tightened even more. "That's no one's business."

"Not even Kirk's?"

"Kirk...I haven't seen him since he was a kid. I doubt he even cares."

"Try him," Gina suggested gently. "He won't be the only one, either. Can I take your coat?"

"I'm just here to pick up Merlin."

"Then how about a quick warmup and a cup of coffee?"

Sassy reluctantly allowed Gina to take her coat. Right away, Gina could see why she had resisted. All that sheepskin had hidden how thin she was.

The bulky sweater she wore underneath hung loosely from her frame.

Gina's very vague picture of Sassy, based on the stories she'd heard, was of a fierce and energetic kind of warrior woman, ready to battle her father, her teachers, kids on the playground, and whoever else pissed her off.

How did that image square with a woman who refused to fight her illness? Maybe fighting an external enemy was one thing, but fighting your own fear an entirely different thing.

That rang a bell for Gina, but she set it aside to think about later. She led Sassy into the big family room, where every face wore some variation of shock, pity, or curiosity. She had to make sure her family didn't embarrass Sassy even more.

Briskly, she said, "This is Sassy. Can someone get her a cup of coffee? Hop to it, Moretti family, it's like ten degrees out there. Show some holiday spirit."

Several people jumped to their feet. George nearly overturned his chair in the process, and in less than a minute, one of Mario's kids was bringing Sassy a steaming mug of coffee.

Her heart ached for Kirk as he took in the gaunt frame of his sister. He might claim that his family was part of his past, not his present...but his shocked expression told a different story.

## *thirty*

Thank God for Gina. If it weren't for her, Kirk wasn't sure he, Sassy and Merlin would have made it back to his place without a meltdown. The three of them were like porcupines with their quills fully extended.

Merlin was terrified that Sassy was mad at her, but at the same time, she was furious at her mother, and scared for her.

Sassy was rattled that Merlin had run away, and braced for some kind of judgment from Kirk.

Kirk was...well, he was mostly trying not to say or do the wrong thing. Which meant he didn't say much, not during the rest of Christmas evening, not during the drive back to the Mason place, and not while Gina got Sassy set up with bedding for the other guest room.

While Merlin and Sassy got themselves settled in on the top floor, Gina rummaged through the cupboards and found an old bottle of brandy. She poured them both a shot. The burn of it going down his esophagus finally snapped him out of his silent state.

"Thanks for being here," he told Gina. "Pour me another of those."

She did so, but after he downed it, she screwed on the top and stashed it back in the cupboard. "So, are you going to talk to Sassy?" she demanded.

"What do you mean? I've been talking to her."

"I mean, *talk* to her. Ask her what's going on, why she won't get

surgery.”

“I know why she won’t. Just like Merlin said.” Those words were burned into his memory because they exactly described how it had been with his father. The pills, the addiction, more pills, more depression, until he was so deep and unreachable that Kirk had barely recognized him.

Of course Sassy wouldn’t want to repeat that history. He didn’t even want to think about it. Talking to her would mean thinking about it. So was he going to talk to her? He didn’t know. He and Sassy hadn’t spoken since he’d called her before his deployment. She was only here to retrieve Merlin. What could they have to say to each other now?

“Look.” Gina set down her shot glass with a hard *clunk*. “I’m going to take off now. You and Sassy have a lot to talk about and I’m just going to be in the way.”

“What?” Panic grabbed at him. “Don’t leave, Gina. You’re not in the way. You’re making everything better.”

“I mean, I appreciate that, and in general of course it’s true.” She fluffed her curls, pretending to preen at his flattery. “But I’m a complete stranger to Sassy. She called me the canoe kid. She’s not going to open up to me.”

“And you think she will to me?”

“You’re her brother, Kirk. You have to try. I think she needs you. If she didn’t, why would she have come here? She could have just sent Merlin money or something, or asked you to bring her back. She came here for a reason, and I think you’re it.”

Shit. Gina was right—he had to try. And no one else understood the history of their family like him and Sassy. He’d spent all these years running as fast and far as he could from the Williams family demons, but now Sassy was in trouble and if he could help, he had to.

He glanced up at Gina, at her dark eyes, shadowed with worry right now, and her loose curls held back by the tiger lily hair ornament he’d given her. In such a short time, he’d come to want her, to need her. He didn’t want her

to leave his side, not now and maybe not ever.

Jesus. That was a shocking thought.

“What are you doing tomorrow?” he asked.

“Oh, just recovering, I’m sure,” she said, stretching her arms overhead. “My girlfriends and I might get together for a little gift exchange. And I’m going to help Carly nail down the incredibly last-minute details of their wedding. All the stylists are booked so we have to beg Bliss to help out. Anyway, don’t worry about me. Just take care of Sassy and Merlin.”

“Take care of them? They seem pretty good at taking care of themselves.”

“I’m sure they were, until they weren’t. Just like all of us. No one can take care of themselves all the time. We need each other, Kirk. And I don’t just mean in the get-naked way.”

On that note, she came and gave him a long, lingering kiss. He sensed something in that kiss, but he couldn’t quite pin it down through his brandy buzz.

“Speaking of getting naked,” he murmured against her lips, “when’s that happening again?”

“Take care of Sassy. I’ll text you later.”

“Wait.” There was something more he had to tell her before she took off. Sassy’s arrival had driven it from his mind, but it was important. “About your old coach. I got more information about him.”

In the midst of putting on her red coat, she paused. “What?”

“The reason he was so hard to find, well...right after that Christmas when you left the training camp, he got caught cheating on his taxes, had to pay a huge fine, declared bankruptcy, quit coaching, got divorced, remarried, took his new wife’s name, and now he works at the pet store she owns. Apparently she keeps him on a tight leash, so to speak. No more reports of shenanigans with students, probably because he doesn’t have any.”

She stared at him for a long, stunned moment. “*What?*”

“Yeah, it’s...a lot. That’s why I didn’t tell you at dinner.”

“You’re telling me my life has been a mess because of a bankrupt tax cheat pet store owner?”

“Technically his wife owns the store.”

She threw up a hand, then yanked her coat the rest of the way onto her body. “Not important. Jesus. I feel like an idiot.”

He couldn’t navigate the storms of emotion chasing each other across her face. “Why?”

“I’ve wasted my life over him! And for what? I could be happily married with kids by now if not for him.”

A chill wrapped around his heart. If that was her dream scenario, where did that leave him? She caught his expression. “This isn’t about you. It’s about me. Don’t look like that.”

“Like what?” He schooled his face so he showed nothing. He’d learned how to do that as a kid; it was a survival skill. But it hurt to do it now, with her.

“Just...nothing. I’d better go. I’ll text you later. Thanks for the news flash, Kirk. I do appreciate it. Pet store, what the hell? He used to hate cats. We even argued about that.”

She swept through the door, her gaze passing across him, completely caught in her own drama, and a moment later he listened to the sound of her car engine disappearing into the cold night.

What had just happened? He’d done what she wanted, gotten her that information. But she’d looked right through him. *Past* him.

That old, familiar sense of being nothing flooded through him. He tried to fight against it with logic. She didn’t mean it that way. She was upset, shocked by his discovery. She needed time to process it. *I could be happily married with kids by now if not for him.*

He went back into the kitchen and poured himself another shot of brandy. It did little to warm the chill in his heart. He waited for a while, but Sassy didn’t come down, so he decided she must have gone to sleep. He might as

well do the same.

He fell asleep thinking of Gina's other words. *No one can take care of themselves all the time. We need each other.* The Morettis had taken care of him when he'd needed it so desperately. Sassy hadn't, though. She'd run away. Left him all alone. He ought to be angry about that, but whether he was or wasn't, it meant that he and Sassy didn't have any sort of relationship other than shared memories neither of them wanted to relive.

He woke up the next morning to the sound of a car pulling up outside. His eyes felt gritty, his mood grim. Checking his phone, he saw that Gina hadn't texted. The car outside didn't sound like her Leaf. He rolled out of the bed and limped to the nearest window that faced the front drive. A blue sedan waited outside, its engine running. He heard footsteps on the stairs, along with low voices. Merlin was complaining, while Sassy held firm.

Holy shit. They were leaving.

The ice in his heart dissolved as hot anger flooded in. He limped over to the bottom of the staircase and planted himself there, legs braced apart, arms crossed over his chest.

"Leaving, Sassy?" he called up to her, after she'd paused at the sight of him. Merlin nearly crashed into her mother on the stairs. "Again?"

"Again? What's that supposed to mean?"

He narrowed his eyes at her, making sure she got the point.

"Jesus, Kirk, we're just getting out of your hair. Merlin never should have come here."

"Well, she did, and she did the right thing. You can't leave yet."

"I have a taxi out there that says different."

She'd called a taxi. God, she hadn't even waited for him to wake up and say goodbye.

As if he meant nothing to her. For a moment, he was a seven-year-old kid again, watching his family fall apart.

"*You can't leave.*" As if from a distance, he heard his voice break.

Emotion rushed through him like water through a crack in a dam. He struggled to hold it back. “Come on, Sass. Please. You just got here.”

“Mom,” Merlin began, but Sassy shushed her.

“Look, Kirkie...” Her old nickname for him brought another wave of emotion. “I’m sorry for leaving you alone back then. I didn’t want to but there wasn’t any other way. I tried to bring you once and he—”

“Fuck, Sassy. I remember all that. You don’t have to remind me. I know you couldn’t take me. I know you had to go.”

Over her mother’s shoulder, Merlin’s eyes widened with avid interest. How much had Sassy told her about their childhood? Just the highlights, or rather, lowlights?

Sassy shook her head impatiently, her red hair swirling across her shoulders. “Then why do you care if we go now? We need to get home. I have to work tomorrow, and I shouldn’t even have taken today off.”

“But you did. You’re here. Don’t leave yet. Just a little longer.”

He held her gaze, standing his ground. *I’m not nothing. This matters. Talk to me. Stay.*



## *thirty-one*

Merlin tugged on Sassy's sleeve. "There's a pool, Mom," she whispered loudly. "It's really nice here."

Kirk could tell that Sassy was wavering. Obviously, Merlin was her soft spot. In the old days, she wouldn't give in about anything, ever.

"Merlin, go give the cab driver some money for his trouble." With shaky hands, she pulled her wallet from her coat pocket. "Then me and Kirk need some time. Okay?"

"So we're not going?"

"Not just yet. We'll see."

Merlin took the wallet and ducked under Sassy's arm. She skipped down the stairs. As she passed Kirk, he said, "I'll go make some coffee. You can have the pool to yourself if you want."

"Cool. No one better come in because I'll be skinny-dipping."

"Appreciate the warning."

She disappeared through the front door, leaving Kirk and Sassy in awkward silence. "Breakfast?" he asked her.

Sassy shrugged and followed him into the dark kitchen. He flipped on the lights, making them both blink in the sudden brightness. Outside, the sun still hadn't fully risen, and he could see their reflections in the bay windows of the breakfast nook.

Shadowy as two wraiths from the past.

“This place must be expensive.” She scanned the stainless-steel sub-zero fridge, the eight-burner Viking cookstove. “You grew up and got rich, huh? You always were a smart little kid.”

“Was I?”

“Yeah. Smarter than me because I didn’t know how to stay out of trouble. And you were actually smart too, good in school. I could have been, if I’d bothered,” she added.

“Make coffee,” he said loudly. Then, at her reaction, chuckled. “Sorry, I was talking to the house computer. It actually makes the coffee. See?”

He gestured at the coffeemaker as it clicked on and began dripping into the carafe.

“Whoa. Creepy AF.”

He chuckled again, and she did too, and it felt good, to be laughing here in this fancy kitchen with his sister.

“What work do you do?” he asked her. “That you have to get back to? Are you still bartending like before?”

“No. I do online sales. I work on commission so it’s hard to take time off.”

“Even this time of year?”

“This time of year people spend money, so no.”

Her clipped tone told him she didn’t want to talk about that anymore. He pulled out two mugs from the cupboard. He’d left his cane in the massage room, where he’d slept, and noticed that his limp was almost gone.

“I can’t drink coffee,” she told him as he set down the mug in front of her. “It makes me throw up. I can make myself some tea.”

He stopped her with a gesture, and went to fill the electric tea kettle with water.

“You never drink coffee, or just now, because...”

“Just now. Since I got cancer. I know Merlin told you all. It’s tittie

cancer, by the way. Left tit only. Right one's still rock solid." There was that classic Sassy tough-chick act.

"How are you feeling?" he asked carefully.

"Like shit. I throw up and I'm tired all the time. The chemo is a beast."

"So you are...getting treatment?"

"Of course I am. What do you mean?"

The coffee stopped dripping and he went to pour himself a cup. "Merlin said you won't stop working. She said that's why she came here, so I could, I don't know, talk to you about it."

Sassy rolled her eyes. She still wore that John Deere knit cap, and he noticed that the red hair underneath wasn't real. It was a wig. His heart wrenched.

"She knows I can't stop working. What the hell else did she say?"

"Well...she said you won't get surgery because you don't want to be like Dad after he got hooked on painkillers."

Sassy's entire body went rigid. That part was true, judging by her reaction. "She shouldn't be spreading my business around. That's private."

She seemed frozen there on her stool, her hand clamped on the edge of the counter. The topic of their father was coming toward them like a rushing river. It wouldn't be denied.

"Sassy. I was there too. I get it."

Her gaze left the counter and met his. And the river crashed over them in a silent wave. He felt it inside him and out, memories, images, emotions, fear, loneliness, and under it all, the fierce need to survive.

"You don't want to be like him." His voice was rougher than sand on an icy sidewalk. "Neither do I. I left here as soon as I could and went as far away as I could. I never want to be like him. At first I thought if I became someone people respected, that meant I wasn't like him. But I think I had it wrong."

"Wrong how?"

“I don’t want to be like him because he was alone. Alone except for that TV and all that anger. He couldn’t even see me anymore by the end. He was so damn alone, it was like I wasn’t even there.”

Tears brimmed in Sassy’s tired eyes, but she was too transfixed to blot them. He kept going.

“I tried. I remembered that you brought a counselor to the house once. I did the same thing. It didn’t work that time either. He never accepted any help. He didn’t want it. So if you don’t want to be like Poppa, you can start there. You can accept some help. My help.”

She just looked at him helplessly, eyes shimmering with tears, and shrugged a shoulder. “Like what?”

He set down his coffee cup and walked around the kitchen island to her side. Without a word, he put his arms around her, watching closely for any sign of resistance. “Whatever you need. Whatever Merlin needs.”

Just as he’d figured, Merlin was her soft spot. At the mention of her daughter, she drew in a sharp breath. Then, stiffly, almost unwillingly, so softly that he almost didn’t hear, she said, “I didn’t want to ask this. But I have to. Will you take care of Merlin if…”

The muffled words nearly broke his heart. “Yes. Of course I will.”

Her thin shoulders shook with the effort of containing her emotion. She nodded, tried to speak, then abandoned the attempt. She allowed herself to lean against him. He knew how much that meant with someone as tough as Sassy.

When she had control of herself again, he pulled away to look into her face. “Is it really that bad?”

She shook her head. “I don’t think so. Neither does my oncologist. I can beat this, but being so worried about what would happen to Merlin, it’s stressful. Her father, I mean, he has a whole new family. He’s not interested in Merlin, and I don’t like her to feel like she’s second best, you know? To me she’s everything. Every damn thing.”

“How about friends? Do you have a support system in St. Paul?”

“I lean on them too much already. I wanted to take care of this, beat it and be done. But it’s...so much harder than I thought it would be. And sometimes...I think about how easy it would be to turn into Jimmy Williams, just give up, you know. Stop trying so hard, stop caring, just...keep those prescriptions coming...I mean, it’s genetic, right? Addiction. Or it can be. It’s what I grew up with. Who am I to say I can be any different?”

“Oh Sassy.” His heart ached for her, for everything she’d gone through, for how hard she’d worked to find her way. “Listen, I don’t have any answers. But you’re already different because you *know* how fucked up it was. And you never stopped fighting back.”

“Yeah, except I left you behind. Surprised you don’t hate me, Kirkie.”

“Sometimes I was mad about that,” he admitted. “But mostly you were my hero. I used to imagine you out in the world like Wonder Woman.”

She managed a smile, which made him unreasonably happy. “That’s pretty cute. You were always such a dreamer.”

“Was I?” He found that he was greedy for these little bits of memory of himself as a kid.

“I’m not surprised you became a celebrity.”

“I’m not a celebrity.” He pushed himself to his feet and went to pour another mug of coffee. “Just a guy they fill airtime with. Wait.” He turned to stare at her. “You’ve seen me on TV?”

“Yeah, I’ve seen you. I read your book.” Her lined face broke into a smile. “I’m proud of you. Weird, huh? Proud of being a Williams. First time that ever happened.”

Warmth filled his heart, more powerful than a shot of hundred-year-old brandy. “Stay here with me,” he said impulsively.

“Huh?” She planted her elbows on the counter “What are you talking about?”

“You can work from here. There’s good internet and plenty of space. I

have the place until mid-January. I'll...take some of the load off your shoulders. I can hang out with Merlin, get to know her. Cook you guys dinner. Whatever you need."

"I can't. I have a treatment schedule. The next one's...well, tomorrow. That's why I need to get back. I don't suppose anyone built a chemo wing onto the dumpy little urgent care while I was gone?"

"No. Shit." He moved his mug back and forth across the table, sliding it from hand to hand. He had a good argument for everything except her chemo treatments but of course he couldn't throw a wrench into that. There was only one other solution. "I'll come back with you, then."

"What?" She seemed genuinely shocked.

"If you don't have space, I'll find a hotel or something. That way you can continue your treatments but I can still help out. What do you say?"

She was busy shaking her head. "No. It doesn't sit right making you haul ass all the way to St. Paul."

"I don't care about that. Come on, Sassy. Let's...act like a family. We are a family. Let Merlin get to know me."

That argument was the one that hit home. He saw it in her eyes, the fear that Merlin might be left alone. As long as he was alive and kicking, that wasn't going to happen. But it would be better for Merlin if she felt comfortable with her new uncle.

"I'm pretty cool, just like you said," he pointed out. "I know some actual celebrities."

"Unless they're on TikTok, she could care less."

"Fair enough."

Slowly, running her thumb across her pointer finger in a nervous gesture he recognized, she said, "I could go home for my next treatment, then come back. I have two weeks until the next one."

"Then it's a plan," he said instantly. "Merlin can pick up some more clothes. She had to borrow things from Gina, and Gina doesn't have nearly

enough black in her closet.”

Sassy laughed out loud, not the tentative chuckle from earlier, but her full-fledged laugh that still sounded vaguely like the caw of a crow.

It made him smile, and for a moment, the two of them felt in perfect harmony.

He realized that the kitchen was filling with cheerful morning light. Outside the bay window, another few inches of snow had fallen overnight. Crystalline reflections sparkled where the sun hit the soft billows of new snow. It was a beautiful winter morning, one of the last of the year, and what better time to sweep out the old and wish in the new?

“What time is it?” Sassy frowned, digging in her pocket for her phone. “Merlin didn’t bring my wallet back yet.”

“She probably went straight into the pool.” They both craned their necks, listening for sounds of splashing. When none came, Sassy bolted to her feet and hurried out of the kitchen. Kirk followed, a little more slowly because of his leg.

No Merlin. Not in the pool, not anywhere in the house, not playing in the snow.

Sassy hit speed dial on her phone. Got Merlin’s voicemail. Left a message.

“What the *fuck?*” Sassy’s hands shook so hard the phone slid from her fingers. “I told her to pay the cab driver and come right back.” She broke off and they stared at each other.

Kirk hadn’t even seen the driver’s face, had no idea who he—or she—was or where he’d come from. Dread sent his stomach churning.

“Call the cab company right away. The town only has a few cabs. I’m sure they can get ahold of him.”

“Should we call the police? Merlin wouldn’t just leave. Not with me here, and you, her brand-new uncle.”

*Shit.* Possibilities spun through his mind. The anonymous emoji-sender.

Or the hero-worshipper from the Boston shelter. Or the mystery man Gina had seen in the woods. Or all of the above, if they were the same person.

What would any of them want with Merlin?

“Let me make some calls,” he said tightly. “And then I need to fill you in on a situation.”



## *thirty-two*

Gina ignored the cellphone ringing from the passenger seat of Frankie's Mustang. She didn't like talking on the phone while she drove, especially when she'd spent the entire drive so far rage-ranting at herself—sometimes out loud.

She'd spent last night stewing, barely sleeping, reliving every excruciating moment of her time with Coach Peters. She'd thought about Junkyard, how she'd jumped into that marriage because she felt so lost and needed some kind of anchor. He'd anchored her, alright, like a pair of concrete shoes. His man-knows-best beliefs weren't that different from everything she'd struggled against growing up. After two months, they'd agreed it was a massive mistake. That was the cherry on top of her self-doubt sundae.

God, how much of her life had she wasted on those two losers? She was furious with herself. She wanted to jump out of her skin. Fix her relationship with herself? Yeah, right. She wanted to bitch-slap herself.

In the morning, she'd driven to Frankie's and negotiated a car trade for the day. As much as she loved it, her Leaf wasn't cut out for longer trips. It took a lot for Frankie to give up his Mustang in exchange for her Leaf.

“You gotta sweeten the deal, Gina. What else do I get?”

“My peace of mind and future sanity?”

He'd backed away at the expression on her face. "I'm gonna hold you to that."

If only he could see her now. *Peace of mind and future sanity, my ass.*

"Why'd I let that man make me doubt myself for one single second? Damn gaslighting asshole. Making me think I was worthless. Making me doubt my talent. Doubt everything. *That's not me.* I let him do that. I let him get inside my mind and fuck with me. Never again. I'm going to look him in the face and tell him I see exactly who he is. Manipulating motherfucker."

She was already about two miles out of Lake Bittersweet, heading down the highway toward the town where Coach Peters lived. The fact that he'd been so close all this time felt like a sign. She needed to do this—alone. For herself. Without Kirk.

If she followed her usual pattern, pretty soon she'd find herself withdrawing from Kirk, not wanting to see him, finding reasons why she couldn't spend time with him. Maybe all that would happen by mid-January, when he left. If not, the distance between Boston and Lake Bittersweet would be the final straw.

She didn't want to repeat that pattern. Not anymore, not with Kirk. Her feelings for him were so different from anything she'd experienced before. There was an ease, a rightness, a depth, a trust. Was this love? The real thing?

If she faced down Coach Peters, could she finally break her pattern?

*This isn't about Kirk,* she reminded herself. *This is about me.* She was tired of being held hostage by the past. She wanted more for herself. She wanted to free her voice, free her heart. Free her...

Lost in thought, she barely noticed the car passing her on the left. Which just went to show how preoccupied she'd been, because she hated it when people passed her. Generally speaking, she drove too fast for that to happen very often. Her five speeding tickets attested to that. If she hadn't been so in love with canoes, she might have gotten into race car driving.

Glaring at the rude car on her left, she noticed a face pressed to the rear

passenger window. The sedan was moving so fast that she got only a quick glimpse, but it sure looked like Merlin with those huge dark eyes and flash of green in her hair. And wasn't that her black beret? She hit the accelerator so the car couldn't veer in front of her yet.

Why was Merlin in the backseat of an unfamiliar car? Was it a taxi cab? Strange. She knew all the cabs in Lake Bittersweet, and this wasn't one of them. Anyway, why would Merlin be in a cab taking her the opposite direction from the Twin Cities?

Her phone buzzed again, but now she was driving too fast to risk answering it. She didn't even look at the screen, just focused on picking up enough speed to draw even with the sedan. It was a dark blue Ford Focus, probably ten years old or so. Frankie's Mustang could definitely outrace it.

The driver swung his wheel so the car pulled sharply in front of her, forcing her to hit the brakes. He'd cut her off and now he was pulling away from her.

That really pissed her off. He could have chipped the Mustang's paint, and Frankie would never let her forget that. More importantly, he could have made her lose control of her car, and all of them, including Merlin, could have gotten hurt.

She decided to take matters into her own hands. Stepping on the accelerator, she steered the Mustang into the oncoming lane, hoping there was enough sand on the icy road to keep her from spinning out. She didn't see any cars coming toward her, so she floored it until she was side by side with the other car.

With a quick sideways glance, she saw that a man was behind the wheel, but she couldn't make out any details other than a hat with ear flaps and a coat collar turned up. The girl in the backseat was Merlin. She was waving at her, mouthing something, pointing at the driver.

Obviously something wasn't right. She leaned on her horn, trying to make the point that she wasn't going anywhere. In response, he veered toward her

again. She hit the accelerator for another burst of speed. Even though he dinged her rear door, she managed to slide ahead of him. If she could just block his way, he'd have to stop and deal with her.

They drove for a while like that, with him making little feints in an effort to pass her, but her cutting him off every time. A few cars passed them going the opposite direction. She leaned on her horn every time, hoping someone would get the point that something was very wrong, and that they should call the state troopers. It might mean another speeding ticket for her, but it would be worth it.

Should she call 911?

"Hey Siri," she said. "Call 911."

While the call was going through, she took her foot off the pedal, trying to slow them both down without the driver noticing. The important thing was to stay ahead of him.

He surged forward and hit her rear bumper. Vibrations traveled through the Mustang—and her body. She deliberately relaxed her muscles to keep from tensing up. It was like paddling; you had to stay strong and focused, but loose.

*I'm paddling down the highway, she thought, almost loopy from the stress. Row row row your Mustang. Merrily merrily merrily merrily, life is but a dream.*

A sharp jolt struck the car, then a grinding crunch. He'd hit her harder this time, hard enough to break a taillight and fling her forward against the wheel. And now he was trying to take advantage by racing around her on the left. But another car was coming that direction, horn blaring, and she had to make space for the Focus in her lane, so she hit the brakes. Just in time, he slid in front of her and the SUV whizzed past.

A shudder ripped through her car and it veered toward the side. A tire had popped. A rock? Ice? General stress? A *gunshot*? She didn't have time to figure it out, because the Mustang was spinning out of control. Black ice, or

too much speed, or something he'd broken when he rammed into her...

*Steer into the spin, keep calm, relax.* Fighting to regain control, she lost track of the other car. They must have gone ahead of her. She'd lost them, lost Merlin. Shit, she couldn't let that happen. But the car kept sliding, fishtailing, a machine with a mind of its own, and the fundamental forces of the universe—centrifugal, gravitational, catastrophic—took hold of it and there was nothing, absolutely nothing, she could do.

A snow bank was coming at her fast, so fast that she flinched away, and then everything went dark.

## *thirty-three*

*Coach Peters was coming toward her. Yelling at her. She couldn't understand what he was saying, but full of fear, she backed away—right into the water. What water? Not the Whitewater Center, not the pool. This was Lake Bittersweet. She was in Lake Bittersweet and even though everything around her was cold, so cold, the lake buoyed her. She felt its waters under her, around her, felt strength and comfort filter through her skin. He can't hurt you.*

*"You can't hurt me!" she yelled at him. "I don't care about you anymore!"*

*He was saying something else, but she still couldn't make it out.*

*"Go away!" she screamed. But he was coming into the water, splashing his way into her domain and she couldn't allow that.*

*She dove underwater and her body became a canoe made of pure light, bow and stern, past and future, taking her forward until her breath was gone and she rose to the surface and broke through the darkness like glass.*

When she came to, the first thing she noticed was the shattered dashboard an inch from her face. A web of broken glass was barely held together by the magic of tempering. She realized that someone was shouting—Coach Peters?

The dream still lingered, until she looked to the side to see Merlin racing across the snow toward her. Her hands were tied behind her back. Someone else was stumbling after her. A man wearing a hat with ear flaps. The driver. Shit. Had they crashed too?

Quickly, Gina unbuckled her seatbelt. She didn't take the time to check herself for injuries, but other than general soreness and shock, she didn't notice any sharp pain or other signs of damage.

Seatbelt off, she unlocked her car door and crawled out. The pursuer was only a few yards away now, slip-sliding in the snow. He gripped a green backpack in one hand, as if he'd grabbed it just before leaving the car.

"Get behind me," she told Merlin as she struggled to her feet.

"Are you okay?"

"I'm fine. *Behind me. Please.*"

Merlin quickly obeyed and Gina spread open her arms to shield her from the man stumbling toward them. She saw no sign of a weapon, so that was a plus. "Who are you? What do you want?" she demanded. She noticed a piece of glass from the side window, which had also been broken when she crashed. Reaching for it took only a moment, and then she had a weapon in her gloved hand. "Stop right there."

He skidded to a stop, nearly falling in the snow. He wore a denim jacket that didn't look nearly warm enough, along with Doc Marten boots that were designed for city sidewalks.

"I'm not going to hurt you," he said indignantly. "I'm trying to help you. You just crashed your car."

She saw now that he was young, probably not much older than Merlin. Early twenties, maybe? While keeping her gaze on him, she asked Merlin, "What's going on? Why are your hands tied? Why are you with him?"

"He let me come help you, but only with my hands tied behind my back. So I guess I'm not much help, am I, Timothy?"

The kid—Timothy—scratched at the back of his neck. He looked more

confused than anything else.

“You know this guy?”

“No. Just that his name is Timothy and he wants to hold me hostage.”

“Hostage?” Gina spread her arms wide to shield Merlin even further. She firmed her grip on the piece of glass “That’s not going to happen, Timothy.”

“Shut up! Both of you!” He added, almost uncertainly, “I have a gun.”

“Where? I don’t see a gun.”

He touched his backpack. “It’s in here. I don’t want to use it.”

“He doesn’t know how to use it,” Merlin hissed. “I can tell by the way he talks about it.”

Scowling, Timothy unzipped the backpack, then dug around inside.

“That’s okay! I believe you,” Gina said quickly. If he really didn’t know how to use the gun, they’d all be better off if he didn’t haul it out. “What’s this all about? Why’d you take Merlin? Where are you going?”

“I...I’m not sure...don’t ask me so many questions! I let her check on you, so you know I’m not a bad guy, right?”

He seemed really anxious about her opinion of him. His eyes darted around the surrounding snow, giving him an air of confused panic.

“That remains to be seen, doesn’t it? Do you promise not to hurt either of us?”

“You’re bleeding.” She looked down and saw that he was right. Blood was dripping down her cheek, onto her coat. “It’s really cold out here. I guess you should come with me because no one can see your car from the road.”

Gina squinted at him in the low-angle winter sun. He looked so young and so confused. Not at all in control of this situation or even himself. Getting in a car with him seemed like a terrible idea.

“Tell you what. You leave me and Merlin here and we’ll call for help. You can leave without getting arrested.”

“Arrested?” The word seemed to send him into a panic. He gripped the backpack tight in his arms, reminding her that he did have a gun in there. “I



can't get arrested. I just can't."

"Okay, then do what I'm suggesting. We'll forget any of this happened. Just go now. Quick, before someone comes. I already called 911." She didn't even know if the call had gone through, but there was no need to tell him that.

"No...maybe...shit. Shit. I screwed this up, just like I always do. If only I was like...he can fix this. He'll help me. Yeah, stick to the plan. He'll help me."

Even though he was arguing with himself, Gina listened closely to every word. She had no idea what he was talking about, but the picture forming was of someone who didn't want to cause harm, but had gotten in over his head. There was no way she was going to let Merlin go anywhere with him alone.

Gina could hear Merlin's quickened breathing behind her. What if they tried to fight him? She had a piece of glass in hand, but her ankle was throbbing. She must have twisted it at some point. Merlin's hands were tied behind her back. And the guy had a gun that she really didn't want him to pull out of that backpack. Especially when he seemed so flustered.

This situation needed adult supervision.

She glanced over her shoulder at Merlin, whose teeth were already chattering. Why didn't teenagers believe in proper winter outerwear? Her funky houndstooth thrift store coat didn't even have functioning buttons. And that black beret did nothing to fend off frostbite.

If the 911 call had gone through, wouldn't someone already be here by now? They needed to get out of the cold.

Gina turned back to Timothy. "We'll come with you on two conditions. One, you need to guarantee that you won't hurt us."

"I already said I don't want to hurt you. I'm a good person," he added earnestly.

"Two, I need my phone."

"Your phone?" Oddly, his face lit up. "Yes, your phone. You can bring it,

but I'll keep it for you."

This situation kept getting stranger. Why did he want her phone? Didn't he have his own? She knew that Merlin didn't have one, but most people in their teens and twenties did, at least in her experience.

"Fine. I'm going to get my phone now."

"Drop that glass first." He brandished the backpack at her.

Could she lunge at him and slash him with the glass before he got the gun from his backpack? Maybe. But she didn't want to do anything that would bring untrained gun-wielding into this situation.

Besides, she had a plan.

She dropped the glass into the snow, then stepped toward her car, trying as best she could to disguise the pain of her ankle. She didn't want him to know she was weakened in any way. She reached through the driver's-side window to grab her hat and scarf. But where was her phone? She found it wedged between the passenger seat and the gear shift, and tugged it out. No service.

She glanced back and saw that Timothy had stepped behind Merlin to adjust the ties around her wrists. The sight infuriated her, but it also gave her a sliver of time. One corner of the front windshield was still intact, though already icing over with condensation. She scratched the words, G + M, *Blue Focus, MN*. She wanted to add more—Timothy, maybe—but he called, "Let's go."

She extracted herself from the window, angling her body to block his view of the windshield. When she was upright, she stuffed her hat into her pocket, then turned to face him as she flung her scarf around her neck with movie-star drama.

"Hand me the phone." He sounded a little more confident now that she was going along with his plan.

"There's no service here," she told him as she reluctantly handed it over.

"I know. That's okay, we'll drive somewhere better. I have a plan now.

Everything's going to be fine. I'll call him and he'll fix it. I didn't have his number but now I do."

"Who's this 'he' you keep talking about?"

He didn't answer as he maneuvered Merlin to walk ahead of him up the snowy slope. It was starting to snow, which worried her. Her plan wouldn't work if it snowed too much, too quickly.

"I think it's Uncle Kirk," Merlin called back to her. "That's why he's holding me hostage."

"Kirk?" Alarm flooded through her. The emojis, the message, the obsessed fan. Was that what this was all about? "Are you the one I saw in the woods the other day? Why do you have to kidnap someone to talk to Kirk?"

"I didn't plan it this way! I just drove to the house to see if he'd let me in. Then she got in to pay me, and it just came to me. Make *him* come to *me*. Quick thinking, improvising, just like he did. Maybe he'll even be proud of me."

As Timothy opened the back passenger door for Merlin to climb in, Gina slid her hand into her coat pocket and found her hat. She dropped it to the ground, then with her foot, kicked it under the car where he wouldn't see it.

"You drive," he told her. "I'm gonna keep the backpack on my lap, so just do what I say. Pull over when I tell you."

"Okay. No problem."

Good. If he was focused on her, he wouldn't notice the bright red hat she'd dropped as a signal to anyone looking for them.

She got behind the wheel and buckled in. When he slid into the passenger seat, she looked over at him and saw a scared young guy clinging to a stained green backpack and a very sketchy "plan."

"Quick thinking and improvising?" she asked him.

"Yeah, like he wrote about in his book. I know every line," he said proudly.

Damn it. She really should have read that damn book.

## *thirty-four*

When Sassy called the taxi company, she learned that they hadn't even sent a cab yet. Whoever had shown up that morning had nothing to do with them.

“Shit, Kirk. You think it's that guy from Boston?”

“There's a good chance.”

He called the sheriff's office, and was told there wasn't much that could be done until Merlin had been missing for twenty-four hours. He wanted to scream and yell that twenty-four hours was a ridiculously long time for a kidnapper to get a head start, but instead he hung up and called Thomas Cooper. As the former fire chief, he knew the ropes.

“I'll get the word out to all the volunteer firefighters and first responders. Maybe someone will spot something. What's the vehicle?”

“A sedan. Either blue or black. I barely got a glimpse of it.”

“All right. Let's keep in touch.”

His next call was to Granger. It took just a moment to fill him in. “I think that Timothy Price kid is behind this.”

“Look, if it's him, he won't go far. He'll want to use her as leverage to draw you out. There's another possibility. Maybe he wants to be close to you by being close to someone close to you.”

“What?”

“He’s not operating from logic, is what I’m saying.”

“Okay, but what now? What do we do?”

“Try to stay calm. He’ll likely attempt to reach out to you. His ultimate goal is to engage with you. Keep your phone on, answer all calls. I’ll be there in a minute.”

“You think I should just stay here?”

Sassy, listening in, was already shaking her head “no.”

“We’re going to search for the car. I’m the only one who got a look at it.”

“That’s fine, just take your phone and don’t engage until I get there. Better yet, wait for me.”

Sassy had already bitten her thumbnail down to a nub, and now she was shaking her head even harder.

“We’re just going to drive. If I see anything, I’ll call you right away.”

“Goddamn it, Williams—”

Kirk hung up on him. Had Granger forgotten that he was a hero soldier who’d saved an entire squad?

“I’m going to go,” he told Sassy. He pulled on his coat so forcefully that the lining ripped. “I might recognize the car if I see it. If I get a call, I’ll go wherever I need to. If you’re not feeling up for this, you can hold things down here.”

She was already pulling on her sheepskin jacket. “I’m coming. I’m fine.”

“Okay. I have the app for the security cameras on my phone. If Merlin comes back, we’ll know.”

Once in the car, his phone started pinging. He gave it to Sassy to read the texts out loud to him. “Word’s getting out,” she said. “Everyone wants to know if they can help.”

“Who’s texting?”

“George Moretti, Frankie, all the Morettis. Conor Gault. Some Cooper brothers. Carly. Kendra.”

“Tell them to take the highway toward the Twin Cities and look for a

dark-ish sedan with one driver and one teenage girl. If they see anything remotely resembling that, take a photo and send it to me. Maybe I'll recognize the car. Other than that, don't engage."

She texted the message to everyone who had reached out. "Where are we headed?"

"We'll go the other direction. I think it's more likely that he went that way."

"Why?"

"Fewer cars, fewer chances of getting spotted. I don't know, it's just a hunch. I could be wrong. If we go a ways and don't see anything, we can try another direction. Shit, Sassy, I'm so damn sorry about this. I should have—" He broke off, not knowing exactly how to finish that thought. Should have known this would happen? Should have sent Merlin away? Yeah, maybe. He hadn't taken the threat seriously, and had never dreamed his brand new niece would get pulled into it.

"Aw, Kirkie, don't be so hard on yourself." With her thin hand, Sassy patted him on the arm. "Whoever took Merlin, he's gonna have his hands full. She's pretty tough."

"I know she is. She got herself all the way here, didn't she? The silver lining is that if he's after me, Merlin's not really in danger. I'll just hand myself over as soon as he lets her go."

"You'd do that?" Sassy sounded so surprised that he glanced over at her.

"Of course. Jesus. I wish he'd call already if that's what he wants. I want Merlin away from him."

"But you barely just even met her, and she can be a real pain in the ass. I think she might be even worse than me at that age."

"No," he said thoughtfully. "You were definitely worse."

She gave him a playful swat on the arm, and they shared a short, knowing grin, before returning to their intense scanning of the road and their surroundings.

“I’m glad were in this together,” she murmured. “Feels good. Different.”

“Yeah. We’ll get her back. I promise.”

“And that guy is going to learn not to mess with a Williams.”

“And you’re going to get better.”

“Hell yeah. Why not go for broke?” She gave that hearty crow-caw laugh of hers. It felt so damn good to hear it again.

“Yeah, why not? Also, we’re not going to lose touch again.” He had to include that, because seeing his sister again was doing something profound to him. It was filling in the blanks, reminding him of roots and connections and experiences that were part of him, like it or not.

“No, we sure won’t. Looks like Merlin’s getting a proper uncle.”

“Top of the line,” he agreed with a grin.

“One more thing—you’re going to tell Gina you’re in love with her.” He shot her a sidelong glance. How had she managed to slip that in?

“Uh…”

“Don’t even try. Merlin told me, and if she hadn’t, I would have figured it out too. Don’t mess it up, kid.”

“I’m not worried about that right now. First we have to get Merlin back.”

“Yes, and we will get her back. She could use a proper aunt too, you know.”

“Jesus, Sassy, she’s not signing up to be an aunt—” He broke off, because he’d spotted something on the right shoulder of the highway. Something red—Gina’s signature color. Sure, other people wore red. But that particular shade, so vibrant against her black hair and the freshly fallen snow…it had to be hers.

He veered to the side and tapped the brakes to come to a controlled stop on the icy graveled shoulder. The red item was halfway buried by snow, but it still stood out like a beacon. He climbed out of the car and knelt next to it. He recognized that knit hat with the ribbed cuff—definitely Gina’s.

He lifted it up. “This is Gina’s,” he called to Sassy as she came toward

him.

“Gina’s? Why is she all the way out here?”

“Don’t know. I tried to call her a couple times but got no answer.” An uneasy feeling was growing inside him.

Sassy shaded her eyes and scanned the shoulder. “Look at that. Tire marks in the snow. Someone went off the road.”

Suddenly sick to his stomach, Kirk saw that she was right. With his heart pounding, he followed the tracks, which went right through a snow bank and then down the slope on the other side and...holy shit, that was Frankie’s black Mustang.



## *thirty-five*

He raced down the hill, with Sassy close behind him, both of them wading through the snow, trying not to fall on their faces. The car was on its side, the front windshield mostly caved in, the driver's-side window smashed.

Sassy grabbed his arm. "It might not be safe to get close."

"If it was going to explode, it would have happened already. Look at the layer of snow. It's been here at least twenty minutes."

He shook her off and stepped closer so he could peer inside. Broken glass, gas receipts tossed everywhere, the glove compartment open, papers spilling out. Hockey gear in the back seat.

"Look." Sassy pointed to the lower left corner of the windshield. "I think Gina left us a message."

He read it, and suddenly it all felt very, very real. Both Gina and Merlin were in danger. Had his fan driven her off the road? What had happened here? "It's got to be him. Now we know it's a blue Ford. That's something."

Kirk pulled out his phone and dropped a pin on his maps app. He only had one bar, but it was enough. He sent the location to Granger, along with a text with the other details Gina had left.

"Come on, little brother. Back on the road."

This time they drove in tense silence. The knowledge that both Merlin and Gina were in the hands of this unpredictable person with an unknown

agenda was seriously terrifying.

“I read your book,” Sassy said suddenly.

“Yeah, you mentioned. Thanks, that means a lot.” Weird time for random flattery.

“I’m not fluffing you up. I’m just wondering...you said this kid knows your whole book by heart.”

“He does. He knows it better than I do.”

“Want to know my favorite parts?”

“Now?” he asked impatiently.

“Yeah, now. My favorite parts are when you testified for your friend, Keiria, and when you were just shooting the shit with your buddies. Your book isn’t about the military, not really. It’s about friendship. About not being alone.”

He shot her a look of amazement. “I never thought about it like that. You might be right. But what’s your point?” he asked impatiently.

“Well, why is this kid so obsessed with your book? What does he love about it so much?”

“Fuck if I know.”

The snowy landscape slipped past them. He focused on the road ahead, where fast-falling snow was gathering on the surface. It still amazed him that Sassy had read his book. That meant she hadn’t simply cut him out of her heart and mind.

“You know what I don’t understand?” he asked suddenly. “You read my book, but you couldn’t reach out to me in person. Why, Sassy? I don’t get it.”

Power poles flipped past them. An exit sign. More snow. “I was afraid of all the memories,” she finally said. “Like in your book. You didn’t hardly talk about your life before the Army. Barely mentioned our family at all.”

“The book was about my time in the Army.”

“It was a memoir, but like, only from the age of twenty. I’m just saying. Some stuff is hard to think about.”

Jesus. Sassy was absolutely right. He'd barely said a word about his family or his personal history in that book. He'd talked about what he'd witnessed, what he'd experienced overseas, his thoughts about it all. His friends, his Army buddies, sure. But nothing about his past. "I see what you mean. I guess we're not that different. We run from the past."

"There's only one time you mention your father in that entire book. I remember because it jumped out at me."

He glanced over at her briefly, saw her eyes bright with determination. She opened an app on her phone. "I have your book right here." She scanned through it. "Found it. One of the sergeants in your squad, Jeff Stovack."

"Stovack, sure. What about him?"

"You said he reminded you of your father. That's literally the only time you mention Poppa or really anything personal in the whole book."

Kirk frowned, still not really getting it. "You think there's a connection?"

"I don't know, but don't you have an FBI agent ready to do whatever you need?"

"Okay, have it your way. Find Granger on my phone," he told Sassy. "Ask him to find out anything he can about Jeffrey Stovack from North Carolina."

Quickly she fired off that message, just as they crossed the town lines into Braddock. He slowed down so he could keep scanning cars, but it was hard now that there were so many more. They passed a motel with a "vacancy" sign, and on impulse he swung the wheel to enter the parking lot.

"Good place to hole up, don't you think?" he murmured.

Sassy agreed. "It's worth checking out."

And sure enough, there it was—a blue Ford Focus parked in the motel's side lot. He squinted, trying to make out the license plate, and noticed a red glove wedged against the rear window.

He pulled into an empty spot and turned off the ignition.

"It's him. They're here. What should we do?" Sassy chewed on the

thumbnail of her other hand.

“Hand me my phone. I’ll text Granger.”

She passed it over with shaky hands. “I feel like throwing up.”

Kirk sent the text to Granger, then stared at his phone. “No calls or texts from Timothy. If he’s safe inside a motel room, why not reach out if I’m the one he wants?”

Sassy clenched her hands into fists, which meant that at least she wasn’t gnawing her fingernails anymore. “I might explode if I have to just sit here.”

He knew how she felt. Adrenaline was making his heart thud. He called on his old Army training to maintain his focus. But Sassy was a mess right now, and he couldn’t blame her. She needed something to do.

“Here.” He rummaged in his backseat until he came up with a wool watch cap. “Put that on, hide your hair. He probably wouldn’t recognize you, but just in case. See if you can find out what room they’re in.”

“Consider it done.” There was that Sassy fighting spirit. “I’m great with clerks and anyone who works in the hospitality industry. I know exactly how much they hate their jobs.”

She jumped out of the car and headed for the entrance. Over the double-doored entrance, the motel had strung up some very cheap-looking silver tinsel to mark the season. He could use a Christmas miracle, he thought. Surely they could happen anywhere, even at a roadside motel that hadn’t plowed its parking lot yet.

Then she turned back. “Kirk…”

“It’s okay. Go. See what you can learn.”

“Okay, but…be careful, Kirkie. I just got you back, I don’t want to lose my little brother again.” Her strained smile nearly broke his heart. Between her illness, her daughter running away, and now getting kidnapped, his poor sister had been through so much. Even for a tough woman like Sassy, it must be overwhelming.

And now she was taking a beat to let him know she cared about him. That

seemed like a miracle right there.

“You won’t. But after this is over, will you stop calling me your little brother? I’m well over thirty.”

This time her smile had more force behind it. “Like I always tell Merlin, we’ll discuss it later.”

He watched until she disappeared inside the motel, then turned his attention to scanning the numbered rooms, ground floor, and then the upper level.

On the second level, two doors from the stairwell, he noticed a telltale flash of red tucked behind the closed drapes. It had to be another sign from Gina. A hat? A glove? Would she have any winter gear left at the end of this?

A rush of images shuttled through his brain. The red dress she’d been wearing that first night he’d seen her at the Loon Feather. The scarlet scarf she’d worn at the skating party. The red sexy-Santa outfit at the SweetBitter party. Red had never been his favorite color—he much preferred blue—but in Gina’s hands, it took on new and beautiful meaning. Her favorite shade of red was deep and vibrant, full of life, sexy, full of heart. That was Gina.

Smart, too, leaving little red breadcrumbs for them to find. Red-crumbs? He was chuckling to himself when he noticed the drapes opening just a slit. Someone peered out. Merlin.

He jumped out of the car and waved to get her attention. When she locked eyes with him, he put a finger to his lips to tell her to be quiet. As she nodded, he noticed that one of her eyes looked unnaturally dark. She looked so much like her mother in that moment that he couldn’t breathe. That time their dad had lost control and dragged Sassy behind the house, and she’d come back with one eye purpling and he couldn’t do anything about it...

Cold rage flooded through him. If the guy was being violent, he couldn’t just wait for backup. It was time to take action. He had to go in now.

His phone buzzed, and another shot of adrenaline hit. Was it the kidnapper reaching out with his terms?

But no, it was Granger.

*Timothy Price's father is Jeff Stovack. How'd you know that? Parents never married, father abandoned the family. We're on our way. Do not approach.*

The hell with that.

*Anything else?*

After a few moments, the answer came.

*My quickie psych analysis: Abandonment issues. Latching onto you since you served with his dad. Sees you as a hero who can save him. Unstable. Watch out.*

Thoughtfully, he pocketed his phone. He could work with that. He knew all about needing your father's love, and learning to live without it. He could write a book about that.

Maybe he would.

But right now, he was going to take his chances with the guy who had memorized his entire first book. Timothy wanted *him*, not Merlin or Gina. So be it.

He climbed up the stairs, feeling an ache in his leg. Driving always made it hurt more. Quietly, he moved along the balcony walkway that stretched along the second level. Flattening himself against the wall, just in case things got unpredictable, he pounded on the door of the room where he'd seen Merlin.

"Timothy Price? It's Kirk Williams. I'm the one you want, right? Let the other two go and let's talk. I'm unarmed and recovering from a broken leg. I'm not going to hurt you. I'm here as your friend."

At first there was dead silence from inside, and then some scuffling sounds that made his blood freeze. What if he'd misjudged this situation completely? What if Timothy Price was just a violent psychopath who wanted to hurt as many people as possible, didn't matter who?

The door opened and he caught a quick glimpse of Gina and Merlin. He

checked Merlin's eye, and saw the extra darkness was just smeared makeup, not a bruise—that was a relief. He managed a quick exchange of glances with Gina, enough to know that she was fine.

And that she loved him.

Although he could have imagined that part; she mouthed something, but it could have been a warning, a “watch your back.” If only he had time to clarify that.

Then Timothy Price, clutching a green backpack to his chest, stepped through the door and closed it behind him. Every other time he'd seen Timothy, the kid had been overjoyed to receive a few words or an autograph. But now his eyes were wide with panic, darting here and there, unable to even settle on Kirk.

“I screwed up,” he said in a hoarse whisper. “I'm in big trouble. You have to help me.”

## *thirty-six*

Gina rushed to the window and parted the drapes to watch Kirk and Timothy Price confront each other on the balcony.

“Should we go out and help Kirk?” Merlin whispered.

Through the glass, Gina caught Kirk’s eye for a quick moment. He mouthed something to her; was it “I love you?” or “Stay back?”

“Not yet,” she told Merlin. “Come here, let’s get your hands free.”

Merlin turned her back so Gina could work on the clothesline he’d used to tie her hands together. It took a few minutes, and in the meantime Merlin’s body shook with soft sobs.

As soon as she was free, Gina spun her around and into a hug. “It’s okay, sweetie. It’s going to be fine.”

“I know it is. I wasn’t even really scared because he said all along he wasn’t going to hurt me. It’s just...it sounds dumb but I feel so bad for him. His mother died and now he’s all alone because his father doesn’t care about him. We were talking in the car and I told him about my mom and...I don’t want to be alone, Aunt Gina.”

Full-on sobs shook her slim body as Gina hugged and soothed her. She didn’t even correct the “Aunt Gina” part—the name was growing on her. “You go ahead and cry all you need, but just understand this, you’re not going to be alone. Not while your not-quite-Aunt Gina is around. ”



Merlin giggled through her tears, then wept against Gina's coat. As Gina held her, she focused on the muffled conversation filtering in from outside.

"Let's go somewhere else," Kirk was saying. "We'll figure out what do next together. How does that sound? You and me, we'll work out a plan."

When Timothy spoke, he sounded even shakier than he had earlier. Gina wondered if he was supposed to be on meds that were wearing off. She glanced around the dimly lit room in case he'd left anything behind. But of course he had his precious backpack in his arms.

"I don't know...I don't know if I can trust you...I mean, I kidnapped your niece even though I didn't mean to. You might turn me in because you're a hero and you always do the right thing."

"I won't do anything unless we both agree. How's that? Now come on, let's get out of here."

Gina held her breath, her heart racing. Kirk was clearly trying to draw him away so that she and Merlin were no longer in danger. But then he'd be alone with someone so unpredictable and troubled. Would that be any better?

"I don't know..." Timothy moaned.

Merlin finally drew away from Gina and stepped back to the window. The two of them peeked through the drapes. Timothy appeared to be frozen in place. He stared at Kirk as if he was some kind of god. But at the same time, he seemed overwhelmed by the situation he'd gotten himself into.

Kirk changed his approach, and leaned back against the walkway railing. "Gotta keep the weight off my leg," he explained to Timothy. "It'd be better to sit in a car, but it's okay. I'm here with you for as long as it takes."

Timothy stared at his leg. "You rescued a little boy. That's how you got hurt."

"I was in the right place at the right time to help him, that's all."

"You're a hero."

"You can be a hero, too. Right now. You can come with me."

"Stop!" Timothy shook his head vigorously, then kept going as if he

couldn't stop the motion. "I need to think. Stop talking about that."

"Okay, okay. We won't talk about that anymore."

Merlin tugged on Gina's sleeve. "I have to pee," she whispered. "I'll be right back."

She headed for the bathroom. This might be a good time to take a little risk. Gina needed Kirk to know there was a gun in that backpack. She waved a hand at Kirk to get his attention, but he was still focused on Timothy.

"Let's change the subject. How did Gina end up with you?" Kirk asked him.

"That was her fault. She tried to run us down. Then she hit some ice or something. We stopped to help her. That's a good thing, right?" he asked hopefully, his entire posture perking up. "Are you proud of me?"

Kirk finally looked toward the window and met Gina's eyes. She read the emotions on his face, crystal clear. *That was reckless. Brave and reckless and if anything happens to you...*

A deep thrill traveled through her, from her scalp to her toes. He loved her. It was right there in his face, his burning gaze, all that depth and passion and heart were *for her*.

*I love you*, she mouthed to him. Then she gestured to the backpack and made a gun shape with her hand. He nodded, hopefully understanding both messages, and turned back to Timothy.

A very light tapping sound caught her attention. She swung around to investigate, and realized it was coming from an adjoining door that must lead to the neighboring room. It was mostly blocked by the TV cabinet, but not entirely. She rushed over to the crack between the wall and door, and whispered, "Hello? Is someone there?"

"Is that Gina? This is Sassy. Are you okay? Is Merlin there?" Her anxiety vibrated through the wall.

"We're okay. Merlin's in the bathroom. She's fine, just shaken up."

"I have the key to this door, but the clerk said they're all blocked."

“Yeah, hang on.” She tried to push the cabinet aside, then realized she was going to need a hand. “Merlin!” she called.

The girl came running from the bathroom, her face and hair damp. She must have splashed water on herself to get a grip on her emotions.

“Your mom’s in the next room over. Help me move this cabinet.”

Together, they were able to shift it over a few feet and free the door. A moment later, Sassy was inside and wrapping Merlin in her arms.

“Thank you,” Sassy mouthed over the dark head of her child. “Come on,” she said out loud. “Let’s get out of here. I came through two rooms to get here and I have to put everything back how it was. I promised the clerk.”

“What about Uncle Kirk?” Merlin asked, still clinging to her mother.

“We called that FBI friend of his. He’ll be here any second. Kirk’ll be fine. The important thing is to get you out. Both of you.”

“I don’t want to leave him,” the girl pleaded.

Of course Merlin would want to stay right in the middle of all the action. Gina had been exactly the same at her age. But Sassy was right. This situation was too unpredictable. “Go, Merlin. I’ll stay here with Kirk. That way he has backup until Granger gets here.

“Kirk would want you to come with us,” Sassy said. “You know he would.”

Gina gave a little spurt of laughter, a release from the tension of the past couple of hours. “Maybe so. But why does it have to be about Kirk? This is about my relationship to myself.”

“What?” Sassy crinkled her forehead.

The laughter came again, bubbling out of her, until she clapped a hand over her mouth. “Sorry. Stress laughter. Just another holiday disaster. Oh my God, don’t mind me. Go, you two. We’ll be fine. Merlin, take this.” She grabbed her black scarf and wrapped it around the girl. “That beret is not enough for these temperatures.”

“Thanks, Aunt Gina.”

“I’m not...never mind.” Gina shrugged as the two of them slipped through the door. At the last minute, Sassy turned back.

“You’re good with teenagers, you know that?”

Gina shrugged. “I like Merlin. She’s a great kid.”

“I’m serious. You have a knack. It’s not that common.”

Sassy tugged her hat into place. Gina recognized that hat; it belonged to Kirk. She’d seen him wear it to the Ring-Necked Grebe cabin that blissful night, and at the Candlelight Chorus. The memory gave her a sharp pang, and suddenly she wanted nothing more than to be pressed against Kirk and wrapped in his arms.

A noise from outside caught her attention. “Go. We’ll see you soon.”

The two of them left, and Gina closed the door. She ran back to the window and her heart nearly stopped.

Kirk was backed up against the balcony railing, his hands raised in the air. Timothy was right up against him, pressing his backpack against Kirk’s chest.

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Over Timothy’s shoulder, Kirk saw Gina at the window again. He shook his head at her. He didn’t want her to come out and panic Timothy even more. The kid was all over the place. It would take almost nothing to destabilize the situation even more.

It was the mention of Jeff Stovack, his father and Kirk’s Army buddy, that had upset Timothy so much that he’d lunged at Kirk with the backpack.

But Kirk had a feeling Stovack was the key. So he kept going. “It hurts when your father isn’t there. I know how that feels.”

Timothy’s blue eyes shifted from him to the parking lot, back to him. “Your father was in the Army too?”

“No, but he barely knew I existed. Didn’t seem to care much either way. I

learned to live without him.”

“My father didn’t even write me. He never loved me. Never. Did he ever say he loved me? He was in your book. I read that part ten thousand times. Did you even know about me? That he had a son?”

“Yeah. I did know about you. He told me he had a boy. I didn’t put this in the book, but he said he wasn’t a good father. I think he felt bad about that, for what it’s worth.”

The pressure of the backpack against his chest eased. He’d felt the hard outline of the gun, and he took that threat seriously. One of Timothy’s hands was inside the backpack, and he had no idea if the firearm was loaded, or if the safety was on. He had to remove the backpack from the equation.

“Your father didn’t love you either?” Timothy asked in a small voice. “Even though you’re a hero?”

“My father spent all his time drinking, taking pills, watching TV, and getting depressed. Did he love me? I couldn’t say.”

A frown pulled Timothy’s brows together. “How could he not love *you*? You’re famous and you rescue people and everyone loves you.”

Kirk lowered his voice. “Can I tell you an important secret?”

Timothy nodded eagerly, his grip on the backpack slipping just a bit. Kirk had to get that thing away from him. He couldn’t allow that gun to go off. “What you see on the outside isn’t always what’s going on inside a person. Maybe I seem like a hero to you, but I’m just a guy trying to figure things out and do the right thing as best I can. Just like you.”

“Like me?” he said in a quavering voice.

“Yeah. Why did you come all the way to Minnesota to see me?”

“So...so...so you could tell my dad...make my dad...it’s Christmas and...you know him...maybe you could...make him be different...” he trailed off forlornly.

“Oh man.” Kirk squeezed Timothy’s shoulder, then left his hand there, the strap of the backpack under his palm. “I wish I could do that. I wish I

could have done that with my father too.”

Timothy blinked up at him with heartbreak on his face.

“That hole in your heart never really goes away. But you can find other people to love, people who will love you.”

“No. I screwed everything up.” Anguish rippled through his voice.

“We can keep talking, you and me.” Then, calmly and firmly, Kirk added, “I’m taking the backpack now.”

“No.” Timothy pulled away, but Kirk gripped the strap and wouldn’t let go.

“I can’t allow you to keep that gun, my friend. It’s not safe.”

“You tricked me!” The kid yanked at the pack, trying to snatch it back. But Kirk braced himself and held firm.

“No. We can keep talking. I’m here to talk to you. I’m not going anywhere. That’s not a trick. That’s what you really want, isn’t it? To keep talking?”

“It won’t work! Nothing will work!” With a cry of despair, he let go of the backpack. Kirk, who’d been putting all his weight into the tug-of-war, stumbled back, landed wrong on his injured leg, and fell to the ground. Pain shot through his shin, but he kept hold of the backpack.

Gina burst through the motel room door. “Kirk!” She ran toward him, but he gestured toward Timothy.

“I’m fine!” he called to her. “I got the gun. Stop him.”

She spun around toward Timothy, who was climbing onto the railing of the balcony. Without hesitating, she lunged for him and grabbed onto his waist. He tried to shake her off, but she held tight.

“Be careful, Gina!”

Kirk tried to get up, to help her, but his leg wouldn’t allow it. All he could do was watch and try to scramble closer. At least the gun was out of the picture, and Timothy was no fighter. He’d seen Gina fight with her brothers in the old days, and knew she could handle young Timothy. If it came to a

battle, Gina would win.

Part of him wished she'd let go and save herself. But if Timothy went over that railing, he'd fall two stories onto pavement. He was a troubled kid, a lost kid. He watched Gina struggle to keep Timothy from tipping over the railing. And he remembered something that Mrs. Moretti used to say. *It's our job to take care of each other, especially the young ones.* Of course Gina was going to try to save him.

Timothy's weight finally tipped the other way, back toward Gina, and he lost his grip on the railing. His body fell backwards, slamming into her, unbalancing her. She slipped and crashed to the floor, Timothy sprawled on top of her.

And then Granger was racing up the stairs, with Thomas Cooper right behind him, and Kirk was yelling, "Gina! Gina," because that was the only word he could remember and the only one that mattered.

## *thirty-seven*

Gina woke up in a hospital bed, her entire body one big ache. But she forgot about that when she turned her head to the side and saw Kirk in the bed next to hers. He was already awake, his eyes shining into hers.

“What happened?” she croaked. Her hand went to her throat. Had her vocal cords been injured or was she just thirsty?

With one hand, he pushed a dinner tray on wheels toward her. It held a glass of water covered with plastic wrap. “You got knocked out when Timothy fell on top of you, but they say you’ll be fine. You woke up for a bit in the ambulance, but they gave you a sedative and you’ve been sleeping since then. You also have a sprained ankle.”

Gina vaguely remembered a moving vehicle, an oxygen mask, a busy paramedic. She took a sip of water, which felt like heaven on her dry throat.

“You?”

“My leg is broken again. Other than that, I’m okay.”

“Oh no. Again?”

“Yeah. What’s worse is that the whole thing made the news and I’m back in the headlines. I keep telling them you’re the real hero, but the media has their narrative.”

His gloomy expression made her laugh. She sipped more water.

“Timothy?”



“He’s okay too. Medically, anyway. Legally he has some issues. Not to mention psychologically.”

“What’s going to happen to him?”

“Sassy wants him to go to jail, but Merlin insists he just needs help. He’s getting a psychological assessment now and things will go from there.”

“What do you think?”

“I can’t be objective. He knocked you out. Could have done worse. You crashed the Mustang because of him, got that cut on your forehead.”

Her hand flew to the bandage on her forehead. She’d forgotten about that.

“I was on my way to see Coach Peters when I spotted Merlin. I forgot all about the coach, and now, when I think about him, I just...” She fell silent, working out how to put this into words.

Kirk waited patiently, his bright eyes on hers.

“He doesn’t matter anymore. I’m done with letting that belittling voice of his affect me. I’m strong. I’m resilient. Merlin says I’m a badass because I crashed my car to help her. Well, Frankie’s car.”

“That’s right, you did.” At the sound of her brother’s voice, she swung toward the door. Frankie, George and her parents were filing into the room. “And I’m fucking proud of you. It helps that I have good insurance.”

A wide grin spread across his face as he strode ahead of the others and bent to kiss her on the cheek. “Mama’s a little freaked out,” he whispered.

Oh Lord. She didn’t have the energy for a Moretti drama-storm. Mama’s mascara was already smudged, her expression operatically tragic. George hovered close behind her, as if to catch her if she fainted. Her father’s hair was rumpled, his collar askew. He probably didn’t know if he should be more worried about her or Mama.

She held up a hand to slow the onslaught. “I have something to say. I love you all, but I’m exhausted and not in the mood for Moretti drama, so listen close.” When everyone went silent, she continued. “I’m not a failure because I left the training camp. I’m not a failure because I’m single. I don’t have to

prove myself by outcompeting my brothers. I'm fine as I am. I will probably never compete again. I may or may not get married. I may or may not have kids. But I will do everything I can for my students and any other young people who come into my life, because they deserve no less. Okay, I'm done now."

She relaxed back into her pillows. Her family members exchanged glances, no one exactly sure what to say.

"Wait. Not done. Kirk and I are seeing each other. Okay, now I'm done."

She closed her eyes in anticipation of the tsunami of drama. When it didn't come, she opened them again. Amazingly, everyone seemed calm.

"Fair enough," said her father.

"Thanks for telling us," said her mother.

George didn't say anything, just gave her the proudest smile she'd ever seen from him.

Frankie flashed her a thumbs up. "We'll see you back in Lake Bittersweet, kid."

After a round of "I love you's," and kisses, they all trooped out the door. It wasn't until they were on the other side, door closed, that she heard the eruption of excited squeals from her mother. "Didn't I tell you?" Mama crowed. "It's almost like I set it up this way."

She looked over at Kirk, who was clearly trying not to laugh his ass off. "Merlin's right. You're a badass."

She made a rueful face. "Don't worry, I told her I'm a terrible role model."

"Her favorite kind, I bet," he said dryly. "Anyway, I disagree."

"With what?"

"You're a fantastic role model." When she started to object, he lifted a hand. "You can't argue with me because I'm in a hospital bed."

"So am I."

"I guess that means we can't argue with each other." His gaze was so

tender that her heart melted like butter in the sun.

“I may not want to ever argue with you again, after watching you in action. My heart nearly exploded, I was so worried.”

He reached across the space between their beds, but it was too far for their hands to touch.

“Never argue? What about little things like leaving the toilet seat up? Brand of laundry soap? How hot to set the thermostat at night?”

A slow flush flooded her face as she realized what types of things he was referring to. Ordinary, everyday, living-together kinds of things. “What are you saying?”

“I’m saying that I want to be with you.”

“Be with me?” It was such a vague way to phrase it.

“Live with you, be your man, marry you if you’re so inclined.”

“So this is a proposal?” She reached for the water bottle, because her mouth had gone dry again. His eyes were shining so brightly at her that she was afraid to meet his gaze for fear of falling apart.

“No.”

Her heart dropped all the way to the pit of her stomach. *It’s fine*, she told herself. It would be crazy to think about marriage right now. She needed to focus on what came next for her in her ongoing relationship with herself. A proposal would be absurd. Was she even ready for marriage?

Actually, yes, she realized with a start, so long as it was marriage to *Kirk*. Under no other circumstances would she consider it.

Kirk was still talking.

“It’s not a proposal because I am not going to skimp out on that. I want to make it elaborate and ridiculously embarrassing. Maybe one of those public proposals at a hockey game or something. Something you’ll never forget, and when you’re telling our grandchildren about it, they’ll cringe at how corny their grandparents are, but they’ll secretly think, maybe that’s the answer because look how happy those two are together, even after all those years.”

She smiled at the sheer beauty of the picture he painted. “You sure have a way with words. Must be because you’re a writer.”

“No, it’s because of you.”

“What about Boston?”

He shifted his body against his pillows, making her wonder if he was in pain. “*You’re* my home. Wherever you are. If you want to live in Lake Bittersweet forever, so be it. I mean, if you say yes.”

“Yes to your non-proposal?”

He grinned. “Yeah, and to the real one, which will be coming when you least expect it, so watch out.” He hummed the theme song from *Jaws*.

“But wait, back up. How can you say you don’t mind living in Lake Bittersweet when you spent your whole life putting it behind you?”

He squinted down at the floor, then back up at her. “I was running from the wrong thing. It’s that voice in your head, like you said. It’s not good to run from that. Much better to turn and face it. In fact, I had a brilliant idea for my next book while I was talking to Timothy.”

“You mean, while you were saving his ass, you were also brainstorming?”

He laughed. “Sort of. I guess he fixed my writer’s block. I realized that I could have ended up like him. I could have been so shut down and unloved that I went over some kind of cliff, like he did. I want to write about that. About fathers and sons and what being a man really means.”

Wow. She loved that idea. “You know, I might even read that book.”

His smile set her entire heart on fire. What a beautiful man he was. And he was hers. He’d said so.

Gingerly, testing out each movement, she slid out of her hospital bed and onto the floor. She shoved aside the wheeled tray table and stepped toward his bed. Her hospital gown snagged on the bed rail, its tie coming loose as she tugged it. Whatever. She abandoned it and shoved the sleeves off her. Naked, she hurried the rest of the way across the hospital linoleum.

Kirk lifted up his blanket in invitation. She slid next to him, careful to avoid jostling his injured leg. “You’re going to have to explain this to the mean nurse,” he murmured.

“Not a problem. The dog ate my hospital gown, what can I say?”

He laughed as he wrapped his arms around her, so warm and cozy that she could almost imagine they were back in the Ring-Necked Grebe cabin.

“I love you,” she whispered. “Will you marry me?”

He drew in a quick breath. “You’re sure? You don’t want to wait until I get my proposal act together?”

“Nope. I’m just as competitive as ever. Let the record show that I proposed first.”

“So you won the race to the proposal, is that what you’re saying?”

“Pretty much.” She nuzzled her head into that perfect spot between his shoulder and his neck. That was what felt like home to her, that spot, where Kirk’s fresh-air scent—somehow comforting and electrifying at the same time—surrounded her.

“I’ll take it,” he murmured. “Now how about another race before the mean nurse gets here?”

And he slid his hand between her legs.

## *thirty-eight*

Transferring his entire life from Boston to Lake Bittersweet didn't take as long as Kirk had thought it would. He found a realtor to put his apartment on the market. He hired someone to pack up his possessions and ship them to Minnesota. All the network producers and his publishing contacts used his email address or cellphone number, neither of which he changed.

By New Year's Eve, the deed was done. He was a Lake Bittersweet resident once again.

He used Gina's address as a forwarding address, although they both agreed they should look for their own house as soon as possible. For now, they were staying at the Mason place because it was easier for him now that he was back on crutches.

Besides the home gym, the Mason house had plenty of usable backdrops for his TV appearances. So many people wanted to interview him after this latest "rescue" incident that he gave in and accepted a few invitations. He figured it would help keep him in the news until he got his book written.

He hadn't figured on Gina's mischievous contribution. She kept pranking him by sneaking props into the background. He got a flurry of emails asking about the tutu-wearing wooden loon on his shelf, and whether the eyeballs in the gumball machine were real or candy. Once Jet had jumped onto his laptop and it had all been a comical disaster.

Life with Gina was even more fun than he'd imagined.

His sister and Merlin were staying in the Mason house with them for now. He wanted Sassy to relax and focus on her treatment, so he made sure she never had to make dinner or do anything else that might tire her out. The heated pool had become her favorite place in the world, and she and Merlin were talking about spending next summer in Lake Bittersweet.

The thought of a Lake Bittersweet summer filled him with joy. After that, another snowy winter, and then another summer, and another, and at some point, maybe there would be a child to join them on the lake. That thought pleased him at a deep level. If they had a boy, he'd make sure his kid could always talk to him, and that he'd always listen. No way was he going to pass on the stifling silence he'd grown up with.

That was going to be a big part of his book. Some of it would draw on the folder of notes from his Army days and all those great convos he'd had during guard duty. But a lot of it would be about his father's journey into isolation, about his childhood, what he'd learned...and had to unlearn. He could hardly wait to get started.

On New Year's Eve, he stood on the Blue Drake's terrace, watching Gina laugh with her friends at the end of the pier. It was Carly and Thomas' wedding day. While deep blue light still lingered in the sky, the photographer was taking pictures of the entire wedding party. Carly and Thomas embraced each other in a passionate pose against the icy backdrop of the half-frozen lake and the pine woods beyond. Thomas' two brothers and his son lined up next to him.

On Carly's side stood Gina, Kendra and Bliss, all dressed in shades of Carly's favorite color—green. Gina wore an emerald wool dress that nipped her waist and clung to her hips. She looked incredible.

Their fourth friend, Trixie Tran, hadn't been able to come, but she'd sent a freezer box of smoked salmon for the occasion. It sat on the buffet table that awaited the guests inside the Blue Drake. From where he stood on the

terrace, he smelled all kinds of delicious aromas filtering from the kitchen. He could also hear the chatter of voices as the guests gathered. The ceremony would take place as soon as the photos were done, which hopefully would happen before the wedding party got frostbite.

As the photographer clicked away, Kirk couldn't drag his gaze away from Gina's glowing, rosy face. If he had anything to do with that expression of joy, he'd count himself a success. It was a different definition of success than what he'd operated under, but just as important, if not more so.

"Got some news." Granger's deep voice made him startle. "We contacted Jeff Stovack and he's taking some leave to attend sessions with your boy Price."

"My boy?"

"You went easy on him."

"That's a matter of perspective."

Granger snorted. "Well, the psychological report agrees with you, so I guess that's something."

"Is that your way of saying I'm right?"

Granger gave him one of the classic stern, one-raised-eyebrow looks that he specialized in.

"By the way, what are you still doing here, Special Agent Granger? There's no need for you to play head of security anymore. The case is closed. Emoji-guy in custody."

The man's face stayed impassive, but his gaze strayed to the head of the Blue Drake pier, where Bliss Gault was touching up Carly's makeup. Bliss had volunteered to handle everyone's hair and makeup for the wedding. An enormous makeup kit and a milk crate full of hair supplies sat just out of camera range.

Bliss was wearing the most toned-down outfit, a loosely fitting turtleneck dress in moss-green. She was probably trying not to outshine the bride, but with her height and slim build, she still stood out. Intellectually, he knew she



was beautiful, and she seemed to be pretty down-to-earth. But no one on this earth, no matter how stunning, had the same effect on him as Gina did, and never would.

“Bliss?” he asked, puzzled. “What about her?”

Granger didn’t answer, giving the clear impression that it was none of his business. Fair enough. He figured there were two possibilities, either professional or personal, and neither were his concern. That didn’t mean he wasn’t interested.

“Sharing is caring, you know.”

Granger lifted his eyebrows even higher. “Oh yeah?”

“Sometimes I wonder if you had another reason for coming to Lake Bittersweet. Those candy cane emojis don’t seem like enough.”

The slightest flinch of Granger’s well-controlled facial muscles told him he’d scored a hit. But no explanation followed.

“It’s all right. If you ever want to say more, I’m here. In case you get tired of the stoic tough-guy approach.”

His glance said that was unlikely, but then his gaze strayed to Bliss again, and softened. Something was going on there, no doubt.

And then Kirk stopped worrying about his FBI friend and focused entirely on Gina. The photo session had wrapped up, and the entire wedding party was hurrying back from the end of the pier, shivering and rubbing their arms to warm themselves.

That was his cue.

He balanced himself on his crutches and swung across the terrace. Being back on crutches was a setback, but he knew the rehab drill like the back of his hand by now. He also had something to fill his time—his new book.

Most importantly, he was home. With Gina. And she was dashing toward him, holding the hem of her emerald green bridesmaid’s dress out of the slush on the pier, revealing the snow boots she wore underneath.

Gotta love a midwinter Minnesota wedding.

He propped himself on his crutches and opened his arms to her as she ran up the steps of the terrace. Shivering, she nestled herself against his chest. He pulled his own jacket around her chilled body, and her skin immediately began to warm. He inhaled the scent of her hair, like spiced hot chocolate in the snow.

A breeze roughened the surface of the lake and made him remember the time Gina had capsized her canoe, over and over again, training herself how to right it again. It was nice to know that however many times you capsized, you had the possibility of righting yourself.

She tilted her head up to meet his eyes. The fire in her dark eyes always gave him a thrill, especially with that extra hint of heat when she was thinking naughty thoughts. “I have news,” she said.

“Uh...not...pregnant?”

“God no.” She laughed up at him. “Though I guess it wouldn’t be surprising, since we’ve spent all night, every night having hot—” Emmaline passed by just then, so Gina didn’t finish the sentence. Not that she needed to. He knew exactly what hotness she was referring to.

“I finally met with Amber Kenosha and her family this morning.”

“How did it go?”

“They fed me wild rice and berries, and I officially agreed to coach her so she can try to make the Olympic team. I swear, if she gets to the Olympics it’ll be even more satisfying than if I did. Did you know there’s only been one indigenous medal-winner in paddling, and that was in kayaking in 1985? I’d love to help her get there. It’d be full circle, after her grandfather taught me.”

“That sounds like a great plan. I support it all the way.”

“It means I’ll have to quit the Blue Drake. I’ll keep working part-time at the high school because I love it, but other than that, I’ll be living off savings and whatever the Kenoshas can scrape up.”

“Forget about that. You’re getting married to a celebrity, remember?”

“I mean...so are you. How many people can say they married the woman who racked up the most setups in one holiday season?”

He tightened his arms around her warm body. “Don’t remind me. When I think of how close I came to not winning the Gina-stakes—”

She burst out laughing. “In the Gina-stakes, winner takes all.”

“Oh yeah, baby.” He lowered his voice to a sexy growl. “I’m taking you all the way. And then some.”

She shivered against him. “You also broke my holiday curse. I guess three times was the charm. And just so you know...the second you crossed the town limits, you won. I just had to make it interesting.”

She nipped his neck with her warm lips, then her teeth. Lust warred with the chill of the lakeside winter air.

“I’m thinking when it comes to life with Gina Moretti, things are always going to be interesting.”

“Challenge,” she rose to touch her lips to his, “accepted.”

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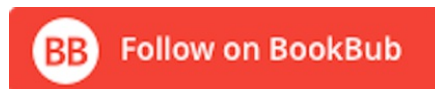
Thank you so much for reading! Bliss Gault’s story, [THE SEDUCTION](#), will be coming next in the Lake Bittersweet series. You can find all the [Lake Bittersweet novels here](#).

For more contemporary romance set in wintry locations, explore the completed [Lost Harbor, Alaska series](#) here.

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## *about the author*

**Jennifer Bernard** is a *USA Today* bestselling author of contemporary romance. Her books have been called “an irresistible reading experience” full of “quick wit and sizzling love scenes.” A graduate of Harvard and former news promo producer, she left big city life in Los Angeles for true love in Alaska, where she now lives with her husband and stepdaughters. She still hasn’t adjusted to the cold, so most often she can be found cuddling with her laptop and a cup of tea. No stranger to book success, she also writes erotic novellas under a naughty secret name that she’s happy to share with the curious. You can learn more about Jennifer and her books at [JenniferBernard.net](http://JenniferBernard.net). Make sure to sign up for [her newsletter](#) for new releases, fresh exclusive content, sales alerts and giveaways.



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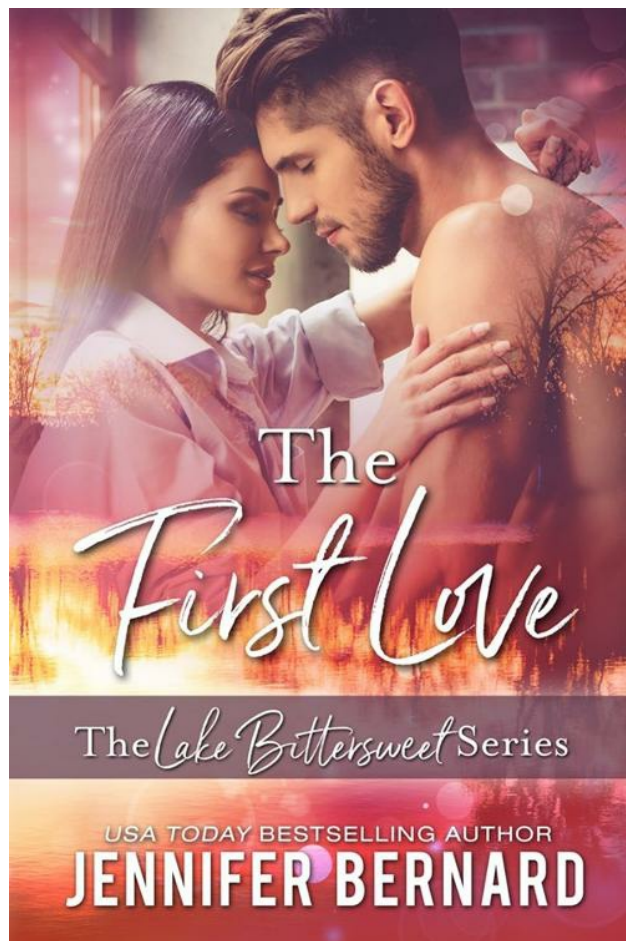
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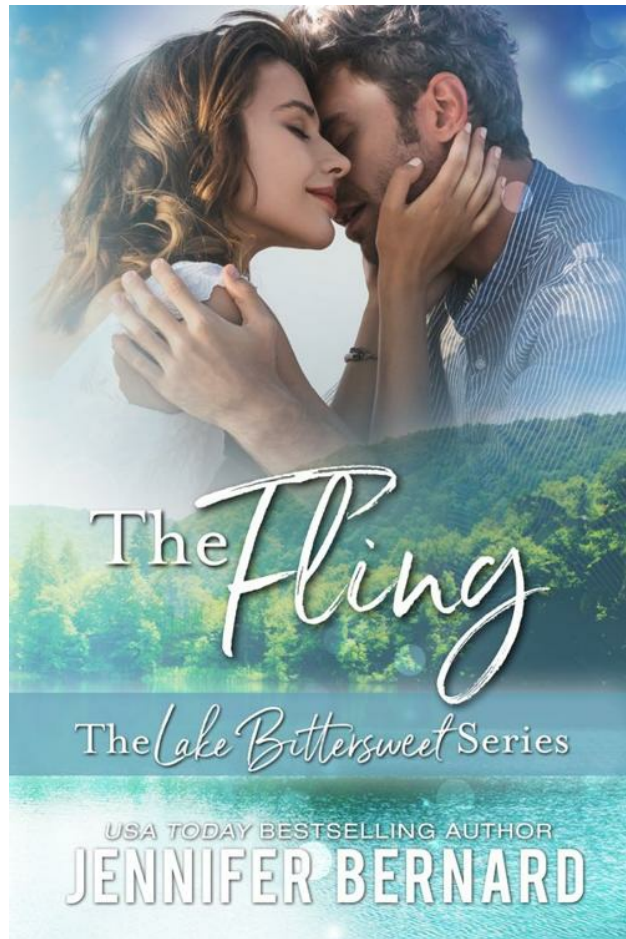
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**Lake Bittersweet**

[The First Love](#)



[The Fling](#)



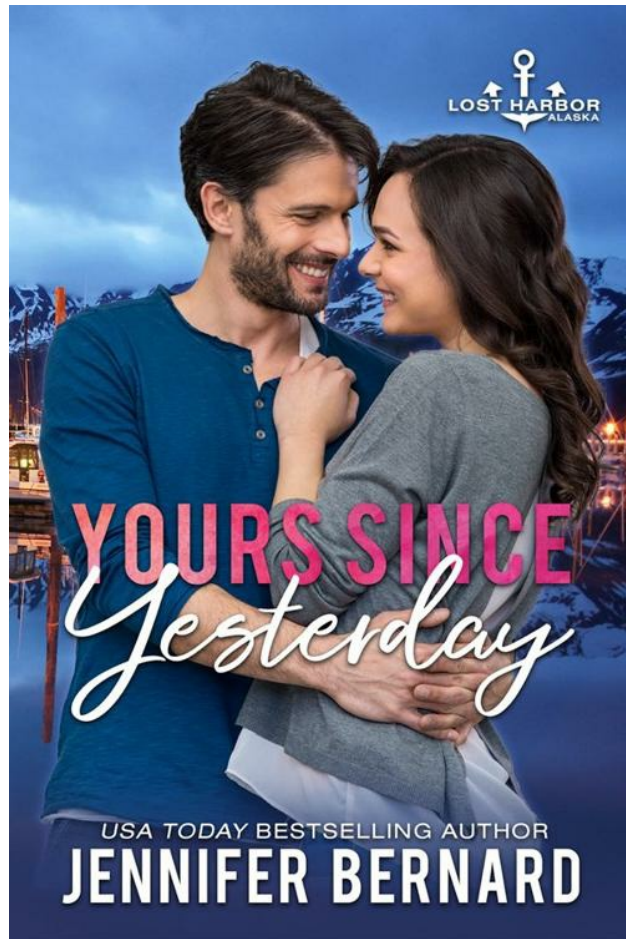
**Lost Harbor, Alaska**

[Mine Until Moonrise](#)



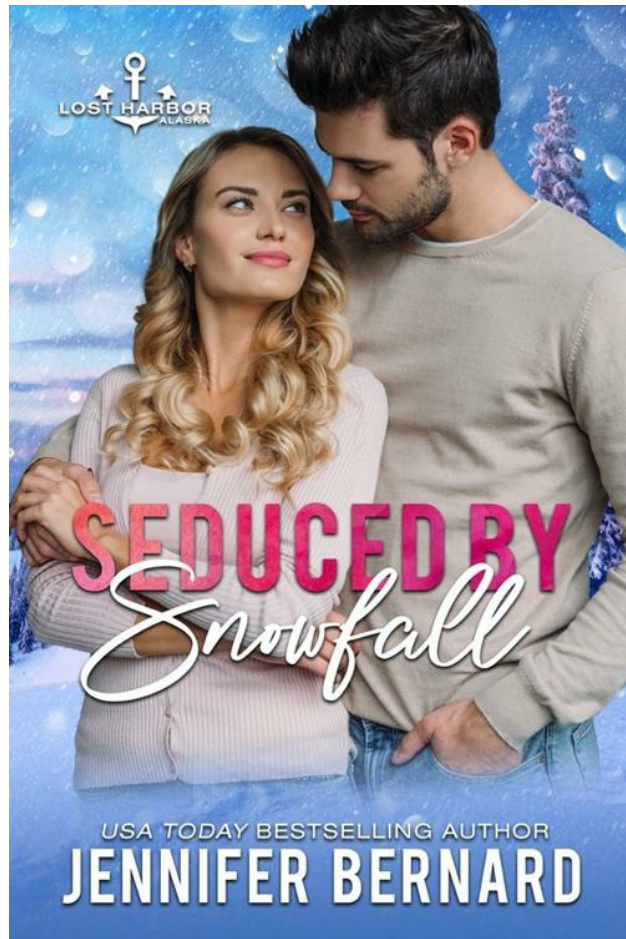
[Yours Since Yesterday](#) ~ Book 2





[Seduced by Snowfall](#) ~ Book 3

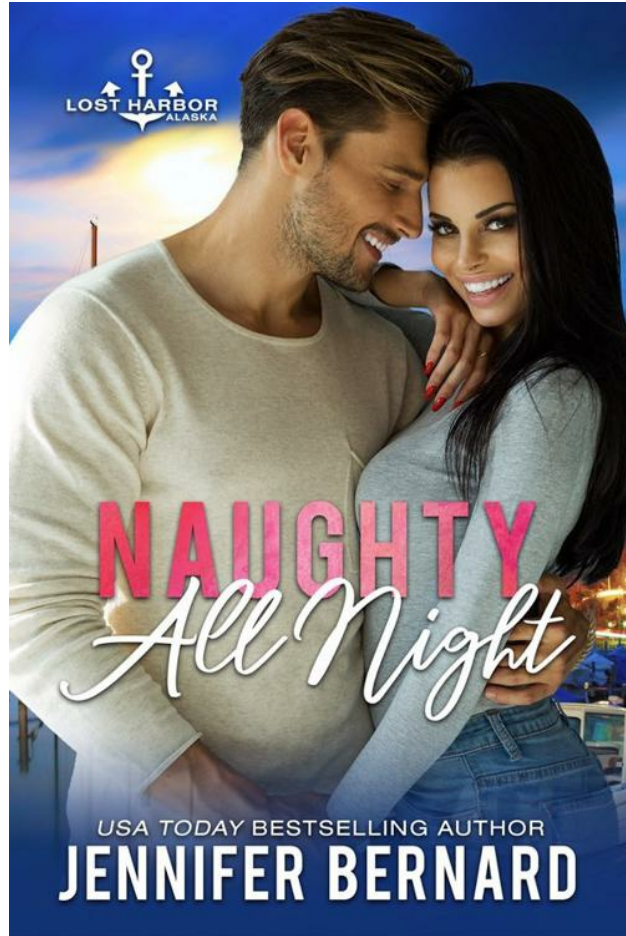




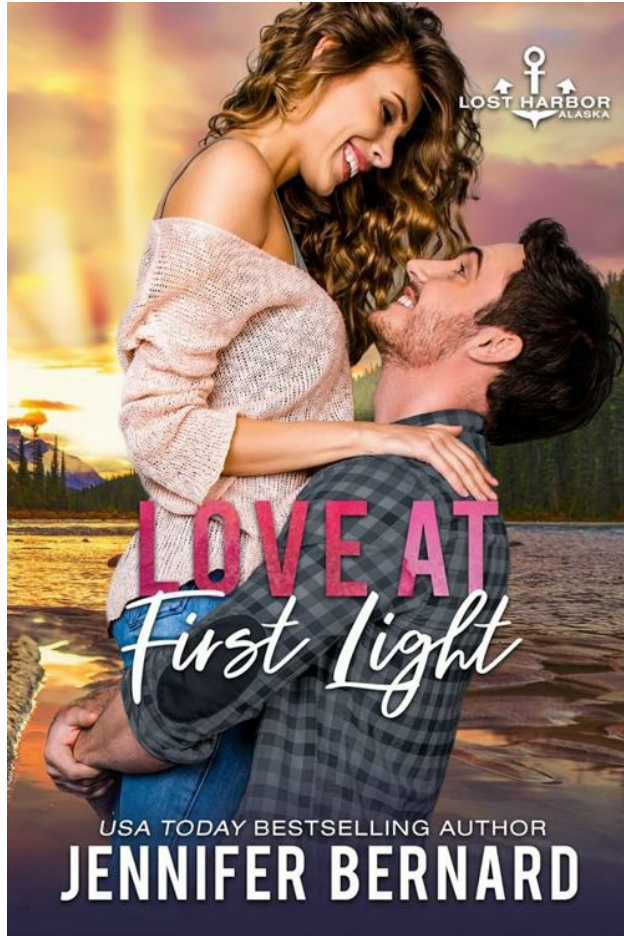
Wicked in Winter ~ Book 4



[Naughty All Night](#) ~ Book 5

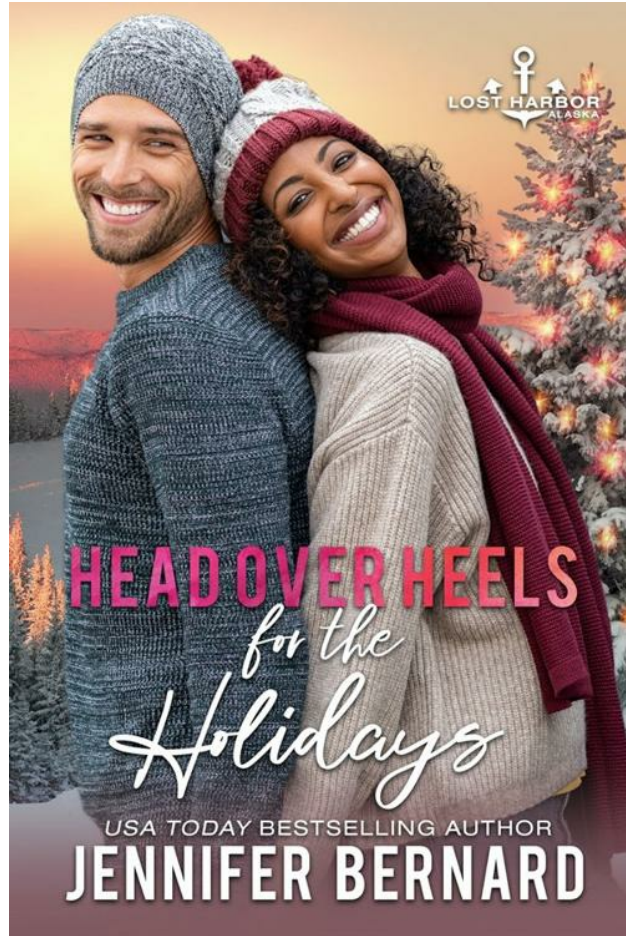


[Love at First Light](#) ~ Book 6



[Head over Heels for the Holidays](#) ~ Book 7

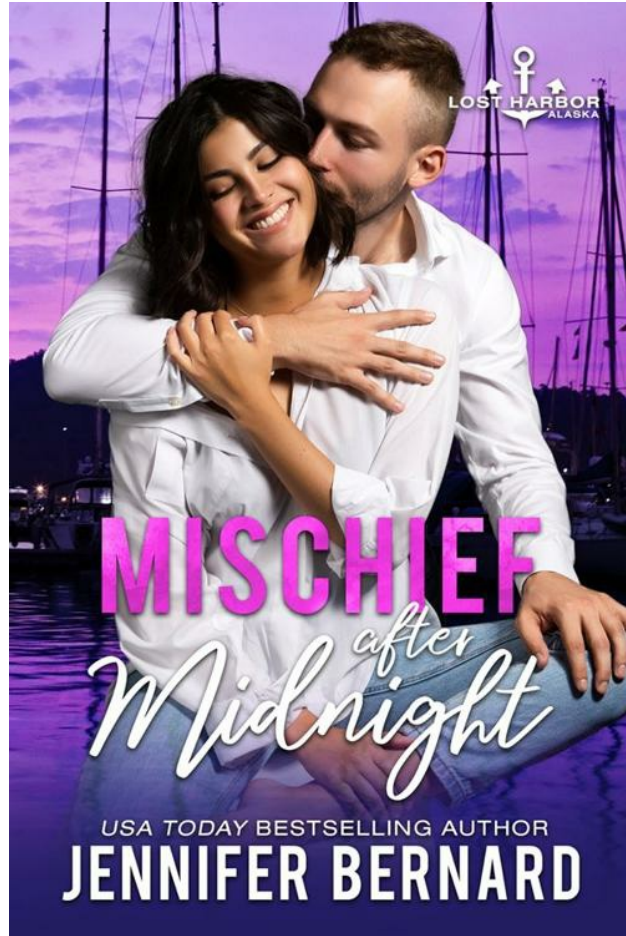




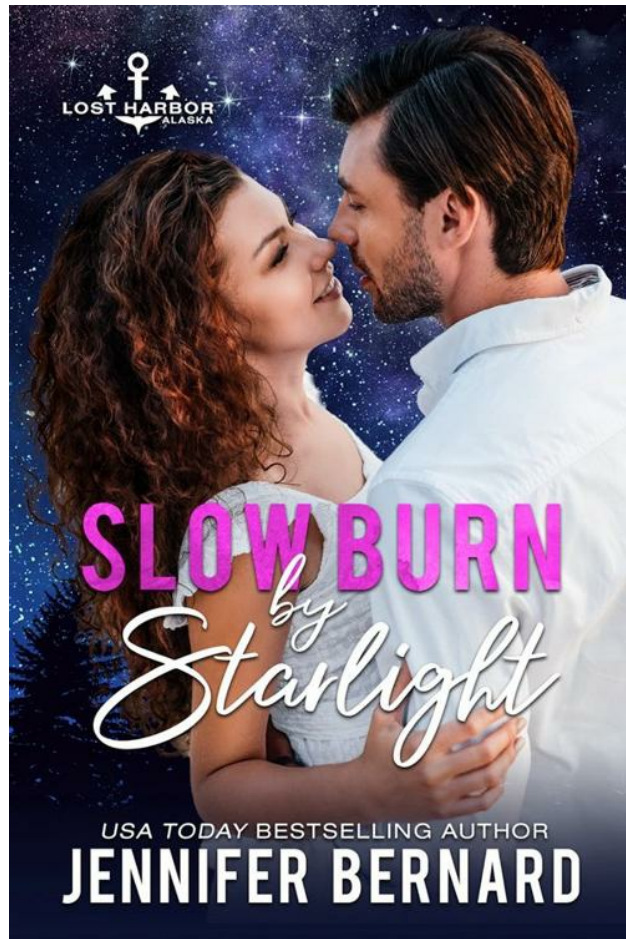
Flirting with Forever ~ Book 8



[Mischief after Midnight](#) ~ Book 9



[Slow Burn by Starlight](#) ~ Book 10

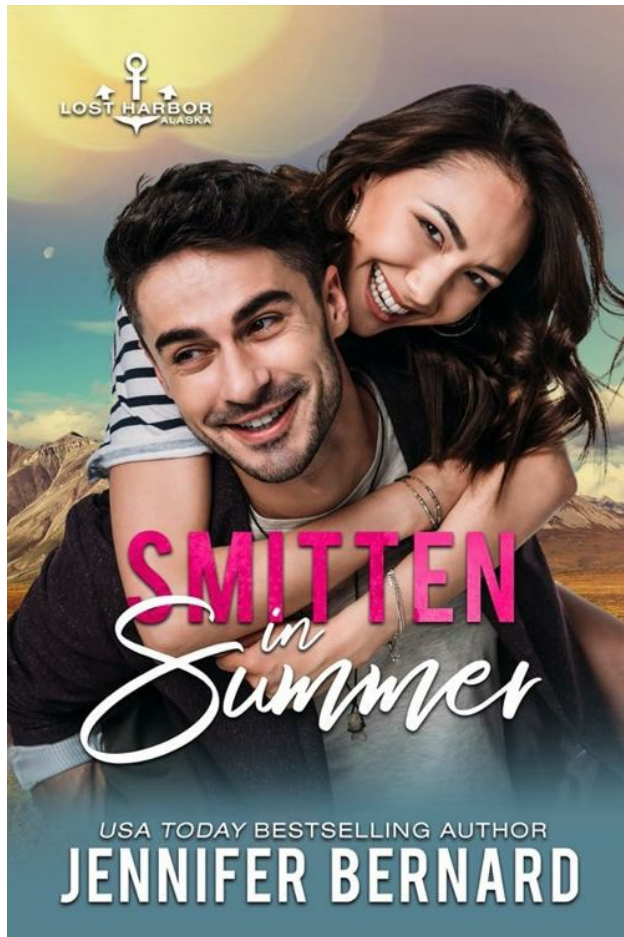


[First Kiss before Frost](#) ~ Book 11



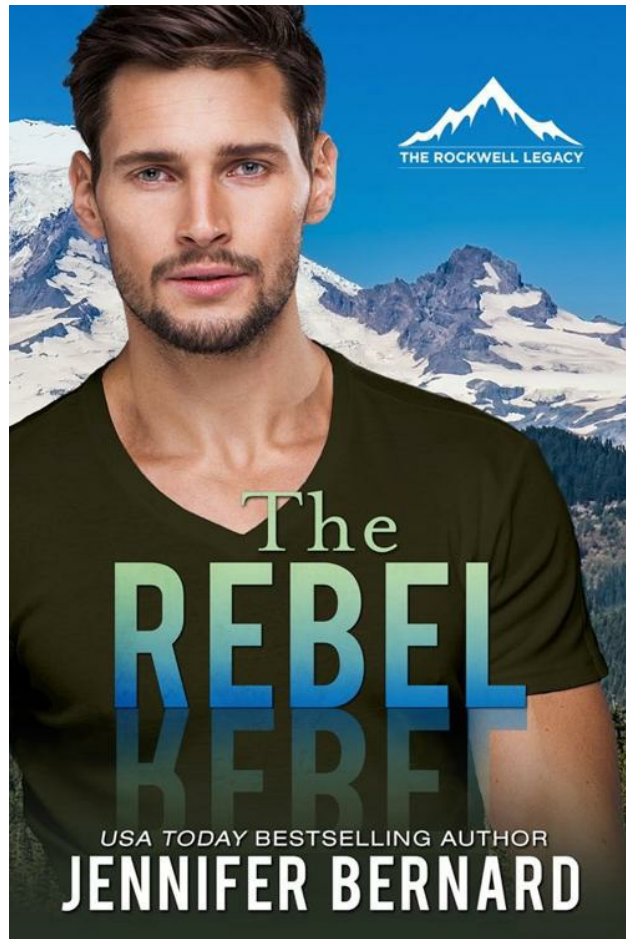


Smitten in Summer ~ Book 12

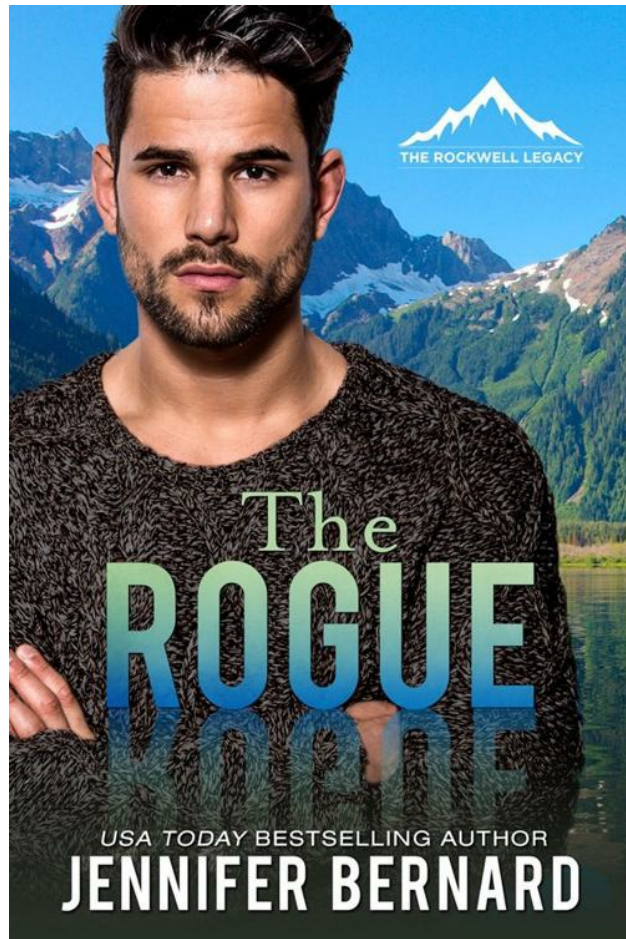


**The Rockwell Legacy**

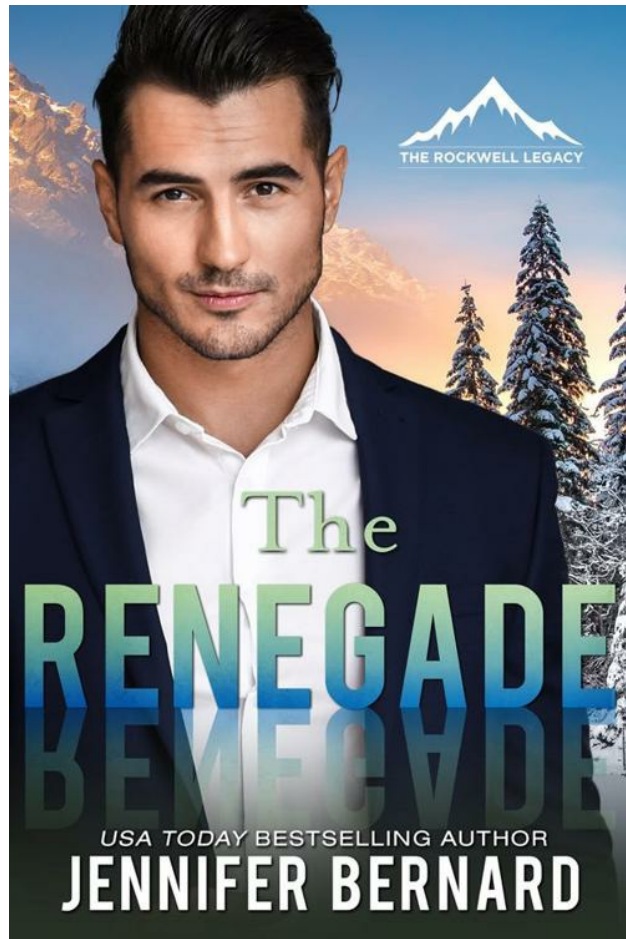
[The Rebel](#) ~ Book 1



[The Rogue](#) ~ Book 2

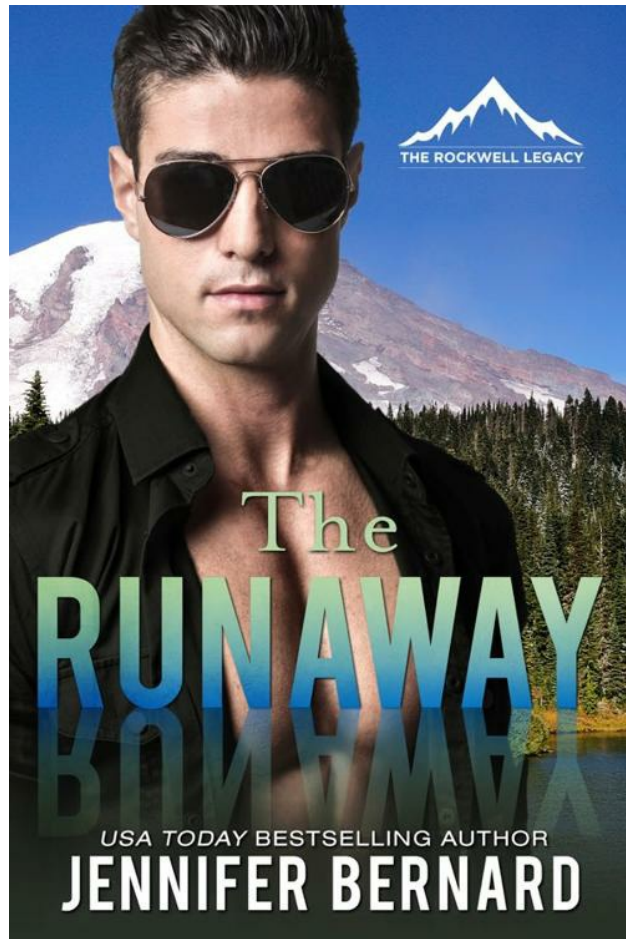


[The Renegade](#) ~ Book 3

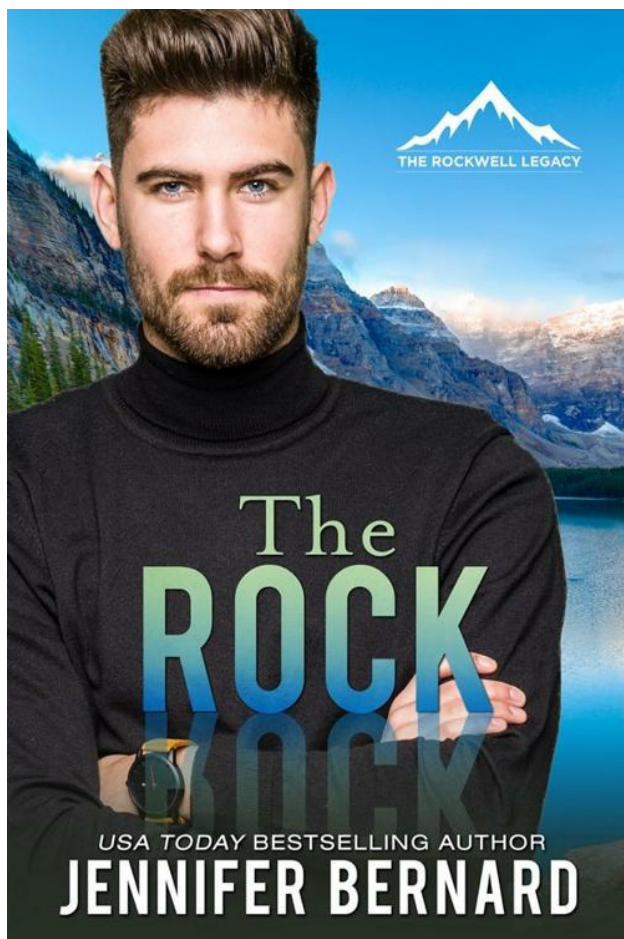


[The Runaway](#) ~ Book 4





[The Rock](#) ~ Book 5



**Jupiter Point ~ The Hotshots**

[Set the Night on Fire](#) ~ Book 1

[Burn So Bright](#) ~ Book 2

[Into the Flames](#) ~ Book 3

[Setting Off Sparks](#) ~ Book 4

**Jupiter Point ~ The Knight Brothers**

[Hot Pursuit](#) ~ Book 5

[Coming In Hot](#) ~ Book 6

[Hot and Bothered](#) ~ Book 7

[Too Hot to Handle](#) ~ Book 8

[One Hot Night](#) ~ Book 9

Seeing Stars ~ Series Prequel

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**The Bachelor Firemen of San Gabriel Series**

**Love Between the Bases Series**



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