A romantic close-up of a man and a woman about to kiss. The man is shirtless and has a beard, looking towards the woman. The woman has blonde, wavy hair and is wearing a dark blue top, with her hand near her face. The background is dark and out of focus.

# CROSSING EVERY *Line*

A BROTHERS THREE ORCHARD STANDALONE

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

# TARYN QUINN

# CROSSING EVERY LINE

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A GRUMPY SUNSHINE ROADTRIP ROMANCE

A BROTHERS THREE ORCHARD STANDALONE

TARYN QUINN



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*Original ebook released by Loose Id as "Suspended" February 2013.*

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## **Falling in love with his stepfather's daughter was off-limits...**

Shane Justice's life fractured in a moment of grief. Then at the reading of his stepfather's will he realized that was only the beginning.

The company he helped build was bankrupt.

The man who raised him like a son lied to him for years.

His best friend—also a liar.

After playing it safe all his life he's left with an empty bank account and a half ownership stake in a bed and breakfast over 3000 miles away.

With a stranger.

His stepfather had a daughter he never mentioned. And now he and Kendall were expected to run The Heron together.

In a small town in upstate New York of all places.

To make matters worse, she is exasperating, sexy, and drives him to the brink of insanity. He can't stop thinking about her, wanting her, or touching her.

They have nothing except one another and a passion that defies all sense and logic.

Except Kendall has a secret too.

Will this be the one that crosses every line?

**Author's Note:** *While this story doesn't take place in Brothers Three Orchard, Shane and Kendall's best friends' story sure will!*

*\*\*This is a re-release. The original book, **Suspended**, was published in 2013 and has been lightly edited.*

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# AUTHOR NOTE

This was one of our earlier works under the title, *Suspended*. It was a small press release under Loose Id which has since closed. Since we got the rights back we were excited to be able to use some of the characters in this book for future novels!

It's been updated lightly for some town references to fit in with our novels set in upstate New York.

Kain and Bells will return in our [Brothers Three Orchard](#) series!

# ONE

The paper in her hands trembled. Creases from the number of times she'd read and reread this single sheet of paper left it looking old and worn. But the summons was only two days ago and had come as a complete surprise. Lawrence Justice had been absent since her kindergarten graduation. Her only memory of her father was broad shoulders and blond hair so light it looked like goose down.

The same hair she saw in the mirror every morning.

Kendall Proctor adjusted one of the many pins it took to contain her hair into the knot at the base of her neck. Instead of highlights like most of the female population, she'd added in hints of honey gold to cut the startling near-white color. Ever the reminder that she was so very different from her mother's dark, Italian features.

She jammed the paper back into her bag and swung her feet out of the compact car she'd rented. Monterey, California was a far cry from Winchester Falls, New York. Even the scent of water on the air was different—briny and metallic somehow. Maybe she'd sneak away after the reading of the will and find the coastal road she'd read about during her eight hours in planes and airports today.

Three cars lined the moss-ridden half wall that hugged the hillside property. She climbed the steep walk-up, her shoes clicking on flagstone. Worrying the strap of her purse, she ducked under the trumpet-shaped blooms that hung from an arbor at the end of the path. Honeysuckle and jasmine scents drew her ever closer to the massive, dark house. She didn't know quite how that could be possible with all the windows, but it was. It looked like a sterile page from *Architectural Digest*.



The wide wraparound porch was slate-gray stone filled with shadows. Nothing said welcome. Not even a happy little wreath on the door.

Not that this was a happy-little-wreath kind of place. Probably too passé for the California set. She had one for every season. What did that say about her?

She stopped at the base of the stairs. What the hell was she doing here? The letter burning a hole in her purse was a formal request for her attendance at the reading of Lawrence Justice's will. She wasn't even aware her father remembered her name, let alone put her in his will.

Hell, the only reason she knew he'd passed away was because of the letter. He might've been a big name on the West Coast, but in Winchester Falls, New York, he damn well hadn't rated a news bulletin.

She tucked the unruly lock of hair behind her ear once more. This was a mistake. She should turn around and go back to the airport. Sitting by the ocean would be better. Another eight hours in the airport would be better. Anywhere but here. She wanted nothing to do with the man who skipped out on her mother—skipped out on her without even a good-bye. The only good thing he'd done for them was give them the Heron. She didn't want anything else from him.

But no, her mother had impulsively bought a plane ticket—nonrefundable, of course—to send her one and only baby girl to see what Kendall's rich father had left her.

She rubbed the tip of her middle finger between her brows, wishing away the brewing headache. She didn't give a rat's ass what her father had to say. As far as she was concerned, graveside admissions were bullshit. She'd never been his daughter in any way. Why on earth had he decided to add her to the will?

If the Heron weren't in such financial distress, she would have told the lawyer who'd contacted her to take a dive off the nearest cliff. And there were plenty in Monterey to leap off. Again, her mother had fielded that call.

She'd been too busy on the trawler. Winchester Falls had a wealth of perfect spots for fishing. The lake had even been mentioned in a few fishing magazines. It was the only thing bringing any money into the bed-and-breakfast these days. All her dreams of lovely rooms and community evenings around the dinner table had been buried under fishing tackle and bait.

She sighed and smoothed her hand over her hips to straighten any

wrinkles in her suit. The flight had been eternal, and the flight back tonight would be even worse. But she couldn't afford a hotel room. Not when her mother had cleaned them out to buy the absurdly expensive ticket to the frigging West Coast.

Kendall took a deep breath and buttoned the hidden hook of her lilac jacket. The suit felt like a straitjacket. She was getting too used to cargo pants and T-shirts. If she kept this up, she was going to have to turn in her girl card.

She lifted her gaze to the porch again and found disconcerting dark eyes studying her from the shadows. "Hello." When he didn't say anything back, she swallowed. "I'm Kendall Proctor."

He stepped forward, and the diffused light gave way to a furrowed brow with a week's worth of stubble shading a strong jaw. Everything was so angular and harsh—everything but his mouth. No, his mouth was lush in comparison. Even with the unwelcoming pinch to it.

She squared her shoulders and climbed the steps. "I hope you're not the welcome wagon."

"Who are you?"

"I just told you."

The front door opened, and a tall man in an expensive gray suit stepped out. "Ah, there you are. Miss Proctor, I presume?"

Kendall nodded.

He held out his hand and helped her up the last step. "I'm Jonas Murray, Mr. Justice's lawyer. We've been waiting for you."

She spared a glance at her phone. "I'm not late."

"No, we're just anxious to get started. It's been a long week."

"Right, I'm sorry." She followed the lawyer inside but could still feel the man's deep, dark eyes on her. What? Did she have a stain on her skirt? On her jacket? She glanced down and paused at the entryway to the house. Dark wood floors spread as far as her eye could see. More dark wood climbed up stairs and around the doorways like a greedy vine. All of it spoke of money and the obvious influence of Frank Lloyd Wright.

California crawled with his houses. The few design courses she'd been able to take were filled with the fascinating architecture. But this didn't have the same magic she'd imagined while poring over her textbooks. She'd been in museums with more warmth.

She was led into what had to be a study. More of the dark wood flowed from floor to built-in bookcases. A huge conference table in the same hue

dominated the space. Hadn't they ever heard of complementary colors? The constant darkness was claustrophobic. Mr. Murray waved her to a chair beside a sandy-haired man in his fifties who looked like he'd just stepped off a construction site. The lawyer settled opposite her with a fat sheaf of papers before him and a smaller stack to his left.

She lowered into the chair. The brooding grouch from the porch came in finally and settled into the chair beside her. Oh, why did he have to sit there? Intensity rolled off him like a scent. The tips of her fingers tingled in response, and a rush of goose bumps swamped her skin.

Not good.

Mr. Murray cleared his throat. "Thank you all for coming. I know it's been a very difficult few days. Lawrence's sudden passing left all of us a little stunned."

She glanced at the stranger beside her. His jaw clenched once, and his hands went very still on the table. He was almost wooden both in stance and lack of emotion. His face was completely blank. His eyes, however, were not. No, they burned with anger. Just who was he?

"I have his will. It was very specific. That's why there are only a few of you here to witness the reading."

"We're all very interested in the cryptic letter that was sent out, Jonas," the sandy-haired man said.

"I know, and I'll explain everything in a moment. Now, would you like me to read the will aloud?"

"I can't wade through that legal mumbo jumbo, Joe."

The slip of familiar in the sandy-haired man's voice gave Kendall pause. Maybe they weren't as distant as it felt. Everything about this mausoleum screamed cold and remote. She may not remember much about her father, but she did recall a booming laugh and charm. So much charm.

The lawyer looked at her. "Miss Proctor?"

"The gist of things would be fine."

"Shane?"

Shane. So that was his name. He nodded curtly. Her gaze drifted to the subtle tap of his forefinger on the conference table. Not so stony. She had the strangest urge to cover his hand and curl her fingers around his. Ridiculous, of course. He'd probably snap her hand off at the wrist.

"Lawrence had a new will notarized six months ago, so there are some changes to the terms you knew before."

“What kind of changes?” Again, the sandy-haired man spoke up.

“Justice Construction has been through some ups and downs. The latest venture has hit a few...hitches.”

Shane stopped tapping. “What kind of hitches?”

Kendall dropped her hands into her lap and twisted them tight. Shane’s voice was biting and hoarse. What exactly had she walked in on?

The lawyer straightened his spine. “Financial hitches, Shane. There’s no good way to say this. Justice Construction will be dissolved to pay back taxes, the double mortgage on this house, and the company’s outstanding debts.”

“What?”

“Now, Gerry. Hear me out.”

The sandy-haired man—Gerry—stood so fast the chair scraped over the polished floor. “What’s to hear out? What do you mean dissolved? I’ve given twenty years to this company!”

“I understand that. Larry did everything to make sure there would be no burden to the shareholders. But I’m sorry, that’s all he was able to do. There will be just enough to cover the sale of the business and the house.”

Shane stood and paced. She couldn’t drag her eyes away from him. *Paced* was too passive a word; no, he was prowling. His jaw was granite, and his eyes blazed with a rage that crackled in the room.

Kendall turned back to the lawyer.

As if reading her mind, Mr. Murray turned his gaze to her. His voice slid back into the professional and distant lawyer mode. “Miss Proctor, you also have one of Mr. Justice’s remaining properties.”

“No.” Kendall’s lungs emptied, and a thick buzz filled her head. All her work. Her home—everything she’d done to keep her mother safe and taken care of. “No, you can’t.”

Mr. Murray lifted his hand. “No, you don’t have to sell the Heron.”

She pressed her forehead to the cool wood. Relief opened the buckles that had snapped around her chest. She dragged in a breath.

“As Lawrence’s sole blood relative, you will share the property with Shane Justice, his son.”

Her head snapped up, and Shane came to a stop behind her chair. Blood relative? Wouldn’t his son be a blood relative?

He swung her chair out. Kendall gripped the arms as it tilted, then slammed her down to face him.

“Who the fuck are you?” Hazel eyes bore into her. The gold seemed to glow with all the seething anger that was boiling inside him.

Her skin buzzed as if energy were roiling out of him in its purest form. “I’m Lawrence Justice’s daughter,” she whispered.

He hovered over her. “He doesn’t have a kid. He only has me.”

“You’re my brother?” She recoiled to the back of the chair. No. No, he couldn’t be her half-brother.

He reared back as if she’d slapped him. “No. I’m Larry’s stepson, but he raised me as his.”

Her father had left her but stayed for this man? She hadn’t thought she could feel any more pain when it came to Lawrence Justice, but she’d been wrong. God, so wrong.

Shane looked up at Mr. Murray. “She has no hold on anything of Dad’s. I didn’t even know about her.”

“That’s because he left us when I was five.” She pushed Shane out of her space and stood. He was too close, too big, too everything. She focused on Mr. Murray, his face emotionless, his eyes steady. “Lawrence bought that house for my mother.”

“Yes, he did. But Lily Proctor never signed the deed over into her name.”

Kendall dug her fingertips into her brow. “No,” she whispered. It would be just like her mother to pull a stunt like that. She’d loved Lawrence and having his name on something would be the ultimate way to keep him tethered to her. *Crap. Crap. Crap.* As with everything that had anything to do with her father, Kendall would be paying for it.

“It would be too much to hope for that he left us the Heron.”

“No, not too much to hope for,” Mr. Murray said kindly.

She fell back into her chair. “Thank God.”

“But it’s a shared property with Shane.”

“What?” Both of them shouted and stared at the lawyer.

“He can’t.” The Heron had been the one constant in her life. “I’ve run the bed-and-breakfast since I was sixteen. That’s my life!”

“Larry and I did everything we could to make sure the two of you would be taken care of. This is all he could do for you, Shane.”

And as usual, all Lawrence did was take from her. She crossed her arms over her churning gut. She wanted to curl into a ball. Even twenty-two years later her father managed to take everything away from her.

Again.

Shane Justice backed into the bookcases that lined his father's meeting room. Justice Construction never had an official home base. His dad liked the informality of his house with a touch of the grandeur to show off how well they'd been doing. Except it was all smoke and mirrors.

Gerry sat heavily. The fight had drained out of him. Gerry had followed his father into every insane scheme and now had nothing to show for it. Shane had known they were in a little bit of trouble, but his father would've turned things around. He always did.

It was the way of things for Larry Justice. Gerry had believed in him, and Larry had never let him down. Until now. Shane listened with half an ear as Jonas listed all the properties that were sold and the debt that would be absorbed. The only thing left was the lakeside B and B in Winchester Falls, New York. And a woman he'd never heard of. He'd have happily killed to be his father's flesh-and-blood son, but Larry had never made him feel less. And here she was staring back at him with rum-colored eyes and his father's angel-white hair. As frustrating as Larry Justice could be, one thing was always apparent. Family was his focus.

The fact that he had a daughter he'd never spoken of was insane.

Some of what Jonas was saying finally sank in, dragging him from the mystery woman sitting at the table.

If the house was double mortgaged, there was no way to cover the expenses. He looked at his lawyer. Through every contract, Jonas had been there to keep his father on the straight and narrow. Larry with a wild idea was a dangerous thing. He could convince anyone to follow him.

All except Jonas.

He was the only source of reason in their life.

Kendall Proctor's wide, shattered eyes flamed up the anger brewing inside him again. More secrets, and more lies from his father.

When Gerry stumbled out the door, Shane whispered, "Fuck," and followed. "Gerry, wait."

Gerry got as far as the front door before he stopped, his hand on the doorknob. "Don't, kid."

Shane shrugged out of the suit jacket and tossed it on the bench beside the

door. “Dad fucked up. But you know he always tried to fix things.”

“He didn’t talk to me about this at all, Shane. Not one fucking word.”

Shane closed his eyes. “He didn’t talk to either one of us.”

“I’m fifty-eight fucking years old. It’s too late for me to start over.”

“Come back inside. There’s got to be something more to this will thing.”

Gerry shook his head. “I need air and a smoke. I’ll be in touch.” The door slammed behind him.

“God dammit, Dad. What the fuck were you thinking?” He yanked at the noose around his neck. Formality was fucked at this point. He rolled up his sleeves. None of this made sense. He headed back into the room. “Jonas, I need more of an explanation. Obviously Dad talked to you.”

Jonas’s friendly eyes flicked into lawyer mode. No emotion, not even a clue to the knowledge he held. “Larry didn’t want you to know the specifics, Shane.”

Shane pointed at Kendall. “Evidently. A fucking daughter?”

“Do not point at me like I’m a dog, Mr. Justice.”

He looked down at her. All hints of the docile woman who had been shaking beside him during the will reading were gone. “You don’t get to talk yet.”

She stood. “Okay, that’s enough. I’ve been sitting here listening to you people talk about taking my home—the only thing that man ever gave me, mind you—like you have any right to it. Where the hell were any of you for the last twenty-two years?”

Shane stalked forward until they were millimeters apart. “Just because my father paid your mother off with a house doesn’t mean you have—”

The *crack* of the slap across his cheek echoed through the room.

Her eyes filled with tears as she covered her mouth with her hand.

His cheek burned, and his anger struggled around in his chest like a wild animal. It would be so easy to take every ounce of pain out on her. She was nothing to him. “You get one freebie, Miss Proctor.”

She flung her shoulders back. “That’s my mother you’re talking about. She loved your useless excuse for a father. He’s the one who left us.”

*Lock it down.* He stared at her. She was a buck fifteen with her clothes on and didn’t even reach his chin, but she might as well have boxing gloves and a title belt around her waist. Men twice his size shrank from him in a fight, and this little one wanted to take him on? “There must have been good reason.”

She stumbled back a step, but her dark eyes never lost their fierce glare. That one little step sliced at him.

Dammit.

He took a step back of his own and focused on Jonas's surprised face. Shame crawled up his shoulders and settled like a blanket, stamping out most of his rage. This wasn't her fault, and his mother would have had his hide if she'd ever heard him speak to a woman like this.

"I want to read the will myself."

Jonas pushed the smaller stack of papers his way. Instinct made him shake his head. "No, I want the full document, not the layman's-terms version."

"You might be good with contracts on the surface, Shane, but this is all courthouse jargon."

Every job they'd ever had that had gone hinky gave him the same tingle in his palms. "I don't care."

He could see the indecision in Jonas's face and knew he'd made the right call. There was something in the papers, even a small thing that would help make sense of this ridiculous will. Jonas laid his hand on top of the stack, then finally let it go.

"I want to read it as well."

He turned to Kendall. "This is none of your concern."

"Considering you now own fifty percent of my house, it sure the hell is my concern." Spite and anger coated every word.

Jonas gathered his briefcase and jacket. "I'll leave you to it. Call me if you need anything explained."

Shane had trusted Jonas in every way but this. If his father asked Jonas to do something, he'd do it. No matter how close Shane and Jonas had become, he knew the man's loyalty was with Larry. Even in death.

He followed Jonas out, stopping him at the door when they were alone. "Why didn't he want me to know?"

"You know your father. There was always a reason for the things he did."

Shane stared down at his too-new shoes as they blurred before he put the grief aside, letting anger back out. At least anger got things done. "He should have trusted me."

"Please don't press this issue, Shane. Let it go."

"I can't."

"What he did was for the good of his employees and to make sure you



could have your freedom someday.”

Shane’s shoulders stiffened. “What does that mean?”

“Lawrence knew about your furniture business. He knew your heart wasn’t in the construction business.”

He stepped back, folding his arms, digging his thumbs into his chest to keep from shaking Jonas. No one knew about his workshop. The pieces he sold were mostly out of state, out of his father’s realm of influence. They were just his, built and sold under his mother’s last name—without the charm and easy salesmanship of Lawrence Justice. He’d wanted—no, needed—to prove something to himself. Not because he was a Justice of California.

“This is a way to start over. Away from all this. Lawrence’s people will be all right. I promise.”

Shane frowned. “What does that mean?”

Jonas shook his head. “Just think about it.”

Shane closed the door after him. He needed a drink, needed a way to extinguish a little of the insanity that crawled under his skin. Everything he’d ever known was being taken from him. He wandered the lower level and found himself in his father’s study. The heavy scent of leather and the tang of lemon were so familiar they were as effective as a blow. He grabbed the decanter of whiskey off the bar and fled the room.

He found her in the conference room. The heavy mass of curls that hung over the back of the chair surprised him. Her head was resting on her hand as she flipped through the papers. She seemed at ease, until he noticed the fingers gripping her hair. His palm tingled in reaction.

A fondness for long hair could be ignored. Plenty of women had long hair, but the pale, almost white strands shot with gold lured him closer. Like moonlight and sunshine rippling together. He banged the decanter down on the table. The fanciful thoughts died with the clatter.

She jerked to a sitting position, steel rebar replacing her spine. She didn’t turn to face him. Instead, she pushed a half dozen pages down the table. “When Mr. Murray said this was full of legal jargon, he wasn’t kidding. It’s like reading Shakespeare with a side of Latin for footnotes.”

He swallowed a biting comment and sat down next to her. None of this was her fault, and he had to control himself. The only way they could make it through this mess was to cooperate with each other. “We’ll have to do the best we can.”

“Yeah, well, I forgot my legalese decoder ring.” She didn’t meet his gaze,

keeping her eyes on a spot near his hands.

“Why do you care?” He fisted his fingers. “I mean, I know why I do.”

Her attention finally latched on to his face. The fierce light was back in her eyes. “I don’t want you near me or mine, Mr. Justice.” The shaky woman from earlier was gone as if she’d never been.

“Then it’s in your best interest to find what I need to know, Miss Proctor. Because if this will be right, you and I will be living out of each other’s pockets until we come to a decision on what to do with our property.”

She pressed her lips together in a tight line before relaxing. Her mouth was a touch too wide, her lips soft and distractingly full. It was a far too sinful mouth to belong to such a tiny, fine-featured woman. Add in the hair, and she could have climbed out of a mythology textbook. The sirens had nothing on her power. The tip of her tongue flicked out to wet her lips as if she knew where his thoughts had gone.

He turned away, focusing on the papers in front of him. “Until we figure out what’s going to happen, you’ll be my guest.”

“No, I have a flight to catch in three hours.”

“Then change it.”

“They’re nonrefundable tickets,” she said between clenched teeth.

“Then we have a problem.”

“No”—she stood—“you have a problem.”

He clamped his fingers around her wrist. She could walk out the door, and he would follow her—eventually. He’d have to find the house they now co-owned and figure out what to do with it. But he needed to settle the will first. And he didn’t trust her not to do something stupid back in Fuckbum, New York, that would screw him over.

Hell, she could sell the house to a friend for a dollar and give him fifty cents if she was crafty enough. He didn’t know anything about Winchester Falls to know what the housing market was like. “How can you trust that I won’t find a way to screw you out of your house, Miss Proctor?” He could feel her pulse fluttering wildly under his fingers. He had her on the hook. Instead of forcing his hand, he let her spin her own worst case. He could see it in the set of her shoulders, the way she stiffened.

Then her eyes went flat and cool. “You’re good.” She stared at his hand pointedly. “Scare tactics with a side of adjective changes. Better men than you have tried to manipulate me, Mr. Justice.”

He let her go and sat back, crossing his arms. No, she was no pushover.

Charm had been Lawrence's gift. And while they were father and son in all but blood, he definitely didn't have that particular talent. Shane had been responsible for the work done after the schmoozing. He held the respect of over eighty men on various crews, but it had been through hard work, not charm.

"Straight talk, then."

She sat back down. "I'd appreciate that."

He laid his hands on the table. "I'm sorry you were dragged into this, and I'm sorry that my father put this in your lap." He gentled his voice at the flicker of hurt in her eyes. Larry had been her father too. "We're going to have to work together."

"I want to help you, but I'm afraid my finances don't allow me to flush an eighteen-hundred-dollar plane ticket down the drain."

"So change the flight."

"Nonrefundable, remember?"

He couldn't let her go. Not yet. Not until he knew more. "It'll be on me to get you home."

A slim honey-colored brow lifted. "Thirty seconds ago you told me I couldn't trust you, Mr. Justice."

"Thirty seconds ago you called my bluff."

"I don't trust you." She emphasized each word.

"You're smart." He shuffled his chair to face her, dragging hers around so they were face-to-face.

Grabbing instinct by the balls, he clasped her hands until they were knee to knee and palm to palm. He tried to ignore the way she fit him. As small as she was, her slim fingers curled around his. Christ, she felt good. Too good, but he didn't drop her hand. Even if every self-preserving part of him struggled to do so.

Making her understand was more important. "Whether we like it or not, we're in this together. We," he paused, making sure their gazes locked. "Us."

"I have a business to run."

"Is November a busy time in the B and B business?"

Her chin lifted. "My—our—house is on a lake. We have year-round bookings."

"I'm assuming you don't run the entire place by yourself." She tried to untangle their hands, but he held her still.

"No, my mother does the day-to-day in the house, but I run the boat tours

and trails.”

“And you don’t have any other help?”

Her gaze slid away. “No.”

“Do you really have customers lined up?”

“It’s a light week,” she said evasively.

“Talk to her. This is important to both of us.”

“No.” She stared unblinkingly at him. Huge brown eyes full of confusion and indecision. “This is important to you. I need to get home.”

“But…”

“But I don’t trust you, and that’s more important than showing a few fishermen the right watering holes.”

He needed to let her go before he gave in to the stupid side of himself that wanted to drag her closer. The part of him that wanted to see if she fit him perfectly everywhere.

That would be a mistake.

# TWO

Kendall twisted out of his grip. The heat of him was like a grease burn. Even when she peeled her skin away from his, the burn still tore deep into the tissues. “I need to contact my mother.”

He nodded to the phone at the end of the table.

“Alone.”

His hazel eyes gave away nothing. “Something you don’t want me to hear, Miss Proctor?”

She lifted her chin. “I have to go tell my mother that your father is a bastard. Again. Do you really want to stand here and listen to that?”

He stood. “You don’t know my father.”

The razor slice was quick and deep. Painless on the first layer, but the wound bled. She was so tired of bleeding for Lawrence Justice. She thought she’d been well past it, and now with one letter, she was at his mercy again. “No, I didn’t, and I never will.”

When he’d leaned in and tried to charm her, there had been pain and life in his ever-changing eyes. Now they were blank. “Let me show you to the study. You can have privacy there.”

She hooked her purse over her shoulder and followed him out. Wide shoulders tight with muscles shifted under his dress shirt, tapering down to a dip in his back. She halted her perusal. The man now owned half her entire life’s work. How the hell was ogling him going to help matters?

Instead she opened herself to the anger that rode just under the surface. Anger would make things happen. She’d used it before, and she could use it again. The urge to reach out in front of her and touch him, to feel those muscles bunch and flow under her hand was a simple chemical reaction.

Living in her small coastal town had been isolating in the best of times, but ever since she'd had to use every last ounce of energy to keep the Heron running, she hadn't had time to remember she was lonely.

Until now.

Until an admittedly attractive man was put in front of her.

Thinking about Shane Justice naked was normal and natural. Stupid, but normal. And her life had held little normalcy for the last eighteen months.

He opened a door for her, but instead of stepping back, he stood in the doorway looking down at her. Intimidation seemed to be his default reaction to everything. She would not be cowed by him. She turned, then brushed against his chest with her own. When he sucked in a breath, she simply raised a brow at him. Her heart pinged around in her chest like a firefly in a jar, but she held her ground.

She was close enough to catch the scent of cedar chips. She frowned. Why would a suited-up guy smell like fresh wood?

"Don't be too long. We've got a lot of reading to do."

She slid into the room and sank into an overstuffed leather chair. This room was personal. Her gaze drifted to the desk and the ledger that was still open on the leather blotter. Her father's desk. The lingering hint of butterscotch made her eyes sting. She remembered her father always having butterscotch in his pocket. She juggled her phone out of her bag and swiped it to life. There were three text messages from her mother and another two from her best friend, Bells.

There was far too much to say in a text. She dialed Bells first. She needed her laughter and her sanity.

"Belinda Grayson."

"Bells?"

"Oh, Ken, I've been so worried. You always text me back so quickly."

Kendall fussed with her purse strap. Usually a text from her best friend was the highlight of her day. Talking to men who grunted about game and fish was definitely not the kind of conversations she longed for. "It's been a little crazy."

"Well? How'd it go?"

"He did it to me again, Bells. Just when I think he can't be more of a shit, Lawrence proves me wrong." She swallowed hard. No tears. That man did not deserve a single tear from her. Not now, not ever. He'd lost the right to any of her emotions over twenty-two years ago.

“Why the hell did they have you come out for the will reading, then? I don’t understand.”

“Because they’re taking half of the Heron.”

“What?” The worry and the outrage came across the line as clearly as if her best friend had been sitting beside her.

Kendall slipped her heels off and curled her feet under her legs, pressing her forehead into the buttery leather arm of the chair. Everything tumbled out. She didn’t know if half of it was coherent, but Bell listened and didn’t interrupt once.

“Bastard.”

Kendall choked out a laugh. “Yeah.”

“But I don’t understand how. He gave that house to you and Lily when you were a kid, for God’s sake. There’s no way they should be able to take the property.”

“Mom never took his name off the deed.”

“God dammit, Lily.”

There was no surprise in Bells’s voice, just the same resignation Kendall felt. They both had years of conditioning at Lily’s hand. No man could or would ever be as wonderful as Lawrence Justice. Even if he’d left them high and dry, there was always some excuse her mother would pull out to justify what he’d done to them. In the end, the fact that Lawrence had given her Kendall was a lasting reason not to hate him.

She wished she could be so forgiving.

Any attempt at that forgiveness was long gone now.

“So you have to share the house with your father’s son? What the hell, Ken? That’s fucked-up.”

“No, what’s fucked up is that Shane Justice isn’t even his biological son. Lawrence remarried and raised him as his own.”

“He left—” Bells cut herself off.

But the words were out. The same words that had run around Kendall’s brain for the last two hours. He’d left her and raised another child. She hadn’t been good enough. Why hadn’t she and her mom been enough? “Yeah.”

“Bastard.” This time Bells’s voice was watery.

“No crying, dammit. You’ll make me cry, and I don’t have time for tears. I have to figure out how this is going to work.”

“So you’re just going to accept this?”

“Shane and I are going through the will to see if there’s anything we can

do to fight it.”

“Are you sure he’s doing it with your best interests at heart? What if he wants the Heron for his own?”

“That’s why I’m staying here and reading over everything with him. Things aren’t good for either of us. All the money’s been frozen. Shane went from rich to poor in a snap.”

“And lost his father.”

Kendall’s voice gentled. “And lost his father.” As little as she cared about Lawrence, she understood that Shane had loved him. She’d loved him once upon a time. She could still remember his booming laugh and the way he held her tight. She remembered the nights he read to her and the sweet scent of his breath when he kissed her cheek good night.

But she also remembered him driving away without a good-bye. And she remembered her mother’s tears. There were a lot of tears. A lot more tears than kisses good night. “I’ll know more after we go through the will today.”

“Does that mean you’re not coming home tonight?”

“No, I won’t. And my ticket is nonrefundable. I have no idea what’s going to happen.”

“If I could strangle your father, I would.”

“Get in line.”

“The B and B is quiet right now, but I’ll go over and help your mom with whatever she needs.”

“Thanks. I don’t want to be a bother.”

“Shut up, Kendall. What are best friends for?”

“I—”

“Seriously. Shut up. It’s slow at the office, so I can take an hour here and there to go check on her.”

“I love you, Bells.”

“Oh, crap. Don’t get gushy on me. We don’t do smush.”

Kendall smiled into the shadows of the chair. “I’ll call when I can.”

“Okay. Chin up and kick ass. That’s what we do.”

“That’s what we do,” she agreed. “Bye.”

She fisted her hand around her phone and dragged in a steadying breath. Her shoulders prickled, and she looked up. Shane stood in the doorway. His shirt was open at the throat, and a thin line of beads showed at his neck. Another anomaly. He didn’t seem the jewelry type. She sat up and put her feet back into her shoes. “What happened to privacy?”



“It lasted thirty minutes.”

“I still haven’t called my mother.”

His full lips flattened into a frown. “What exactly were you doing in here, Miss Proctor?”

She stood. “Look, let’s get this Mister and Miss crap out of the way. I’m Kendall. We’re going to be in each other’s face all night.”

“Who were you on the phone with, Kendall?”

The way he said her name awakened the damn firefly. She pushed the odd feelings aside. “I called my friend. I needed to talk it out with her and figure out what to do with my mom.”

“I don’t want to waste any more time.”

“Nice to know that my mother is a waste of time. I’m sure your mother would love to hear the same thing.”

“My mother’s dead.”

Kendall slammed her molars together. *Stupid, Ken.* Of course his mother would have been at the will reading if she were still alive. “I’m sorry.”

“Happened a long time ago.”

She frowned. “How long ago?”

“And why is that your business?”

“I’m sorry to pry.” She didn’t even know what to tell her mother. And getting her mom off the phone when she was worried was nearly impossible. With quick fingers she tapped out a message to her mother that she was safe and that her flight had changed. “I’ll call my mother later. After we figure out the will.”

“We’re on West Coast time. It’s already well on its way to seven your time.”

“My mother’s settled in to watch television for the rest of the night. I’ve got a few good hours.” Her phone buzzed in her hand. She looked down and saw that her mom wasn’t worried and jammed her phone back into her purse. “Let’s get this done.”

“After you.”

She shrugged out of her jacket and went back into the conference room. A tray of coffee and fruit sat in the center, and the papers were lined up.

“I broke up the piles into a few different sections. This bigger pile covers all his assets. I want to look through this part and see what’s going on. Something feels hinky.”

“Hinky?”

Shane nodded. “Based on the debt we supposedly have, there’s no way the house and the sale of the business could cover what we owe. Something doesn’t add up.”

“Who bought out the business?”

“That, Kendall Proctor, is a very good question.”

She sat down across from him. “I really wish we had access to a lawyer who understood this and was willing to talk to us.”

“I’ve never had to trust anyone but Jonas. And the fact that everything monetarily is locked down because of the will, I don’t have access to anything.”

“I wish I could cover you, but if there’s any reason for savings, now would be it.”

“I have about four hundred dollars in my personal account.”

Surprised, she smoothed her hands over the papers. “For a rich boy, you’re certainly money poor.”

“I’m not a rich boy, Kendall. I’m a working man just like anyone else. And just like for most people, the economy has sucked the hell out of my free cash.”

She frowned. His gaze slid away at the end of the sentence. He wasn’t telling her something. “We should be able to demand that Jonas give us the details of the will.”

“He’s following Larry’s directive. I honestly don’t know how much we can demand without finding our own lawyer and having him or her read the paperwork. And with the size of this tome?” He sighed. “That’s a grand or so that I don’t have.”

Kendall stood and reached for the carafe. “Looks like we’re going to need a lot of this.”

He grunted a response, and they both settled in to read. Shakespeare was easier to read than the contract. Three hours later they had six separate stacks of papers, and she knew way too much about the construction business. Every blessed tractor, backhoe, truck, and trailer was explained in detail. Her eyes were crossed at the staggering amount of machinery that Justice Construction had. Hell, even the client list was part of the sale.

She dragged her hair out of her face and pushed across the sheet she was reviewing. “Can your client list actually be sold?”

“What?”

She twisted the paper so he could read it. “Right there. At least I think the

legal jargon means that.”

He stood and leaned over the table. His large, tanned fingers splayed across the table as he read. She pulled her hand back. She did not need to pay attention to how big or small any of his damn body parts were.

“Son of a fucking bitch.”

She came out of her chair. Excitement thrummed through the room. She rounded the table to stand beside him. “What?”

He riffled through papers. “I saw something—where...” He pushed one stack aside and handed her another. “There’s something in here about the client list as well, but I missed the importance.”

“So it’s not me. That’s weird?”

“That’s hinky.”

There was that word again. She flipped through the pages and scanned for a similar phrase. She couldn’t skim the documents. There was so much hidden in the legal-speak she was afraid she’d miss something. “Wait. Here it is again.”

He turned to her, their shoulders brushing as he read. “That’s it again. There isn’t a legal way for a client list to be given in a sale. Not unless the clients knew ahead of time and agreed to let the contracts be bought out.”

“And do you think they would?”

Shane’s brows snapped down as he focused on her face instead of the papers. Anger burned bright and fierce in his eyes. Instinct told her to take a step back. He looked dangerous and more than a little scary. Instead, she laid her hand on his forearm. His muscles vibrated under her touch.

“Shane?”

“I’m going to kill him.”

The papers shook in his hands. He dragged a deep breath through his nose and placed the papers on the table. He thumbed through, and the name flew out. How had he missed it? He’d read the damn contract at least seven times, and still he’d refused to see the obvious.

“Shane?”

“Goddamn Kain.”

Confusion darkened the espresso brown of her eyes. “Who’s Kain?”

“My fucking best friend.”

“What does your best friend have to do with this?”

He fisted his hands. “Evidently...everything.”

Shane paced the length of the boardroom. He couldn’t believe Kain would do this to him. First his father left him completely out of the loop about just how bad things had gotten, and now his best friend since eleventh grade betrayed him as well?

“Shane, you’re going to have to dumb it down for me. I don’t know who your best friend is.”

He whirled on her. Anger threw spots in front of his eyes. Days of no sleep and living on coffee churned in his gut. And now her. Another secret. Just how many people in his life were going to lie to him? She was so goddamned innocent in all this. He stalked to her, pushing her back with every step he took. “I’ve known him since I was sixteen. We played ball together, for fuck’s sake. And his family’s the owner of the largest construction company in Hawaii.”

Kendall put her hands up to fend him off, but he kept advancing. “What does that have to do with buying Justice Construction?”

“Everything,” he snarled. He knew Kain could be ruthless about getting a toehold in California, but this? Rage rode him hard, and instead of panic, her chin lifted in defiance.

“From your reaction I’m going to say you’re super pissed off.”

“Not one thing has made sense to me today.”

Her gaze dropped to his mouth as she reached behind her for the bookcase that lined the wall. Her attention darted back up to his eyes. Her chest heaved, and her nipples tightened under her blouse.

The slap of her apple scent threw him off. He grasped her upper arms. The silk of her blouse crumpled under his hands; her skin was warm and disturbingly fragile. He had no business touching her, but her huge doe eyes pulled at him.

“Shane?”

He hauled her up onto her toes and slanted his lips across hers. Taking, not asking. She sucked in a breath, her jaw slackened in shock. And bastard that he was, he took advantage. He wanted to feel something beyond the chaos. Even the slap of her hand again if that was what he got.

He swiped his tongue into the warmth of her mouth and slid along hers.

She sagged against him. He transferred his grip onto her hips. Instead of pushing him away, she wound her arms around him. The fierce scrape of her nails through the short hairs along his nape snapped whatever leash he had left.

She held on, crushing her chest into his. He backed up, lifting her into his arms. Blind with the anger that transferred into lust, he acted on instinct. From the moment she'd walked up to the house, he'd wanted to know just how she tasted. The bitter edge of coffee and the sweet tang of the melon she'd eaten drew him in, and he wanted more. He sucked her tongue into his mouth and was rewarded with a moan of surprise.

She opened wider, and they fought for a deeper taste. The scrape of her teeth along his lower lip ended in a nip that left his lip and his cock throbbing.

He hoisted her onto the table and jerked her skirt up. She lifted her legs around his hips and pulled at his shirt. "This is just sex."

He nodded. He could live with that. He wanted to lose himself in the uncomplicated mechanics of pleasure. Even if it was just ten minutes, he wanted to empty out his brain and feel something else.

She slid her hand under his shirt, loosening the buttons from the bottom up. Her angel-soft hair fell forward. The strands were at least a yard in length and teased around his wrists at her hips. He wrapped a hank of it around his hand and pulled her neck back. He sucked on the fragile skin at her collar and up to her jaw. Her nails bit into his belly, and he bunched his muscles under her attack.

Fuck.

Little Kendall had some claws. She finally got his shirt open and wiggled out from under his mouth. She fisted her hands into his shirt and pushed it off his shoulders. He still held her hair in his hands. The surprisingly heavy strands tangled around his fingers, ensnaring him all the more. Open-mouthed kisses turned into nips at his chest. He tightened his hold on her hair, unprepared for her aggressive nature.

His dick went from half-hard to a steel tent under his dress pants.

She tugged forward until she could taste him again. She flicked the pads of her thumbs over his nipples, and he hissed. "Christ."

She looked up at him as her tongue swirled around the tight disk. "You're not the only one who could work out some anger." She nosed over to the center of his chest and gently ticked her fingernail along the beads of his

mother's rosary. It was as much a part of him as his skin. She traced the center medal and moved on to his other pec. He hissed when she nipped again.

“Leaving marks?”

She smiled and wrapped her teeth around the muscle until the indent made him groan. “I think I like angry sex. This is my first time.”

He arched a brow. “First?”

Her hand slid into his pants. “Not that kind of first.”

He sucked in a breath as she gripped the base of his cock. He'd expected fumbling fingers and nervous excitement, not this. Not a woman with sure hands who knew what she wanted. He lowered his head and took her mouth. The kiss was hot and deep and carnal. With each pump of her hand he grunted into her mouth. Finally he detangled his hand from her hair and slid his thumb over the line of her panties against her inner thigh. She undulated on the table until he cupped her. He broke away from her mouth, and again the nip of her teeth set his control on edge.

He was used to taking the lead. He got off on watching a woman's eyes burn hot with excitement. But he couldn't read Kendall. Her gaze was intense and wary and seemed to be on the knife-edge of control like he was.

She fisted his shaft and dragged her thumb under the head of his cock. He jerked her panties aside. Finesse was as absent as his control. He nudged two fingers inside her. She clamped down on the invasion, and he groaned. He wanted her to close around his cock like that. Wanted it more than breath.

But he levered himself inside her again and again. The tissues of her pussy softened and swelled. He rolled his thumb under her hood and found her clit. She jerked against his touch. He followed her hitching gasps, making tight circles until her head fell back and her fingers grew slack on his shaft.

“Tighter,” he growled into her ear.

She fumbled with his zipper, pushing his boxer briefs aside. “Tighter here?” She cupped his balls, then vised the base of his cock.

He groaned and pushed himself into her hand as he sawed his fingers in and out of her slick folds. He swiped his tongue along the smooth column of her throat. “It will feel even tighter in here, I bet.”

She sucked in a sharp breath as he pulled out of her. He pushed up her blouse, then flipped the cups of her bra on the trip up. Small and firm, her breasts barely filled the palms of his hands. She leaned back on the table and continued to rock his cock between her fingers. He braced his hands on her

lower hips and dug his fingertips into her ass as he closed his lips around her nipple.

She arched, panting with each drag of his tongue and teeth over her tight little nipples. Soft pink deepened with the angry scratches from his beard. He liked his marks on her. “Do you like it rough, babe?”

She shuddered. Her grip on his cock was erratic.

“Kendall?”

She opened hazy, dark eyes. She stared down at him as he sucked her nipple harder. One hand slid into his hair and held him tight. “God, yes.”

“Yes, you like it rough?”

“I’ve never had it like this.”

He tongued her nipple. “Do you want me inside you?”

“If you don’t have a condom, I’ll probably kill you.”

He laughed for the first time in days. He gentled his tongue along the underside of her breast before nipping over the hard tip again. “Wallet.”

His cock slid free from her hand as she fished into his back pocket.

“Not that one?” She gripped his ass.

“No,” he growled.

He cupped her breast and scraped the edge of his nail over the rigid center. She gasped out a shout and unearthed his wallet from his other pocket and dumped it on the table. She pushed him away and shimmied out of her panties. “Hurry.”

He flipped his billfold open. Christ, he couldn’t remember the last time he’d had to use his emergency condom. He pushed down his pants and underwear and sheathed himself.

She widened her legs. He pulled her closer to the edge of the table and guided the head of his cock along her swollen lips. She placed her hands behind her back for leverage. With her shoulders thrust back, her breasts lifted. Fuck, she was too pale and lovely to be this wild. Her mouth was ravaged from his, and her dark eyes were heavy-lidded, but there was definite excitement glittering there.

His cock throbbed. His entire focus was getting in between her sweet thighs. He lowered his mouth to one tight tip as he teased her with another swipe.

Her hand slid between them to guide him inside, but he wasn’t ready to end the teasing. He jerked her hand behind her back and braceleted her wrists. “Not so fast.” Her eyes widened, and her shoulders bowed. But there

was no censure in her gaze. She bit her lower lip and smiled up at him. He tightened his grip, and she ground her pelvis into him, forcing him in another inch.

“What did I say?”

She rolled her hips with a laugh. “I don’t care what you say. I want you inside me.”

He grabbed his shaft and slid up and down through her slick folds. “What if I’m not ready?”

She reversed the roll, and he couldn’t stop the forward motion this time. She grasped around him, sucking him into a fisting warmth he wasn’t sure he ever wanted to leave. She winced, and he stopped.

“Kendall?”

“Keep going.” She panted.

He tried to back up, but she wrapped her legs around his hips and dragged him inside until he was balls-deep. She cried out. He stilled inside her. The throb of her muscles vising him strained his control. He wanted to do it again, to watch her take all of him again. Her hands splayed under his grip against the table.

Her chest heaved. “More.”

He slipped out of her and rocked forward again. She clasped tighter. “Fuck,” he muttered against her neck and repeated the motion. Heat and pleasure swelled inside him, around him, and fueled him. He let go of her arms and thrust into her once more. He couldn’t get enough.

Ferocious need seemed to mirror hers. She grasped his shoulders so tightly the bite of her nails ratcheted up the tension between them until there was nothing but sweat, the groan of the table bearing their weight, and moans.

“God, that’s so good. More,” she gasped.

He wasn’t sure how much more he could give her, but he increased his pace. The dark slide of madness closed in on him. His grip along her hips was punishing, but he couldn’t stop.

She bumped her hips up on each full thrust inside her, and the friction of sweat and her excitement heated the air between them. Her cries pushed him for more. The sweet sound of her moans was all he could cling to as he held on through the lava-hot tingles rocketing up his spine.

“Fuck,” he growled.

She shuddered. The vibrations shook him as he chased her clasping



pleasure until it wrung him dry.

Slowly her legs slid down to hang off the table. She pressed her forehead to his shoulder, and the way she trembled made him want to cuddle her close. But this was just sex. Two people riding anger and grief and possibly a little hate. He didn't want to confuse things.

He held tight to the condom and pulled out of her. With her warmth gone, the emptiness returned twofold. At least now he was just too fucking tired to hold on to the anger. Her hair fell forward, and he couldn't read her. Would there still be a sly smile filled with pleasure? Or would it be one of regret?

She hopped off the table and swayed once before he caught her. She hid behind her shield of hair, turning away from him to pull her skirt down.

"There's a bathroom through that door."

She nodded and didn't say a word before grabbing her panties off the chair and fleeing through the door.

With a sigh, he took care of his condom. Every bit of those last fifteen minutes was ill-advised. So why did he want to chase after her and do it again?

# THREE

Kendall slumped against the door. Her thighs were still quaking, and she was pretty sure her system hadn't quite caught up to the fact that she'd just gotten fucked within an inch of her life. Because there was no mistake; that had been sex in its purest and most basic form.

God.

And she had loved every second of it.

Twenty-seven years of playing it safe, of doing exactly what she was expected to do, and no one was here to see just how far she'd gone off track. She didn't have to tell anyone. It was insane, but the thrill of it still coursed through her veins.

If this was what drugs felt like, she understood why people did them.

Her skin buzzed, and she was pretty sure she was going to have a few creative bruises.

She looked down at her wrists. Deep red marks stained her skin where his thumbs had bitten into her when he'd clamped her hands together. He'd surprised the hell out of her when he'd done it, but the quick shock had bumped up the excitement to another level.

A dangerous one.

A stupid one.

But God, she wanted to be stupid for once.

She moved to the mirror and had to lean over the sink. Her thighs still shook, and every part of her felt stretched to the limit. She forced herself to look up. Her lips were raspberry red, and her chin was raw. She touched the abraded skin. Flashes of his ardent mouth let that firefly loose again. She pressed a hand to her belly, then up to her tender breasts.

She'd never been so deliciously taken. Ever.

Allowing herself a few minutes to freshen up, she stepped into her panties and faced the door. Now she just had to figure out a way to act like having sex with a man she'd known less than twenty-four hours wasn't a big deal. Oh, and not look like a whore at the same time.

Piece of cake.

She thumped her forehead against the door and took a deep breath. She swung the door open and froze. Shane's shirt was still open, though his pants were buttoned and zipped. The light thatch of hair at the center of his chest arched down over his ridiculously tight abs. He definitely didn't have the body of a man who spent time behind a desk.

But it was the rosary that did her in.

It was so old. The chain and the beads were antique and settled against his skin as if they were simply part of him. He pulled his shirt closed. When he looked up and continued to slip the tiny disks through their holes, her heartbeat roared in her head. His golden eyes were wary and yet still filled with heat. She swallowed the nerves that blasted into her belly and walked out with her head held high.

"So what's the plan?" she asked. He looked at her with that eyebrow raise she was coming to expect. Evidently he didn't want to waste words.

He glanced at his watch. "I think we need to go and talk to Kain."

"Tonight?"

"It's not that late, East Coast girl."

For her it was well after ten, but she supposed he was right. "Well, if I'm not going back home, I'll need some supplies."

He nodded and jangled keys in his pocket. "Let's go."

She folded her arms over her stomach and followed. His stride was long and purposeful. He shrugged into a leather jacket that had seen more years than anything in her closet. When he barely stopped at the door for her, she quickened her pace. Impatience surrounded him as surely as the battered leather.

She was fairly sure that it wasn't directed at her, but when he climbed into the truck without a backward glance, she didn't waste time asking any more questions. She opened the passenger side door and swung her purse in. The truck was massive. Fortunately there was a running board and handle, because there was no graceful way to get in with her suit. She settled in her seat and reached for her seat belt. When she clicked it into place, she looked

up. His gaze traveled up her thigh before she tugged her skirt back down to her knees.

But there was no burn in his eyes this time. In fact, he looked even more pissed off.

“What part of the construction business do you take care of?”

“Evidently none of it.”

The acid tone killed any future plans for conversation. He pulled down the drive and out onto the winding roads that led to the coast. The sun had long since set, but the roar of the surf against the shore was worth the drive. Lights dotted the horizon from slips and docks and the occasional boat on the water. Otherwise the ride was dark and quiet. Finally he snapped the radio on, and 30 Seconds to Mars pounded through the speakers.

Leto’s harsh whispers suited Shane’s mood. She leaned against the door and studied his profile in the dim lights of the dash. She had a feeling that without the scruffy beard and buzz-cut hair he would be far prettier than he liked to own up to. His cheekbones were as sharp as his jawline, but she couldn’t stop thinking about his mouth. It was so wide and soft in contrast to the rest of him.

When the muscle in his jaw rippled, she averted her gaze.

And still he didn’t talk.

She’d never been the type to need to fill the silence with chatter, but she could feel the babbling conversation bubbling up in her gut. Everything was happening so fast. By the third song, she couldn’t stand it any longer. “What exactly are you going to say to...Kain? Was that his name?”

He didn’t answer her, but his jaw flexed again.

“Shane. I’m so far out of the loop on this. You gotta give me a little info here.”

“I don’t know the details, or I’d give them to you.”

She wasn’t so sure about that. “Fine. Sit there and let your gut churn up acid until your voice box fries.”

His eyebrow rose, and his lips twitched. But again, not a damn word. Her own anger started a slow burn. The entire album finished by the time he turned off onto another winding road. What was it about California? Did they have to carve all the houses out of the... Her thoughts drifted away as Kain’s house came into view.

Glass and steel and sand. She could hear the ocean roaring below, but she couldn’t pull her gaze from the wall of softly lit glass. There was no hiding

the inside of his friend's home. Streamlined wood and contemporary furniture filled the lower level. A huge stainless steel and granite kitchen flowed around the open-floor plan.

"Holy crap."

"Kain's an architect."

"You think?"

Of course he didn't reply. The jackass just opened his car door and left her to follow. She was getting tired of playing puppy behind him. She caught his arm at the door. "If you don't stop stalking around and tell me what the hell the plan is, I'm going to deck you myself."

He was at least a foot taller than her, and his damn lips twitched again, but he didn't say a word, just opened the door like he owned the place. "Kain," he called out.

"In my office, bro."

Kendall slid her gaze to Shane. "Bro?" But he was already heading up the stairs. Her molars clicked together as she followed—again. Halfway up the landing, she held on to the banister. The stairs were wide open, and the entire living room floated under her. She returned her focus to Shane's backside and wasn't sure which was more dangerous.

The upstairs was as impressive as the down. Kain's office was the first thing she saw at the top of the stairs. It was a huge room that was wall-to-wall glass. A panoramic view of the ocean and dark skies stole her breath. Wispy fog blocked the stars and filtered the moon. More warm furniture and streamlined couches filled the room. A large desk took up the corner with the fantasy view as Kain's backdrop, but it was the man who completed the holy-crap view.

He was huge. His shoulders were massive under a sleeveless shirt that hugged his broad chest. Long, dense black wavy hair hung at his shoulders with a few tiny braids peeking through. His eyes were a direct and uncompromising bottle green under slashing dark brows. His left eyebrow was bisected by a deep scar that emphasized the natural arch.

He stood and came around the desk. "I didn't realize you were coming out. And bringing company." He looked down at his long board shorts and bare feet. "I would have been a little more presentable." He held his hand out. "I'm Kainoa N'ai."

His voice was a deep bass any woman would react to. At least that was what she told herself when her heart rate kicked up. She tilted her chin back

to keep eye contact. If she thought Shane was impressive, Kain had another few inches on him in brawn and height. “Kendall Proctor.” Her hand disappeared into his gentle grip. Shane vibrated with anger beside her, but she instantly felt at ease with this man.

Kain straightened his shoulders, and she was pretty sure his chest puffed as he faced Shane. Kendall took a step to her right. “What can I do for you, *kaikua`ana*?”

“Why’d you do it?”

Kain’s eyes lost their friendly warmth. “Do what?”

“Don’t put that fucking boardroom face on with me, asshole. What the fuck did you do?”

“Why don’t you tell me what you think I did?”

“I think you swooped in and took my father’s company when he was financially fragile.”

Kain arched his scarred brow. “Is that right?”

Shane paced the length of the room. “This isn’t one of your acquisitions that you can just come in and take over.”

Kain folded his arms over his massive chest. “Do tell, brother.”

“I know you’ve been trying to get a foothold here, but this is the lowest of the low.”

Kendall’s stomach clenched. Between the prowling tiger and the stoic linebacker who could be an extra on *Hawaii Five-0*, she was a little worried. Surely they wouldn’t start a brawl. They circled each other, and she took another step back until her calf bumped into a couch. She sat down and curled her fingers into the edge of the cushion. The tension in the room was as thick and virile as the two men.

“My dad always got back on his feet. You know that. What did you have over him that he’d allow you to swipe up his client list? That list had been cultivated for decades.”

She frowned. The list seemed to be far more important than even the company. That was the third time Shane had reacted to it. What could be so important about names?

“Not this time, Shane.”

Kain’s quiet voice finally halted Shane’s pacing. He looked up, his golden eyes brittle with pain. Kendall wanted to get up and smooth a hand down his arm. Christ, what was wrong with her? None of this was any of her business. She had only the Heron to worry about. Not some name game in the

middle of California's finest-looking men.

"What are you talking about?"

"Look, your dad had no choice when he came to me. Believe me. I asked him to talk to you about this."

"And you couldn't come to me?"

Kain looked down, and she saw his arms flex with his fisted hands. "Don't you think I wanted to? For fuck's sake, Shane, you're my best friend."

"Yeah? Well, best friends would never betray each other like this." Shane turned and headed down the stairs. Kendall rose and slung her purse over her shoulder.

"Let him go, *ânela*."

"He's not going to leave me here, is he?"

Kain smiled down at her. "No. He's just going to go hit the beach."

"At night?"

"It's what we do. How we met, actually."

Kendall slumped back down on the couch. "I'm so freaking lost. I don't know what the hell is going on." She let her head fall back.

He sat down next to her and covered her hand with his. "I knew when I put this deal together with his dad six months ago that he was going to lose his shit, but I thought I'd have time to convince Larry to tell Shane."

Kendall hooked her foot behind her ankle and turned to him. "Was it really that bad?"

Kain rubbed his huge hand over his face. "Worse. Larry begged me to help him. I've got more money than sense, according to my accountants, because I took on the Justice Construction debt. It wasn't in the will, but I also took on all of Larry's employees."

That didn't sound like any merger that she'd ever read about. Usually the company would place their own people in the spots. "You loved him."

Kain nodded. "He was as much my father as he was Shane's."

Kendall flinched but kept silent. Who was this Lawrence Justice? The man they described was nothing like the man she remembered. Not even close to the sort of man who would inspire this much devotion.

"My family runs most of the construction in Hawaii, but I wanted to branch out off the Big Island. I came here for college and fell in love with the area. After I got my company up and running, I had the know-how but not the contacts. California is all about old names and a good-old-boys network that I

could never bust into.”

She didn’t understand the intricacies of construction, but she did understand reputation and word of mouth. The Adirondacks of New York thrived and died by those same principles. “And Lawrence had those contacts.”

Kain nodded, relaxing beside her. “Larry knows everyone, and he knows that Shane wasn’t built for this life forever.”

Kendall frowned. “What do you mean?”

“Shane will have to tell you about that, `ânela.”

She sighed and slid her hand away. “He’s not all mad at you.”

He tapped his forefinger against his knee. “I don’t know about that.”

“The lawyer, Mr. Murray...he wouldn’t tell Shane anything either.”

He sat back and stretched his arm across the back of the couch, his face contemplative. “Are you his new girlfriend?”

“Where would you get that idea?” Shane had been nothing but rude since before they left. There was no way they gave off a couple’s vibe.

Kain shrugged. “Just curious.”

“Why?”

“You’re beautiful, and he left you alone with me.”

Kendall’s eyebrows rose. “Should I be worried?”

He grinned. “Nah. I’m harmless.”

She doubted that. Something told her there was a string of women across the state who would attest to just how intriguing he was. But oddly she didn’t feel the least bit attracted. Oh, he was attractive and wore charisma like cologne, but that was all it was. Not like when she was with Shane. And that scared the hell out of her. “We just met today.”

“Huh.”

She twisted the frayed edges of a woven bracelet under the cuff of her blouse. “I feel like I’m only getting half the conversation here, Kain.”

He seemed to make a decision and sat up. “Shane’s kind of a loner lately. I’m surprised to see him bring someone here with him, let alone a woman.”

“He doesn’t have a choice.”

Kain cracked his knuckles. “And now the story gets interesting.”

“Just you wait.”

Kain stood and gestured down the stairs. “This sounds like a whiskey story.”

She smiled. “Probably a bottle of whiskey.”



“My kind of story.”

Kendall went down the stairs, again marveling at the breadth and scope of Kain’s house. She wouldn’t want to be the one who had to keep all the glass spot and fingerprint free.

“To the left,” he said from behind her.

Even with his huge presence, she didn’t feel uncomfortable with him. There was an innate friendliness and openness about Kain. So at odds with the Shane she was beginning to know. He went to a sideboard and opened a crystal decanter, splashing two glasses half-full. She’d been kidding about drinking the bottle, but she took the glass when he offered it.

The living room was much different from the front room. The furnishings here were wide and comfortable, and a huge picture of a perfect tidal wave hidden by tropical vegetation hung above a glass and crystal rock fireplace. She walked to the flames, grateful for the heat they gave off.

How the hell was she supposed to tell him? It was probably better to just get it out. She sat down on the oversize leather love seat. “I’m Lawrence Justice’s daughter.”

Kain sat beside her. He didn’t even try to hide his shock. “His what?”

“Yeah.” She took a sip, and the bracing fire of good liquor faded to a pleasant burn. Kain was an active audience as she explained the shortened version of her story. He asked questions about her place and her mother. He was a calming influence that she hadn’t expected. Nothing had been what she expected since she’d gotten to Monterey.

On her second refill she told him about the will.

“I knew Larry had some secrets.”

She sat next to him on the edge of the cushion. She was so tired that if she sat back and settled in, she was pretty sure she’d go right to sleep. “You did?”

“Larry liked to be everything to everyone, especially Shane.”

Everything to everyone, except for her.

His green eyes gentled. “I’m sorry, Kendall. That was thoughtless to say.”

“It’s okay. I don’t understand the man you knew, but I remember flashes of a strong and charming Lawrence Justice. But for me, he was simply a man who turned his back on me and my mom.”

“The man I knew was so worried about being the best man for Shane and his employees. And when he came to me, I couldn’t turn him away. Even when he asked me not to tell Shane. He had far too many people counting on him.”

Kendall worried the knot of her bracelet. She could still see the shattered shock on Shane's face. In her head she knew Shane had lost more than she had, but hers was a distant empathy. He was a stranger to her. Their afternoon together had only added more confusion to the mix of emotions. "Shane's had a few too many punches today, I'm afraid."

"Far too many," Shane said from the doorway.

"How long have you been there, brother?"

His face was shuttered up tight. Nothing was there to soften the harsh planes of his jaw. Even his soft mouth had hardened. "Long enough." Shane looked down at her. "Cozy."

She flushed. She had no reason to feel guilty, but her gut churned thanks to lack of food, alcohol, and a rising fury. She stood. Who the hell was Shane to keep poking at her? She was just as angry and just as lost about this whole thing as he was. He took her glass from her and knocked back the last mouthful and took it for a refill.

With his back to them, he splashed another healthy dose of whiskey into the tumbler and gulped it down. He braced his hands on the bar. "Jonas won't tell me what's going on." He refilled and turned around. "Did you really think I wasn't going to ask questions? That I was going to just walk away without a word?"

Kain got up and walked to him. "I told your old man this wasn't the way to go."

"You could have told me, Kain."

"There was a lot more to this deal, and you know it."

Kendall frowned. She was sick of being on the outside of this conversation. "You two need to clue me in before I get on a stool and clock you both with that crystal decanter."

Kain grinned. "She's spunky."

Shane sighed. "You have no idea."

She waded in between them and stabbed Shane's chest. "You don't know me well enough to make that comment." She turned to Kain and tipped her head back. "You need to give us some answers—and straight ones—before I let him loose on you." She pointed her thumb behind herself at Shane.

"Yep, spunky." Kain looked over her head at Shane. "I like her."

"Can we talk about me later?" she growled.

For the first time Shane's mouth quirked up at the corner. "You heard the lady."

“Shane, your dad knew about the furniture.”

Shane’s face closed off again. What the hell were they talking about now? Kendall took the glass away from Shane and drank down a little too much. She coughed before handing it back to him. “Will you two stop with the word games? Shane and I are now officially joined at the hip thanks to my father’s idiotic will. I deserve to be in on this discussion.”

Shane tossed back the rest of his glass. “Looks like we’re staying here tonight.” He grabbed the decanter and another glass and headed into the kitchen.

“Seriously. If he doesn’t stop walking away from me, I’m going to toss him through your glass window and see if he’d like an up close and personal taste of the ocean.”

Kain tipped his head back, and the booming laugh startled her.

“I’m glad you think this is funny.”

“Ânela, you’ve no idea what you’re in for.”

She had enough liquor in her that the room was getting hot. She shrugged out of her jacket and shoved it at Kain and followed Shane into the kitchen. “Do you think I’m just going to stand around and get drunk with you tonight?”

“It’s the current plan,” Shane said wearily.

“I’m not getting drunk in a skirt and silk.”

Shane leaned on the counter with hooded eyes. She didn’t need to focus on what she could do in a skirt and silk. But instead of saying anything, he took another drink.

Kain came in and opened the fridge. He threw packages of deli meat, cheese, and condiments on the wide granite island, then pulled out bread and rolls from a cupboard. “Go to the top of the stairs and hang a left. My sister has some clothes in the closet. Might be a little big on you. You’re a tiny thing.”

“As long as it’s not your clothes, I’ll be fine.”

“You’re not wearing anything of Kain’s.”

Kendall put her hands on her hips. “Oh, really?”

Shane looked up. His gaze was steady, and everything about him seemed too still. “Yeah, really.”

Her skin tingled, and her nipples tightened. She turned and took the stairs two at a time, hoping to God that neither man noticed. What the hell was wrong with her today? First she’d hopped on a table and had...well, the best

sex of her entire life. With a stranger, no less. Oh, and a stranger who was going to take half of her home.

“I’m assuming hands off?”

“Assume right.” Shane rolled his shoulders and cracked his neck. After he’d walked off his mad, when he’d come in to see Kain and Kendall cozied up on the couch, all the mad had come back like a goddamned breaker off Big Sur. And that wasn’t going to work. He had too much at stake now to get messed up over a woman. Even if the woman felt so good he was already half-hard at the thought of her naked upstairs.

“Good to know. Christ, Shane. Larry’s daughter?”

“I didn’t even know she existed.” Shane stuffed roast beef and cheese into a roll and added mayo. Nothing made sense. Family was important to his father. How many times had his father given Shane shit about working too hard and not visiting him enough? And he had a daughter he’d left behind?

If she didn’t have the same exact odd-colored hair as Larry, he’d question the validity of that in the document as well.

“This will has me twisted up as fuck. What the hell was he thinking?”

“He was looking for a way out. He was maxed out on every card, every line of credit, and even owed some to a loan shark before he came to me.”

Shane rubbed his hands over his face. “Thanks for bailing us out.” Pride pricked at him, but he knew his friend only wanted to help. Kain did have more money than God. Between his clients as an architect and the construction company, Kain had already made a name for himself. Kain wanted to make his own mark, away from his father. That was why he’d stayed in California after college.

Shane dug his fingertips into the bunched muscles along his shoulders. He’d thought he was being so clever with Avery Furniture. He’d been happy to adopt his stepfather’s name when his mother married him, but he and Kain both had a need to establish themselves away from their fathers’ reputations. Every penny he brought home from work had been poured into materials for his own company. If he hadn’t bought all that lumber from Hawaii, he wouldn’t be so strapped now.

Kendall came down the stairs. Soft pants hit just above her ankles, leaving her feet bare. A flash of silver winked from her toes. His gaze slid up to the flare of her hips and the matching gray hoodie that hugged her like another skin. The clothes would be too big, his ass. “I hope it was okay to dig into her workout clothes. Everything else made me look like a twelve-year-old playing dress-up.”

Nothing about Kendall said teen, but the street clothes did make her look far younger than when she wore the suit.

“Come and eat, `ânela.”

Shane’s head snapped to Kain. He’d already given her a Hawaiian nickname? Kain let his native language fly when he was drinking, but Shane was pretty sure he was sober.

She padded over and hopped up on one of the stools at the end of the island’s breakfast nook. “Make it a Dagwood for me.”

Kain grinned. “I love a woman with an appetite. If Shane fucks up, you’ll find yourself chased.”

Kendall blushed. “I haven’t eaten anything all day.”

“That’s because Shane forgot his manners along with his tact.”

Kain was laying it on a bit thick. Shane’s gaze rested on Kendall. He couldn’t blame his friend for the interest. Without the prim suit and mask of makeup, she was softer, even more beautiful than when she’d landed on his walkway. His voice gentled. “It’s been a shitty week.”

Kain laid a hand on his shoulder as he passed by and set a plate in front of Kendall. Shane drew in a deep breath. He didn’t want to alienate anyone, least of all his best friend. “So you took on my father’s debt for the names of all his clients?”

“As well as a meeting with each of them to make sure the transition would be flawless.”

And he’d been distracted working ten-hour days for Justice and then six or more hours in his shop every night. His goals had been more important than seeing that his father was floundering. What did that make him?

“We were meeting with the final few clients just before he died. He was going to tell his employees that they’d be under Kainoa Construction by the start of the new quarter.”

“Did you lose anyone?”

“Just a handful. Some were looking for a way to start their own firms, and Collins and Frederickson were fucked off— Shit, sorry, Kendall.”

She shrugged and swallowed. “I hang out with fishermen and hunters. You couldn’t insult me if you tried.”

Shane picked at his sandwich. He couldn’t quite rectify the idea of Kendall in hip waders and fishing poles.

“They didn’t like the idea of change. I have a feeling they’ll be in contact with me soon. Especially now that your father is...”

“It’s okay. He’s gone.” The grief sat inside his chest like an organ without a purpose. He didn’t know how to push it out or make it feel less. He’d lost his mother so long ago that she was just a vague memory of laughter and the sweet scent of vanilla.

Kendall’s attention was on her food and the slice of tomato that had slid from the roll she could barely hold with both hands.

“Your dad wanted to retire. I offered him a job, but he said he wanted to have his freedom,” Kain said quietly.

A freedom he’d never gotten. Larry Justice was always taking care of someone. Whether it was an army of employees, contracts, or friends. He rarely spent a moment alone.

“And he knew you’d be fine. You were almost self-sufficient with Avery Furniture.”

“Avery Furniture?” Kendall’s dark eyes met his.

Shane didn’t like to talk about the wood he was compelled to work with. Being a foreman for the job site was his life as far as his father was concerned. But he liked to build. He needed to feel the smooth wood under his hands and decide what would be created out of it.

Kain sighed. “Shane is a master carpenter.”

Shane slanted a look at him. “I’m a carpenter.”

Kain held his hand out to Kendall. “Let me show you something.”

Shane cracked his knuckles as she took his friend’s hand and followed him. If Kain was looking for a fight, he was going to get one if he didn’t stop manhandling her. Shane tossed back another inch of whiskey and followed them out into the entertaining area. He knew what Kain was going to show off. It was one of his personal favorite pieces. And the reason he’d started Avery Furniture.

Kendall had squatted down, and he bit back an oath. The soft pants hugged every inch of her perfect ass. He forced his attention back on the task at hand. The bench was made from koa wood. The striations reminded him of marble and had taken hours to sand and plank to find just the right thickness.

He'd left some of the natural edges and varnished them until the surface was smooth as glass. He'd taken it a step further and planked boards up the wall and added a water feature with a bed of river rocks Kain had flown in from Honolulu. The entire piece had cost thousands, but it suited the space and Kain down to the ground.

She stood and turned. "You did this?"

He tucked his hands under his arms. "Yeah."

"Yeah?" Her face was incredulous. "All you have to say is *yeah*?" She swiveled to Kain. "Does he always downplay his work?"

"Yep."

Kendall's face softened. "This is what you want to do?"

His jaw hardened. "This is why I have no money in the bank. Building a company doesn't come cheap."

"If you let me back you—"

"No." Shane rocked back on his heels. "We've been over this, Kain. I'm doing it on my own. I don't want to owe you anything, let alone twenty percent of my profits."

"It doesn't make you weak to ask for help. I had to ask your father for help."

Shane's breath stalled in his chest. "Yeah, and you had to dig him out of a hole because I didn't pay attention."

Kain sliced a hand through the air. "It wasn't like that. He was just too proud to show that he couldn't take care of everyone."

Shane turned and went to the sideboard. All he knew was that his father hadn't trusted him. And nothing was the same. He took the first bottle he saw. "I'm taking my usual room."

# FOUR

“Son of a bitch.” Kain stalked back into the kitchen.

She followed him, rubbing her arms against the tiny hairs that had risen. Shane’s emotions were volatile and made her want to go to him. To fix it and soothe him. It wasn’t her job, dammit. She should be home taking care of the Heron and her mother, not dealing with this minefield of emotions.

The room felt empty without his prowling, angry presence. Not that it should, especially with a man like Kain in the room with her. Confidence and the indefinable male charisma infused the space around him. She wasn’t sure she’d want to be one of his enemies, but she’d spent her life trusting her instincts about people. Strangers were her livelihood, and Kain was a nice guy under all the wealth and power.

If she weren’t in the middle of this insane situation, she’d have jumped at the chance to flirt and see where things went with him. Normally, an easygoing attitude and offhand way of flirting were two of her draws. But the only thing she felt was comfort. Kain didn’t stir her up or make her skin feel too tight.

Shane was too intense, too volatile, and filled with far too much anger.

All she should want was a bed and six straight hours on her face. If she was dumb enough to be interested in anything, Kain was the better choice. He was the wild weekend of laughter and sun-baked sex. Kain had *fun fling* written all over him.

So why did she want to go upstairs and check on Shane? Why did she want to grab on to the man who was more like a lightning rod? And why did she want more of that contact burn that left her shaky and tingling?

“You sure you know what you’re doing?”



She looked up. Kain's weighty stare had lost the easygoing edge, and his voice was serious instead of playful. "What?"

"I can spot a woman hatching a plan. And you are wading into dangerous territory, Kendall."

Could Kain read her damn mind? She lifted her hand to her cheek. Was she as flushed as she felt on the inside? "How do you mean?"

"He's angry, and his pride has taken a helluva hit. Now's probably not the right time to start something."

"Are you warning me off?"

"I've known him for ten years. And I can tell you right now that he's not the same guy he was two weeks ago. He just lost everything and a father he loved so much that he would rather keep his own happiness buried in a workshop than disappoint his old man."

Kendall looked down at the perfect hardwood floor. The quick prick of tears came with a lump in the center of her chest. "That's a Lawrence Justice I just don't know."

"Shit. I'm sorry. You'd think I would stop making that mistake. You're like the mini-fairy hot version of Larry."

She snorted. "Thanks."

He laughed. "No, I mean the coloring and the hair—definitely the hair but not the eyes."

"My mom's Italian."

"That explains that one. Boy, you got everything else from Larry, though."

"DNA doesn't lie," she said with a shrug.

"That's the thing. I can't wrap my brain around the fact that he had a daughter and never told anyone. Shane is—was—the center of his world."

Kendall rubbed the heel of her hand along her breastbone. The lump felt larger and heavier. She'd made her peace with the fact that her father hadn't wanted her a long time ago. Why did that man have to drag her into this? What gave her father the right to take the only thing he'd ever given her and make her share it with Shane?

Kain stepped closer, his large hands gentle on her shoulders. His light touch was comforting as he rubbed up and down her arm. "And I'm not helping at all."

"It's okay. I'm not one of those broken girls who misses her daddy. My mom was enough. She loved my father, and he walked away from us. He got

in his car and drove away one day without saying good-bye. At least to me. He broke her heart into a million pieces. I don't mourn for that man." She looked up at Kain. "I'm sorry, I don't. But I do know that Shane does. And I can see that you do too."

His brows were snapped together in confusion. "It's just not the Larry I know."

"Maybe he changed. Maybe Shane became the perfect family he'd always wanted."

Kain shook his head. "I don't know. I do know that Shane lost his mom when he was sixteen. It's only been him and Larry for a long time."

"You love him a lot." That she could understand. Her best friend was just as important. Bells was like a sister to her. Blood definitely wasn't the qualifier for love.

"I loved both of them. My father wasn't an easy man. His empire in Hawaii was all that mattered. The N'ai name and the power behind it were his sole focus. Larry was a great guy who cooked burgers on the grill and took Shane camping. He welcomed me into the family like a...well, like a son."

"Sometimes family isn't about blood," Kendall said quietly.

"No, it's not. And that's why it's hard to see Shane like this. He's always the serious one but never like this."

She'd had a feeling Shane wasn't exactly the angry type. There were far too many laugh lines that didn't match the somber-faced Shane she'd met today. It didn't make sense for her to want to go upstairs and check in on him. If he wasn't talking to his best friend, why would he talk to her—a complete stranger?

She sighed. "I suppose you're the charming one?"

He grinned. "I've been known to be charming." He dropped his hand to her lower back, turning her toward the island.

She climbed onto the stool in front of her. Everything in the kitchen was outfitted for a giant. "I bet."

"Not interested?"

She laughed. "If I were a smart woman, I would be."

He arched a brow. "You're not?"

Yeah, he was a pussycat. A Bengal tiger-sized pussycat but harmless. She leaned on her propped hand and couldn't fight a giggle.

"Good thing I have a healthy—"

“Ego?”

His face melted into a devastating smile. “I was going to go with sense of self-preservation. No matter how attractive you are.”

Her heart thudded. “Thanks. I think.”

“If Shane wasn’t in the picture, my interest would be crystal clear.” He leaned in. “Crystal.”

“Shane and I...” What? They’d had sex. Spectacular sex, but in the end, it was just a reaction to a crazy situation. When death was involved, some people got drunk, and some people got laid.

Shane was currently on the get-drunk portion of the night. And her formerly dormant hormones were still sizzling. That was all. “My interest is purely physical.”

“Oh.” He blinked and crossed his arms over his chest. “Can’t say I was expecting that answer.”

“I might be from a small town, Kain, but not the small-town sensibility. We’re both adults, and things happen.”

His eyes went from friendly to cool. “That wouldn’t include charming my best friend out of his inheritance, would it?”

Her eyebrows shot up, and her spine went rigid. “Of course not.” Shit. She wasn’t some femme fatale.

“The terms of the will don’t do you any favors.”

“No, they don’t. The will has been nothing but a nightmare, but I can’t change things.” Not when it was her own mother who had put them in this position. If her mother had just changed the deed into her name when her father gave them the house, they wouldn’t be in this mess. Her father was and would always be an opportunist. Her mother had her head in the sand, but Kendall had been just as guilty. She hadn’t protected herself or her home either. Kendall clenched her fingers.

“Do you know what you two are going to do?”

“No. We had to spend the last five hours figuring out the finer points of the will thanks to Jonas’s handy legalese.” Her father’s secrets and lies. Why should she expect anything else? She tried to stuff down the anger, but it didn’t want to go back into its box.

“Now I have to share my business with a man who didn’t do any of the work, didn’t worry over it, slave over it, and give his life up to it to support the one person who gave a crap about me. No, I have to share it with a stranger. And that’s the best possible outcome. The worst? We have to sell it

and split the money.” She hopped off her seat. “So don’t talk to me about charming anyone out of their inheritance.”

“Kendall, wait.”

“No, you wait. I got this summons to come here—from my home in New York where I wasn’t bothering anyone—to get in the middle of this drama pot? I don’t need it, Kain. I don’t need any of this.”

“Shane lost everything too.”

She tried to rein in her temper. “And I’m sorry for that, but at least Lawrence wanted him. He sure as hell didn’t care about me.”

Shit.

Kain walked around the island, and she backed up. “No. I don’t need you to feel sorry for me. I didn’t mean to say that.”

“No, you mean you didn’t mean to say that out loud.”

She shut her eyes against the tears. She didn’t pine for her father. Her mother had made sure she was loved, and Kendall rarely even thought of him. But this will was a blatant reminder she didn’t need. That Lawrence didn’t care enough to reach out to her except to take. Except to give another piece of her away, this time to the boy who meant more to him than she ever did. “I just need to figure all this out.”

“Take the time and do that.”

“We don’t really have that much time. That will locked everything up for Shane, and I need to get back home.”

Kain plowed his fingers through his hair. “We didn’t have time to get the money straight. I didn’t even know Larry had a new will written up. I would have had everything taken care of by the end of the year. No one would have known how bad it was.”

Pain shimmered in Kain’s fierce green eyes. Her voice gentled. “Do you think Shane would want to be in the dark about this?”

“No.”

She sighed and laid a hand on his ridiculously wide chest. “You really think that Shane wouldn’t have figured it out?”

“All Larry wanted was to give Shane a way out. He didn’t want him to be burdened by the mess that Justice Construction had gotten into.”

“And you wanted to help Shane.” The realization settled down the last of her anger. “He doesn’t seem the type to allow that.”

Kain pinched the bridge of his nose. “You would be right.” He dropped his hand, his eyes earnest. “I could give you the money.”

She stepped back and jammed her hands into the hoodie pockets. It would solve all her problems. She fisted her hands. For once in her life there was someone willing to help out, no questions asked. A stranger who could make all the difference in the world.

Kain rubbed her arm. "It's not about the money."

Kendall dragged her attention back to him and looked up. "Come on."

"Just enough to get you guys situated. Get you both to New York."

Her fingers relaxed. "Shane already knows I'm poor as a church mouse." Things just weren't ever meant to be easy. Why would this situation be any different?

Kain turned and slammed his fist into the fridge.

She winced. "Feel better?"

"Fuck." He shook his hand and flexed it carefully.

She turned him around and pushed him onto a stool. She opened drawers near the fridge.

"What are you looking for?"

She found power bars, granola bars, and trail mix. In another, she found what had to be his junk drawer. "Baggie? Towel? Something for ice?"

"There's a gel pack in the freezer."

"Ah." She opened the bottom drawer of the huge refrigerator and spotted the blue pack, pulled it out, and slapped it on his swelling hand.

"Ow."

"Don't be a baby."

He winced. "You're something else."

"That's what they tell me." She turned back to the freezer and took out the pint of ice cream she'd seen.

"Hey. Crappy Florence Nightingale routine I can forgive. Stealing my Cherry Garcia? That's a no."

"Spoons?"

He sighed. "Drawer behind you."

"Got it." She hip-checked the drawer shut, then popped the lid on the pint and handed him a spoon. "I just said no to money. I deserve ice cream."

"You don't have to say no."

"Yeah." She dug in and carved out a dense spoonful of the pink confection of perfection. "I do."

He plunged his spoon into the hole she'd made. "What is it with you two?"

She shrugged. "Did you take a handout to get where you are?"

He met her gaze and squinted. "I see what you did there."

Kendall grinned around a mouthful of cherry goodness.

"I just want to help."

"I know, and I'm sure Shane appreciates it when he's not being grouchy. So he's really not this bitchy all the time?"

"Oh, no, he's plenty bitchy."

Laughing, she sat back, then swallowed another bite. "Good to know."

"But he's a good guy. Just too serious sometimes. And now if you guys move to New York, who's going to be around to keep him in beer and pretzels? Who's going to drag him out of his workshop and make him watch a ball game?"

She twisted the spoon in her mouth and licked the bowl of the spoon clean. "You're going to miss him."

He made a production of scraping the inside of the carton. "Yeah, I'm going to miss the grouch."

"And I gather from earlier that Shane doesn't want you to be a backer for a shop of his own?"

"Yep."

So he was going to be her problem. And somehow she had to convince Shane that selling the Heron wasn't an option. Oh, and figure out what to do with the overwhelming attraction between them at the same time.

No big deal.

"All we have is each other right now," she said quietly.

"That's true. Are you sure you want to add sex into the mix? Never mind. By the look on your face, I just answered my own question."

What? Was she wearing an "I had sex" T-shirt or something? "Look, I appreciate that Shane's got someone like you in his corner, but in the end we've only got each other to figure this out."

"Tomorrow is soon enough for that. It's nearly ten, and you're on East Coast time."

One a.m. was well past her bedtime. "I'm sorry we ended up crashing here."

"That's fine. You can crash in my sister's room."

She nodded. Maybe with some sleep she could actually make an intelligent decision in the morning. "Let me help you clean up."

He shook his head. "Go on up. I have a few more hours of work to do,

and I can do that down here.”

She sighed and climbed the stairs. The house was silent. The carpeting muffled her footfalls as she reached the landing. The first room’s door was cracked open, but the lights were off. The dull scrape of glass over wood made her pause. She could hear the low crash of surf from an open window.

She pushed the door a little wider. “Shane?”

Her eyes adjusted to the dim light. An ivory panel fluttered around the sliding door. There was just enough moonlight to show the half-empty bottle and heavy tumbler with a shot’s worth of amber liquor inside sitting on the desk. She moved into the room, then closed the door behind her.

“Sure you want to do that, babe?”

The husky tone of his voice didn’t sound slurred, but the insolent *babe* brought that firefly back to life in her chest. She followed his voice out the door and gripped the doorjamb, stepping back into the room. The balcony was glass and steel like the rest of the house. The ocean roared beneath them as the tide battered the rocks spitting spray into the night. Moonlight shimmered across the breakers—wild and beautiful like the man who leaned against the railing. Dress pants hung low along his tapered waist, and his dress shirt was long gone.

“Shane, why don’t you come inside?”

“Why don’t you come out here?”

Everything inside her wanted to move closer, to touch the smooth expanse of his back and feel those muscles bunch and glide under her fingertips again.

He looked over his shoulder, his eyes glittering in the dark. “You want another fuck, Miss New York?” His voice rumbled, barely rising over the crashing waves.

Her nails bit into her palm. “You’re an asshole.”

His wide hands flexed around the steel railing. The muscles of his shoulders rippled under the strain. “I’ve been an asshole since you met me. Didn’t stop you from climbing on me before.”

No, it hadn’t. Hell, it had ramped up the lust. Not that she’d tell him that. She took a deep breath and stepped out onto the glass platform. She swallowed against the quick shock of vertigo. Cool air whipped her hair around her face. “Are you just going to sulk in the dark?”

He shrugged and looked back out at the water. “Not bothering anyone. But I don’t think you came in here to check on me for that, now, did you?”

“What makes you say that?”

He turned and crossed his arms over his chest as he leaned his hip against the glass. “You closed the door.”

How the hell could he know that? “What? Do you have the ears of a bat?”

He didn’t answer her, just pushed off the rail toward her. “Worried about me?”

She straightened her shoulders. “If you pitch yourself off the balcony, then the Heron is mine free and clear.”

His teeth flashed. “Is that right?” She took a step back as he closed the distance. He caught her wrist. “Running?”

She wasn’t sure if it was the roar of the sea or her heart rate in her ears as he wrapped his long fingers around her pulse point. “I don’t need to run.”

“You don’t want to run. There’s a difference.” He drew her wrist behind her back until she went up on her toes and her breasts grazed his chest. The dark thrill zinged through her, tightening her nipples to aching points. The sharp tang of whiskey burned her nose. He brushed his lips along her jaw and nipped at her ear. “I’m tired of being numb. When I’m inside you, I can feel again.”

She shivered. She understood the numbness now. When she was busy, she didn’t think about her empty bed. She was too glad to see it at the end of the day to want to do anything more than sleep. One touch from Shane and sleeping was the last thing on her mind. She should be exhausted, but her body was so keyed up she could only think about getting him over her or under her.

He brought his mouth to hers, hovering just out of her reach. “Is this what you want?”

She nodded. The heat of his breath against her lips stalled her ability to speak.

He jerked her hoodie over her shoulders and down her arms, but instead of dropping it to the floor, he trapped her hands and brought the zipper up to lock her arms behind her. His touch was gone. She had room to move—to a point. “I watched your face this afternoon when I held your arms behind you. You liked it.”

She gasped. She wasn’t sure if she liked it. She wanted to touch, wanted to feel the warmth of his skin under her hands. But with her shoulders pinned back, her breasts were on display. The cool night air streaked through the thin tank she wore. He nosed down a strap, leaving only the stretchy lace of her



bra as a shield. His breath was hot and moist, but he didn't touch her. Didn't taste her.

"Is this what you want?"

She nodded again and groaned when he pulled away.

"I need to hear you say it, Kendall."

She closed her eyes. "Yes. Yes, I want this."

"Like this?" He circled her nipple through the lace. Needing to see what he was doing, she opened her eyes. His eyes glittered in the diffused light as he used the second knuckle of his finger to go first clockwise, then counterclockwise around her tight nipple. "Will you let me touch you? Will you let me make you come?"

She pressed closer. "Yes."

He stepped back, and she hissed. Goose bumps raced over her skin without his warmth. He drew down both the straps of her tank and bra until they became another binding. He cupped her breasts. "So small and perfect." He lowered his head, then used the flat of his tongue to swipe under one nipple before fastening his lips around it and flicking with his tongue. Her ribs expanded as she sucked in a deep breath. With his thumb and forefinger he tugged at the other, drawing the tip away from her breast before releasing it. Again and again the pressure increased with each pull. She jerked at her bonds. There was just enough tension to hold, but she could still slip free. Instead she linked her fingers and fell into the swamping pleasure.

The suction from his mouth made her skin tingle. Her head spun. He released her with a *pop*, letting the air hit her wet nipple. He switched to her other breast. The fingers that had been ruthlessly plucking her nipple gripped her hip instead. He drew so hard that her nipple throbbed like a heartbeat. He flicked his thumb under the first one he'd paid attention to, and she cried out.

He straightened and cradled both breasts, grazing her nipples with the pads of his thumbs as he trailed the tip of his tongue up to her collarbone, tracing the dip there, then along the column of her throat. All the while, his endless metronome of a touch brought her nipples to such sensitive peaks she could barely breathe. He nipped her chin and finally caught her mouth. He opened her wide, stroking his tongue along hers.

His kiss was a soft meeting of mouths, back and forth until she had to shift her thighs apart just to stay upright. How could a touch be so caring and so ruthless? She could taste the whiskey and the heat of him as she ticked up another level of want. Her thighs quivered, and then the gentle swipes turned

to sharp pulls on each nipple. She heard her keening cry but didn't care. All she could do was chase the pleasure.

The static Shane was gone. One hand slipped under her pants and into her panties. His groan against her throat echoed her own. "Fuck. So wet." He knuckled into her slick folds and circled the tight bead of her clit.

She shuddered, and her head fell back. His chest was a wall of heat against her swollen nipples. He pinched her clit in a firm grasp between two knuckles until she moaned his name. When he released the sensitive flesh and started circling again, she shuddered. Restless and on the verge, she rolled her hips in time with his touch.

His other hand gripped her ass. "Christ, Kendall."

She couldn't think. The riot of emotions rattled her. She rubbed her chest against his, and her hips jerked with each swipe of his knuckles. With his mouth back at her breasts, she stumbled. Who knew she used her arms for balance so much? She twisted her arms to free herself. He stopped, staring up at her.

"No."

Her breath stalled in her chest.

He widened her stance and dropped to his knees, peeling down her pants. "I want you like this." His hot breath teased across her thighs before he gripped her ass, hauling her forward. He breathed her in, then rumbled out a groan. Kendall couldn't stop the whimper. Both of them in supplicant stances. She'd never felt more vulnerable or so turned on in her life. His forearms braced her hips as he transferred his grip to her wrists, then to her forearms until they were locked together just as his tongue slid inside her.

Invasive, overwhelming, intimate—all the things she'd never once allowed. Not like this. She was at his mercy, and the quick bite of fear drowned under a deluge of pleasure.

He wrapped his lips around her clit and sucked, drawing hard and relentlessly. Her nails dug into his forearms as words, sounds, the room, everything disappeared into the chasm of pure bliss. When oxygen became paramount, she dragged in a breath, and the swipe of his tongue brought her back into herself.

He gentled his grasp but didn't let her go as he lapped at her. The flat of his tongue opened her wider, and he found her clit again. She struggled against the vortex of pleasure. She couldn't survive it again. Not and stay upright. "More."

She shook her head. There was no way she could give him any more.

He looked up at her, his mouth and chin wet with her. He licked at her folds lazily. “I love how your thighs quiver. That’s how I know.”

He tugged off the rest of her hoodie and stripped her to the skin. He stood and lifted her until she clutched around him with both arms and legs. His dress pants abraded her delicate tissues, but instead of drawing back, she undulated her hips against him. It would probably kill her, but she was revved for more.

The short hairs of his buzz cut tickled under her fingertips as she palmed the top of his head, then slanted her mouth over his. He jerked back, but she latched on to him. She could taste herself on his lips, on his tongue. The smoky remnants of the liquor made for a heady mix of flavors. The kiss was anything but sweet. The crush of his mouth on hers, the dominant angle of his head, and the hypnotic stroke of his tongue made her want more. The chain of the rosary he wore dug into the side of her wrist. The nip of pain and the full-body press as he crawled onto the bed with her wrapped around him kicked her into motion.

She scuttled back, her fingers at his zipper.

He tried to push her hands away, but she wasn’t going to be held back again. She wanted to touch him this time. She peeled his pants over the muscular curve of his ass. She smoothed her fingers over the lighter skin. His cock sprang free and bobbed between them. She smiled up at him. His face was all serious and intense, his jaw locked around a growl. She smiled wider and cupped her palm under his shaft.

Had she ever made a man growl before?

With the lightest of touches, she skittered her fingertips over the suede softness of his head. He jerked in her hand. “Are you going to just play with it?”

She laughed. “Maybe.”

The cross of his rosary swung in front of her. The dichotomy of religion and hot, near-stranger sex made her heart kick. The chain slithered over her forearm, tickling her as she grasped him. His groan burrowed into her. The power of the sound matched the volume as her grip intensified. She cupped his balls with her other hand as she clasped the base of his cock. The underside of his shaft pressed into her belly.

“Tell me you have something.”

He buried his forehead into the pillow beside her head and thrust into her

hand. “God, I hope there’s something in here.” She pumped his shaft, and he stilled above her. “Not helping.”

She hiked her knee over his hip. “Incentive to find a condom. Until then...” She grazed the underside of his cockhead and up to the split at the top. Precum coated the pad of her thumb. She watched him as she slid her thumb between her lips.

“Fuck.”

He was salty and warm. “Well, hurry up.”

He reached over her and fumbled in the drawer beside the bed. He leaned back, his dress pants bunched around his knees. She followed him up and swiped her tongue under the head. He groaned, “Kendall.”

She looked up at his warning tone, letting his shaft slide along the cup she’d made with her tongue. She flattened it, enjoying the texture of his veins and widening shaft until he hit the back of her mouth. She tried to relax, but it had been a long time since she’d done this. She fisted his shaft and sucked around the tip of him. He slid his fingers into her hair.

“Christ.”

She closed her eyes and eased him in deeper. His grip on her hair tightened, and the bites of pain urged her to take more of him. She let him go with a soft, sucking *pop*. His face was even stonier. She dug her nails into the tops of his thighs. “Giving up so soon?”

He stumbled off the bed and into the bathroom. He came back with a strip of condoms and flipped her onto her back. “You are going to be the death of me.” The amused grunt was the first time she’d heard anything remotely friendly from his mouth.

She rose onto her elbows and flicked her hair over her shoulder. She watched him take his cock in hand. Part of her wanted to stop and watch him stroke himself. To watch him erupt in his hand, but it was too dark. And she wanted him inside her far too much.

“Don’t fucking look at me like that.” He rolled the condom over his shaft.

Her smile grew wider. “Like what?”

He didn’t answer; instead he crawled over her, the rosary cross teasing the skin between her breasts as he settled himself between her thighs. She pushed the pillows out of her way. Want and curiosity replaced the fire and neediness.

He slid the tip of his cock through her folds and stared down at her. Her hazy restlessness seemed to have transferred to him. He drew her leg up and

draped her calf over his shoulder. Curiosity dissolved with each inch into her. The angle opened her wide and let him thrust into her until every single tissue and muscle was stretched to accept him.

She reached over her head for the headboard and tried to lever herself up to meet him, but he pinned her into the bed. His eyes glittered in the moon-spun dark as his hands rested beside her head. He slowly rocked inside her with a groan. She cried out. Overwhelmed and unable to do anything but take what he gave her, she gripped his shoulders.

She wanted to flip him, to be in control, but with each glide of his cock inside her she opened more, accepted more. He filled her so completely that darkness pulled in and around her, drenching her in his amber-soaked scent. With each breath she drew in, he pushed deeper. Each breath out was torture because all she wanted was the closeness, the fullness. All she wanted was Shane.

She choked out a sob of frustration. He filled her, ramped up the need, but the pace was killing her. He leaned back, pulling out of her until just the tip of his cock teased her entrance. Before she could move, he hooked his arm under her other knee, turning her onto her side. She clutched the pillow-top mattress edge as he folded her knees together and pushed them up.

She turned her mouth into the bunched sheets and screamed. The angle made him feel even bigger. He slammed into her again and again. Her body shattered around his, accepted the invasion of this man who had the power to change her whole world inside this room and out of it.

Spots danced behind closed lids, and sweat dripped from every inch of her skin. She spasmed and cried as her body shook with aftershocks she couldn't control. He smoothed his hand from hip to thigh as his strokes slowed, and her limbs collapsed under her. She pressed her cheek into the mattress and sucked in gasping breaths. He pulled away and stood. She brought her knees up the rest of the way to her chest.

Surely she was going to fly apart.

In the conference room, she understood the sex there. That was anger and frustration needing an outlet. This—no, this didn't make sense. She rolled until she was sitting upright. Her entire body felt like an open wound. Her thighs shook as she stood to gather her clothes.

The room was silent save for the high tide roaring outside. The thought of the stretchy fabric on her skin right now was too much to take. She set her bundle of clothes on the desk and leaned on the sturdy chair. The glass was

still there. Maybe alcohol would settle her jangling nerves. The smooth burn chased the lump down her throat as she unhooked his dress shirt from the back of the chair and slipped it on, buttoning it enough to stay closed.

She turned, and her heart slammed. He stood in the bathroom doorway wearing only his boxer briefs.

“Fuck, you’re beautiful.”

His coarse voice and words were like a slow stroke down her back. Again nothing seemed to make sense when it came to this confusing man. Closed off one moment, stretching her open and demanding everything the next, and now this. She tucked her hands into the overlong sleeves of his shirt.

*Thank you* didn’t seem to fit. Instead, she followed instinct and went to him. It was the only thing she could trust right now. Silvery moonlight highlighted his cheekbone and kiss-swollen mouth, leaving the rest of his face in shadow. His shoulders and torso were a fascinating terrain of dips and valleys that made the pads of her fingers buzz. She brushed her knuckles over his belly. The muscles of his abs bunched and tightened under her touch. Some of her nerves settled. Maybe he was just as affected as she was.

She cupped the cross of his rosary in her palm. The back of her hand tingled at the soft brush of his chest hair. “Are you religious?”

“My mother was. She always had it with her.”

She traced the Madonna medal in the center. He pushed away a lock of her hair that had fallen forward, but then stepped back. The smooth beads slid from her hand.

“I think you should stay here with Kain while I get some things settled.”

Suddenly cold, she curled her fingers around the gap in his dress shirt. “What?”

“There’s nothing here for me in Monterey. I need to take care of a few things.”

She frowned. “I thought we were going to do this together.”

“I have to talk to Jonas and sell whatever I can. Most of my money was wrapped up in Justice Construction, so that’s gone now. I have to figure out a way to get us back to New York.”

“I...” She took a step back. She what? She was dependent on this man, and he was going to go off and do God knew what alone. Had the orgasms short-circuited her brain? Kendall painstakingly made sure not to rely on anyone, and she was completely at his mercy. She’d allowed herself to be. God dammit, how fucking stupid was she?

One of a half dozen mistakes she'd made since getting off the plane.

Damn her mother for blazing through their emergency money with this blasted trip. For what? To come in person and see for herself that her entire world was going to change thanks to an amendment in Lawrence Justice's will? At least in Winchester Falls she was on her own turf. She could rely on the one person who always got things done.

Herself.

She turned away and grabbed the yoga pants off the desk and stepped into them. She could feel him behind her but couldn't look at him. With shaking fingers she unbuttoned his shirt and let it drop. She dragged on her tank top and went to the door.

"Kendall."

She stopped with her hand on the doorknob. "You're right. We have a lot of things to take care of. I'll need you to take me back with you in the morning so I can get my rental car."

"I'll return it."

She shook her head. "I'm not going to be reliant on Kain to drive me around." She couldn't afford more than another day's rental on the little coupe. Not if she had to find her way back across the country.

"Kain has a fleet of cars in his garage."

Incredulous, she let her hand slide limply to her side. "I'm sure Kain would appreciate you dumping me on him."

"I'm fairly sure that Kain would love it."

She turned at his low, dangerous voice. "You think that I'd even..." Pride and astonishment clogging her ability to form a sentence. "After—"

"After what, babe? This was just fucking. I don't have any hold on you."

Stunned, she got her voice back. "Congratulations on the upgrade. You're a fucking asshole. That fits better." She opened the door, then slammed it behind her.

# FIVE

“It’s pretty impressive to get laid and have the woman slam the door in your face within the same hour.”

“Fuck off, Kain.”

“If you don’t want me to comment, then don’t have sex in my house. Especially loud sex I can hear over my headphones.”

Shane’s grip tightened on his dress shirt. He hadn’t been able to put it on after she’d worn it. Just a few minutes against her skin, and it smelled like her. Apples and sex. Two things that shouldn’t go together, but as usual the dichotomy was what made him sit up and pay attention.

He knew the difference between losing himself in sex and losing himself in a woman. Twice in the same day was more than scratching an itch. Twice with the same woman who left him wrecked and lashing out at her, that was the capper.

He balled up his shirt.

“Shane, this doesn’t have to be a cluster fuck. Just let me help you guys get to New York. It’s the least I can do.”

Shane looked up at his friend. Kain was one of the few people he actually had to look up at. Even with all the gargantuan guys he’d worked with on construction sites over the years, no one was quite as holy-fuck-huge as Kain. “I think you’ve done enough.”

Kain’s eyes flattened.

Shane held up a hand. “No, not like that. I appreciate you taking over our employees and making sure the jobs get done. I just can’t let you bail me out of this too.”

Kain dipped his hands into his pockets. “It’s just money.”



“It’s just your money.”

“And I decide how I want to use it.”

Shane held out his hand. “I know it, but this I need to do alone.” It was more than time for him to stand on his own. Avery Furniture had started with a backup. He didn’t want Larry’s name and influence involved, but he hadn’t taken the plunge without the safety net of Justice Construction. He needed to know he could do this by himself.

The training wheels had to go into the garage sometime.

Kain grasped his forearm, and Shane did the same before breaking the contact.

“You know I’ll do anything you need,” Kain said.

“Good, because I need you to babysit Kendall.”

Kain’s brow rose. “I’m pretty sure she’s a grown-up. The gymnastics upstairs certainly settled that discussion.”

Shane scratched along the few days’ growth of beard at his neck. “I’d rather not talk about that.”

“I got it. You’re interested in her. I didn’t really need a sound track as proof.”

The moment Kendall had come into that room, there had been nothing on his mind but her. Kain might be a charming son of a bitch, but he was loyal beyond definition. As young as his best friend was, there was an old-world shadow that rode behind him. Honor was important, and he’d never poach.

“I don’t know what’s going on with Kendall. I have to focus on the future, not getting her naked. And that’s why I need a few days away from her.”

He didn’t trust himself not to get wrapped up in her. The minute he got near her, there was a hunger that precluded all sense. Attraction he understood, but not this gnawing hunger to strip back all her defenses and take everything he could from her.

The numbness he’d felt since Larry had his heart attack two weeks before and through the hospital visits and finally his death—all that faded the moment he got his hands on her. The fact that it came back, double time, made her more addiction than cure.

He needed to know he could walk away.

For himself and for her.

“I’ll wine and dine her. Keep her occupied.”

Shane’s spine straightened. “As long as it’s occupied, not romanced.”

Kain grinned. "I can't help it if I'm more charming than you." His smile faded. "That wasn't always the case."

It felt like that part of him was behind Plexiglas. He could see it but didn't know how to reach it. He wasn't sure he'd ever be that person again. He was pretty sure his laughter had gone into the ground with his father.

"Just take care of her."

It took all his willpower to walk to the door. Kendall was right; he was a fucking asshole. And she didn't need him in her life right now. Even if losing himself in her arms was the sweetest thing he'd known in too many years to count.

He pulled out of Kain's drive and pushed Kendall to the back of his mind. He had a lot of work to do and not much time to do it in. The quiet, winding road gave him plenty of room to think. By the time he made it to his father's house, he had a half plan formed.

Now he just had to make sure the money worked.

Kendall pushed the door from the garage open into Kain's small mudroom. "I can't believe you did that."

"You're the one who dared the personal shopper from Chanel to go with you to Target. Who does *that*?"

She dropped two huge shopping bags on the counter. "I was playing your wingman. You got her phone number, didn't you?"

Kain grinned down at her. "I did. You still should have let me pay for the clothes."

Kendall laughed. "Maxing out my Target card was worth it for the look on Monica's face. Especially when I saw her try on two pairs of those dress pants in her size when she thought I wasn't looking."

But now she had clothes for the trip home and a few extras that she probably shouldn't have bought. She had a problem with bras. The only good thing about being a B-cup was the ability to buy cheap bras. Her girls were small, but they were always dressed pretty.

Her phone buzzed in her pocket. She held up a finger to Kain and answered. "Hey, Mom."

“Any idea when you’re coming home, sweetie?”

Her mother had called and asked the same question twice a day, but it was now day three, and Shane hadn’t contacted her once. Kain was playing the perfect host, yet she hated to just sit here and do nothing. “Still working out the specifics.”

“I can’t believe that will is so complicated.”

Kendall winced. She hated to lie to her mother. How was she supposed to tell her that everything was going to change when she was over three thousand miles away? “As soon as I know more, I promise I’ll let you know.” Kain tucked groceries into the fridge. She leaned heavily on the counter. Her good mood evaporated.

“Sweetie, I know you’re not telling me something. I wish you didn’t think you have to take care of me all the time. I’m the mother, you know.”

She smiled and dipped her head until her forehead touched granite. “I don’t want to worry you. Are you sure you can handle the Heron without me?”

“Bells has been stopping by to take me to the store every night. We only have one group of men here, and they are repeat guests. They don’t need you to be here to show them all the good fishing spots.”

From a monetary standpoint, that news sucked, but she was glad it would be an easy week. “You have—”

“Sweetheart, I have Bells’s phone numbers. You know this is a slow time of year. Thanksgiving is right around the corner.”

“I know.” Kendall hoped to God she’d be home before that.

“Just come home as soon as you can. And stop keeping me in the dark. At least say you’ll think about it. You’re as stubborn as your father was.” She could hear the tears in her mother’s voice. The news of Larry’s death had hit Lily hard. As if the man hadn’t abandoned them twenty-two years ago. Kendall felt a prick of her own tears in sympathy for her mother. Her mother was so strong about everything except that blasted man.

“It’s about damn time.”

Kendall looked up at Kain’s voice. Her gaze followed his to the kitchen doorway through to the dining room.

“I’d say the same thing. It’s about fucking time you two got back.”

“Mom, I gotta go.”

“Who was that?”

*Oh, no one. Just the son of the woman who was more important than we*

were. “No one important.”

Shane leaned on the doorjamb with his arms crossed over his chest. A dark green thermal Henley pulled tight along his shoulders and biceps, bringing out the gold flecks of his hazel eyes. He hadn't shaved since she'd seen him last. A beard darkened his handsome features, accenting the rough-around-the-edges man she'd missed. She hated that one look at him kicked her heart rate into high gear.

Son of a bitch.

“Mom, some answers just walked in. I'll call you tomorrow morning, okay?”

“All right. I love you, sweetie.”

She looked away from Shane. “I love you too, Mom.” She shoved her phone into her back pocket. “Nice of you to show up.”

Shane crossed one booted foot over the other. “Glad you missed me, babe. Wouldn't want you to get too comfy with Kain.” His body language said relaxed, but he was just as wound up as she was. And she *had* missed him. Kain had been attentive and charming, generous to a fault, but all she'd wanted was Mr. Surly. And right now, him calling her *babe* made her want to slap the almost smile right off his face. The twitch of his fingers on his forearm echoed in the fluttering of her belly. Damn him for looking so good.

Kain rolled his eyes and opened the fridge. He pulled out three beers and slid them on the island. “If we're done with the flirting?”

Kendall took a beer and snicked off the top, then bounced it on the counter until it spun in front of Shane's beer.

His eyebrow rose as he walked in and took his beer. “Where were you two?”

“I think the better question is where were you, pal? You left me here without a car for three goddamn days.” The only reason she knew he'd taken her rental car back was because she got a text from the rental place thanking her for the car being dropped off. “Kain was the perfect host. Even showed me around Monterey.”

“I know. I told him to.”

She snapped the bottle down on the counter. “Excuse me? I'm not some dog you dropped off at the kennel, you as—”

“I know, asshole. Is this asshole with or without the adjective?”

She clicked her molars together. Swearing wasn't going to solve anything, but the man brought it out in her like no other.

Kain leaned on the fridge and sipped his beer.

Rein it in. She took a slow breath and lifted the bottle to her lips again. Shane did the same, and she forced herself to look away from his strong neck muscles pulling as he swallowed. Her hormones had been happily in a box for months. This man had to be the game changer?

“Are you done now?” Shane asked.

Not trusting herself, she simply nodded.

“We’ll be heading out in the morning.”

“Pardon me?”

“Pack up all the new goodies Kain bought for you.”

“I bought them myself, thanks.”

“Wasting trip money, babe?”

The bottle shook in her hand from holding it so hard, so she put it down. “First of all, I missed a perfectly comfy flight to stay and figure this out. A flight you asked me to skip so we could go back to New York together.” Okay, so the flight was economy and about as comfortable as sitting in a bumper car for eight hours, but goddamn that man.

He shrugged. “I trust you about as much as you trust me.”

“It was your bright idea to wait. So tell me, hotshot. How are you getting us back to New York?”

“We’re driving.”

“Driving?” Her jaw dropped. “That has to be three thousand miles.”

“A bit more, actually, but yeah.”

She couldn’t read a damn thing on his face. He couldn’t be serious. She couldn’t be trapped in a car with him for days on end. “This is your grand plan?”

“I sold off everything I could and shipped what I could to the Heron. The rest is in my truck, including you.”

Like she was luggage? “And you didn’t think to pick up the phone or come over here and discuss that with me?”

“What’s to discuss? All we have is the Heron. We’re in the same pile of shit, babe. While you were wining and dining with Kain, I was taking care of business.”

“So you’re just pulling up stakes?” Kain asked. His quiet voice dried up all the venom she was tempted to spew.

For the first time, a hint of emotion touched Shane’s face. “I don’t have a choice, brother.” He grinned, and his whole face changed. It softened him,

and his eyes actually crinkled at the corners. "You'll just have to make sure to come visit me, Daddy Warbucks."

"Oh, don't start calling me that."

The smile slowly slid away. "I talked to the men and to Gerry. They're all glad that they're going back to work next week."

"I told your father I'd take care of them."

Realization that more than just her life had changed radically sank in. As much as she hated Lawrence Justice for what he'd done to her, she'd at least had her mother to lean on. Shane had no one. And he was going across the country to start over. A strange place and a strange woman were now the center of his life. She took her bags in one hand and rounded the island. She didn't know how to deal with the flood of new feelings.

She didn't have a choice but to walk by Shane.

He grabbed her wrist before she could pass him. The grip wasn't hard, but he definitely wasn't letting her by. She looked up at him.

"I'm going to try and make this as painless as possible for both of us."

Not sure what to say or what to do, she nodded and tugged. He held on for another moment, his thumb brushing over the center of her palm before he let go. "We'll have plenty of time to talk in the truck. I promise."

"Damn right we will." She stopped in the doorway, looked back at Kain, and mustered up a smile. "Thanks for entertaining me, Kain."

"I think you have that backward, `ânela."

Kain had made sure her days were so full that she didn't have time to think about what Shane was doing, but he couldn't control her nights. Her body ached for something she'd never had before. It wasn't like she and Shane had been close, but her body certainly craved him. She felt empty and itchy. The musky amber scent of him had those hints of cedar again.

He smelled of wood and autumn and home.

Of all the things she loved and wanted to hold close.

What a cruel trick of fate. She held her head up and went through the living room and up the stairs. She needed to pack. It was time for everything to change.

Again.

She tossed her bags on her bed. How long would it take to go cross-country? Trapped in a confined space with Shane and his Oscar impersonation was not what she'd call a good time. Would it be any cheaper to drive than fly? Remembering her bank account's status as well as her

credit cards, she definitely didn't have any choice but to be at his mercy.

That made her belly cramp.

She took care of her own. She didn't like to be beholden to anyone, and yet here she was. Beholden to a near stranger who knew her more intimately than anyone else and yet didn't know the real her at all.

She snapped that particular box of ugly shut and dumped the clothes she'd bought out of the bag. Two pairs of cords, long-sleeved T-shirts in an array of colors she'd never thought to choose for herself—thank you, personal shopper chick—two pairs of jeans, one she was wearing, along with half a dozen bras with matching panties. Had she bought them for herself? Or just in case Shane got her naked again?

No. For herself. She happened to like pretty undergarments, dammit.

She folded the oversize fleece she'd picked up thanks to the cool nights in Monterey. She'd make do with what she had and get her ass home. Then she could figure out what to do with Shane and the Heron. Her phone buzzed, and she dug it out of her pocket. Bells. Her finger hovered on the Answer button when a knock on her door made her pause. She tapped Ignore and stuffed it back in her pocket. "Yeah?"

Without turning around, she knew it was Shane. Kain had been careful not to come to her room. He'd been the consummate gentleman. She must have a few screws loose, because she'd missed Shane's surly disposition.

"What can I do for you?"

"You know you should turn around and check who it is. Or were you expecting Kain?"

She looked over her shoulder at him. He leaned on the jamb, something she was coming to know as his I'm-going-to-play-this-cool stance. Too bad it made her want to shake him up all the more. "Really? I'm tired of that song. Kain doesn't come to my room."

"No?"

She folded one of the shirts, stacking it on top of the pants. "No."

He stepped inside. "And you're not interested in Kain?"

"I'm not interested in anyone at the moment."

"Oh, really?"

"Yes, really."

He stopped a foot away from her. "No one at all?"

She turned to face him. "It was just fucking, remember?"

"Right." The gold color at the center of his hazel eyes caught her

attention. A tiny flicker of heat was alive in all the cool green. Without the suit, he was a walking ad for LL Bean. Especially with the almost beard he was sporting. All he needed was a plaid shirt, and he'd be like every other man who came to the Heron. Except none of the fishermen made her feel like Shane did. Not that she hadn't been interested in a few over the years, but knowing they would be leaving within a week or less tended to put a damper on any ideas besides a fling or two.

Most of the time it wasn't worth the hassle.

Most of the time she didn't have time to think about it.

As usual, Shane didn't expand on that one word. The intensity was a living thing inside him, but it was behind a wall so thick she wondered if it could possibly be breached. Did she even have the right to wonder? Was it even smart to?

Their options were lousy, and nothing about this attraction was smart. He was in her life for one purpose: to become her partner or sell her bed-and-breakfast so they could each start a new life. Part of her wondered what it would be like to be free to do something else, but a larger part couldn't face the idea of losing her home. It was everything she knew. Everything she'd built with her mother.

But she did have this one slice of freedom.

A few days to see the rest of the country and forget about responsibilities.

She closed the distance between them until her breasts brushed his chest. His nostrils flared, and his jaw tightened. At least she wasn't the only one who reacted when they were close. "So we're really going to drive across the country?"

He nodded slowly. "I sold what I could and sent on the materials for my furniture to the Heron."

The first fingers of annoyance crawled up her spine. "Just like that? Without talking to me?" What the hell was she going to tell her mother? *Oh, Mom...by the way. Our home isn't ours anymore. We have to share it with the boy that replaced us. But that's okay, right?*

It just didn't make sense that she'd even be attracted to Shane. And yet her painfully tight nipples said otherwise. Even now she wanted to take that final step and surround herself in the outdoor scent that was as much a part of him as his skin.

"I have just as much right to use the property for storage. It is half mine." The gruff words were chased with a gentle pull of her hair. He wrapped the



tail of her braid around his thumb.

He was a constant source of mixed messages. Each stroke tugged the braid lightly, keeping her nerve endings frazzled. As tempting as he was, they were forced to be in each other's company. Would she want to be around him if she didn't have to be? Would he want to be around her?

Would this gnawing hunger exist if they'd met each other through friends or at a Christmas party?

She just wasn't sure.

She took a step back to prove that she could.

The ache didn't go away, but at least she could think. "You're right. You have every legal right to be at the Heron, whether it's your body or your furniture materials. I'll call my mom in the morning so she can direct the delivery to go into the barn."

"I appreciate that."

It was on the tip of her tongue to say *Hallelujah!*, but she stifled it. This was the first time he'd been civil to her. She turned away from him and picked up one of her new shirts to fold. "What time do you want to leave?"

"I have a few things to do in the morning, and then we can leave."

She smoothed her hand over the plum-colored T-shirt. "Do you want me to come with you this time?"

"Yes. Be ready at seven."

She nodded but still couldn't look at him. If she did, she'd want more. And she needed to think tonight. She let out a relieved breath when she heard the door close behind him. Tomorrow she'd be in his company nonstop. The thrill of it warred with her unease. Everything was changing. Her life had been static for so long she couldn't imagine having the freedom to go and see and experience different places. And now she was doing just that. With a man who made her realize what she'd been missing.

Could she treat this trip as an adventure? She slipped her arm across her midsection.

She just wasn't sure.

# SIX

Shane slammed the tailgate of his truck. The back was empty save for sleeping bags and his locker of tools. It was a crisp mid-November day, and the sun beat back the fog that had blanketed the coast. He'd been up well before dawn mainlining coffee. If they stayed on course, they should be able to make it across the states in a little under seven days. It was a big if. And the big if was because of Kendall.

She'd been laughing with Kain all morning. She was so easy with him. Shane envied their friendship. Hell, he envied anything that had to do with enjoyment and Kendall. The three days away from her had nearly killed him. The skin-on-skin contact was addicting enough, but he found that he missed her acerbic wit and the wide, sassy smirk when she tried to get him riled up.

She was a means to an end. But when he was around her, he could forget how angry he was. He'd taken so much for granted being a California Justice. He'd worked on his furniture nightly, and it had been a solid goal for his future. But it had been a future with no end date.

This was real. And this was his future.

And Kendall was part of the now. Their reality was soldered together in two misshapen forms. Did it make something ridiculous that would need to be fired apart, or was it something interesting that might fit better than anything else he'd ever known?

Was he even in the right frame of mind to decide?

All he knew was that she made him feel alive. And it seemed to be the only thing he could focus on.

Her peal of laughter dragged him out of his thoughts. She was hanging off Kain with a good two feet of air between her feet and the ground. His best

friend had her up on his hip, grinning like a lunatic as he whispered something to her.

She laughed again and gave him a smacking kiss on the cheek. “Thank you so much for taking such good care of me. I don’t remember the last time I’ve been so pampered.”

Shane’s jaw snapped closed. She dropped to the ground and gave Kain one more hug, her nose pressed into the middle of his chest. Shane couldn’t hear what else she said, but he could see the light of interest blazing in his friend’s gaze.

He fisted his hands.

He couldn’t blame his friend. Kendall was a pocket of sunshine with her warm, dark eyes that were at odds with her mane of almost-white hair. But that smile. Man, that smile was a blast to the gut. If Kain didn’t get his damn hands off her, he was going to snap his fucking wrist.

She bent to pick up her backpack, but Kain waved her off.

Fuck.

Shane walked toward them and took the bag from Kain. What was it about this woman that drove him crazy and negated any manners his mother had instilled in him? Kendall had him so freaking twisted up. And it pissed him the fuck off. “Thanks, Kain.”

“I can’t believe you’re leaving me to fend for myself in California, cuz.”

The familiar Hawaiian jargon loosened the lock on his jaw. He smiled. “I’m going to miss you too, brother.”

Kain hauled him in for a full-body-blocking hug and whomped his back.

“Christ, don’t crack my spine. I still have to drive a million miles.”

“I wish you’d let me—”

Shane stepped back and held up his hand. “We’ll be fine.”

Kain sighed and nodded. “Stubborn ass. You just want to road-trip with the hot girl.”

“You got me.”

Kendall looked up at him, that half grin making him want to return the smile. It would be so easy to slide his arm across her shoulders and drag her in. To stamp himself on her skin. Instead he looked back at his friend.

“I’ll let you know what happens when we make it to New York.”

“You’re welcome to come out during the holidays, Kain. My mother would love to meet you.”

Kain glanced at him, then back to Kendall. “I might do that.”

Would he still be there? Or would Kendall just like to see Kain? Shane swallowed down the acid burning up his throat.

Kain kissed the top of her head. "Aloha, `ânela. Be safe."

"Still not going to tell me what `ânela means?"

Kain grinned. "Shane might bust my lip."

Kendall turned to him, then back to Kain. "Nah."

Oh, he would. He'd pulverize his face if Kain didn't stop touching her.

"Now I have to go hijack the GPS. Shane doesn't know it yet, but we are going to be taking the scenic route."

His fingers loosened, and his chest tightened when she wrapped her fingers around his pinkie. That was not on his agenda, but her huge grin killed any reason to deny her. "Yosemite?"

"Oh, yes. I want to see the mountains and all the colors. I'm assuming you have color changes in California?"

Shane started to reply, but Kain interrupted him. "Yes. It's gorgeous out there this time of year."

There were places he could show her. And if it stayed as mild as it was today, he knew just where to take her. "We'll take a few detours."

She snagged her bag out of his hand. "I'm going to go look at my California travel book." She bounded forward and dragged Kain down for a kiss on the cheek. "Make sure you come visit me." She laid her hand on Shane's arm, squeezing lightly. "I'll let you two talk for a few minutes."

Shane fingered the end of her messy braid. "Thanks."

He watched her hoist herself up into the truck.

"You're a dead man."

He turned back to Kain. "I'm afraid you're right."

Kain's eyebrows rose. "You have funny way of showing it."

"Why the hell do you think I took off?"

"Yeah, I had a feeling. I have a soft spot for her, but it's not what you think, so you can stop orchestrating my death."

Shane's lips twitched. "Caught that, did you?"

"Subtlety has never been your strong suit."

Shane pinched the bridge of his nose. "No, I guess it hasn't."

"Just enjoy her and yourself. We have plenty of time to be grown-ups, brother."

But what happened at the end of the trip? Would they have to sell the bed-and-breakfast, or could she buy him out? When they needed to go their

separate ways, would he want to let her go?

He had nothing but Avery Furniture to offer, and that was fledgling at best. He needed the money from the sale of the property to give his dream a shot at reality.

Kain crossed his arms. "It's a shitty time to make any decisions. Just take things a day at a time."

Kain had always been the voice of reason when he and his father butted heads. Why would now be any different? "I'll be in touch."

"You better. Looks like I better sign up for frequent flier miles."

"Marcus wouldn't mind the change of pace."

Kain laughed. "I'm sure my pilot already has a honey stationed in New York."

"A few."

"No doubt." Kain's face sobered. "Things won't be the same without you."

Shane held out his hand. "You'll be taking over the world, just like usual."

They clasped forearms. "I prefer to do it with you by my side."

"I need to do this on my own." He needed to find out if he could do this on his own now more than ever.

"I know." Kain tightened his grip, then stood back.

Kain understood that more than anyone in his life. Shane opened his door and climbed into the cab of his truck. It smelled of her. Crisp apples and shampoo. It would always be Kendall.

She was true to her word. The GPS was hooked up and coordinates set.

"So where are we going, copilot?"

She tucked her chin on her shoulder and grinned at him. "I guess you'll find out in four hours."

He smiled. It was getting easier to do. He waved to his friend, and the *pop* of his gravel drive led to pavement and finally the open road.

"Did you know the Yosemite Falls is twenty-four hundred and twenty-three feet high?"

“Nope.”

She simply eyed him. She’d been spouting off facts for the last two hours. But it saved him from trying to come up with conversation, so he didn’t mind. She sat cross-legged with her seat belt on and a bottle of water between her legs. Evidently she didn’t get car sick, because she’d had her nose in the California guide since they’d left.

“It’s the largest falls in North America.”

“I did know that.”

“You did?”

“I did. I’ve lived here all my life. I’ve gone a time or two.”

“Oh.” She sounded disappointed. “I’m boring you, huh? Sorry. I’ve just never had the chance to go anywhere. Mom and I didn’t have a lot of money, and the Heron doesn’t allow much in the way of vacation time.”

His stomach flipped. His father had left her and her mother to fend for themselves. Oddly enough, she didn’t seem bitter about it. More like resigned. He was still trying to wrap his mind around the fact that his father had a daughter he’d never spoken of.

“How old are you?”

She quirked an eyebrow. “You and manners don’t get along too well, do they?”

He rolled his eyes. “Just answer the question.”

“Why?”

“I’m curious.”

She turned in her seat. “You’re never curious.”

“How do you know?”

“Because I’ve known you for almost a week now, and you haven’t asked me a single personal question.”

“I wouldn’t say that.”

She blushed and socked him in the arm. “You know what I mean.”

He grunted. “I was just wondering what our age difference was.”

“Oh.” She closed the guidebook. “I’m twenty-seven.”

He was thirty. He rubbed the heel of his hand over his chest. Lawrence had married his mom when he was eight. He wasn’t sure of the specifics, but it had been really fast. He didn’t know if his mother had been dating Larry before she introduced them, but all of a sudden Larry had been his stepdad and spending a lot of time getting to know him. He remembered moments of finding Larry staring out a window with a sad look on his face when he’d

first married his mother, but Shane had been so happy to have a father in his life that he'd rush in and drag him outside to play ball.

Had Larry really left Kendall behind at such a young age?

It just didn't make sense.

Of all Larry's faults, being an absent father wasn't one of them. Too involved would be more like it. The will was a testament to that. But why would he take away one more thing from Kendall? Shane wasn't the first child to have a parent die without leaving anything behind.

"Going to clue me in on the personal conversation going on in your head?"

"We'll talk about it when we stop for the night."

She jammed the guidebook into the backpack she'd bought that morning. "I hate when you do that."

He rubbed his palm on his jeans. He wasn't going to play dumb. "It's a little heavy to talk about. And it's too pretty a day to fight."

"Oh, and that makes me feel a million times better." She tucked her back into the door and crossed her leg over her knee. His large bench seat was perfect to let her stretch out. Part of him wanted to pull her feet into his lap. Everything about Kendall invited intimacy. She was so tiny and limber. God, was she limber.

His fingertips bit into his thigh in memory. That last night with her had been too intimate, too intense, too everything. He'd pushed her away as far as humanly possible.

She sat up suddenly. "Can we stop?"

He looked at the dash. They hadn't been on the road three hours yet. "Already?"

"There's a rest stop, and I prefer not to use a campsite one. I've seen them."

He sighed. "You aren't one of those girls that has a bladder the size of a walnut, are you?"

"No." She sneered at him. "I need snacks and a coffee. And you need something with caffeine too. Did you sleep at all last night?"

"Enough."

"Oh, yeah, big strong man. I no need sleep."

He knew she was looking for a laugh, so he kept his face perfectly stony.

She slumped. "Your sense of humor is nonexistent."

He pulled off for the rest stop and parked. Kendall clambered down and

jogged ahead to the visitor's center. After a trip to the men's room, he made a beeline for the mini-mart and decided to go with cold caffeine. He got in line. She was right. The road was starting to blur a little. Even with her Lonely Planet narration, he needed a quick stretch to get out of his own head.

He didn't want to ask her about when Larry had left her and her mother. He had a sinking feeling he knew the answer to that question. He just wasn't sure about the why.

She slapped a bag of Skittles and a Coke Zero on the counter in front of him. He looked down at her. "Are you sure you need sugar and caffeine?"

She smacked his arm with a fistful of brochures. "Yep. We have tons to see. And I've got our first stop."

"No, I have our first stop."

"Oh really?"

He paid and thanked the teller and took the bag before she could grab it. "Yes. I'm going to take you to my favorite spot."

"You actually have one of those?"

"Yes. My favorite spot is in Big Sur, but at Yosemite there's a place my mom used to take me when I was a kid." Shit. He expected her to clam up, but she didn't. Her eyes were bright and friendly and curious.

"Yeah? I can't wait to see it. Should we get a couple of sandwiches?"

"Yeah." He dug a twenty out of his jeans. "Why don't you do that."

"I have my own money."

Her raised chin and flash of pride made him want to kiss her boneless. He liked how she sighed into him and opened. All heat and generosity. "I told you I'd take care of getting you home, remember?"

Her brows lowered. "Yes."

He hooked his forefinger into her belt loop and dragged her in until she was on her toes, then tucked the bill into her front pocket. "Then let me."

Dark eyes dilated, and her mouth opened. She flicked her tongue along her bottom lip. He groaned, lowering his head until their lips lined up. A hint of peppermint teased the air between them. He brushed his nose along hers and breathed her in. She stilled in his arms. Soft. So freaking soft and lovely.

He let her go.

Her gaze dropped to his mouth before she pressed her lips together and backed away. She turned to the eateries.

"Kendall?"

She swung back to him, her eyes wary and still a little wild.



“Roast beef with the works. Hot peppers too.”  
She stared at him blankly for a moment before nodding.  
It was going to be a long damn trip.

KENDALL SNAPPED HER gum as she waited in line. Nothing, grouchy, a hint of friendly, then stony, and then that. How the hell was she supposed to keep up? Just when she thought she understood the unspoken rules between them, he pulled that bullshit on her.

Dammit.

Her blood was humming as if she'd just run a circuit around the lake at home.

She crossed her arms over her chest to hide her stupid reaction to that man. She was tired of being the one at the end of the strings. Her skin flushed at her neck. She could feel the heat. More than once she'd definitely been tied to him in a different way.

“Can I help you, Miss?”

“Yes, sorry.” Derailed by food. She made her order and added a couple of bottled waters to the list. She turned to lean on the counter and wait. Shane came out of the mini-mart again with another purchase. She saw the telltale red bag and grinned. Well, well. Oscar couldn't be all bad if he liked Twizzlers.

“Miss?”

She turned around and smiled at the kid behind the counter. He smiled back; the sandwich fell out of the bag. She laughed and tucked it in. “Thanks. Have a good day.”

“Yeah...uh, you too.”

She jogged over to meet Shane.

“You do know that kid is half in love with you, right?”

She shrugged. “I'm prettier than the truckers he's used to.”

His gold-green eyes flattened. “Mmm.”

She shook her head. “You get grouchy about the weirdest stuff.”

He took her bag. “You can't be that oblivious.”

“What? A seventeen-year-old kid who works in a rest stop got a little

fumbly because I gave him my big smile. Big deal.”

“Your big smile?”

“Yeah, the one I gave you the other night when I had my hand around your—”

“Kendall.”

His dark, uncompromising tone made her want to tease him all the more. She took the candy bag, and he grabbed it back. “Hey!” she said.

He reached in and tossed her the bag of Skittles.

“Something in there you don’t want me to see?”

He turned her toward the door. She grinned at the kid who was still watching them and waved.

“Christ, you’re a menace.”

She looked over her shoulder. “You love it.” His lips twitched. She ripped open a corner of her bag and popped a few candies in her mouth. His moods were beginning to make more sense. She was pretty sure he wasn’t quite as grouchy as he pretended to be. But she liked his growl face, so she didn’t mind so much. It was much better than the fake friendly she got at the inn. Oh, there were genuinely sweet people who came in, but for the most part, it was all about the good old boys who wanted to stink up her shed with fish.

Shane and Kendall walked through the parking lot. He slowed his stride to hers, and instead of climbing into the driver’s side like he usually did, he followed her to the passenger side. He opened the back door and stowed their food, then opened her door. Surprised, she froze.

“What?”

“You don’t usually open my door for me.”

“Yeah, well, I should.”

She grabbed the Oh, Jesus handle and hauled herself up. His wide hands curved around her hips as he gave her a boost. She bounced on the seat and met him face-to-face. He had such an interesting face. Almost pretty. But the beard softened his jawline in some ways and hardened it in others. She smoothed her thumb through the dent in his chin and placed a quick kiss on his lips. She reached for her seat belt, but instead of closing her door, he stepped up on the running board, held on to the roof of the truck, and sealed his lips over hers.

The cool bite of the soda he’d drunk mixed with his taste. Then the glide of his tongue dissolved the rest of her thoughts. Gentle was a useless commodity between them. His hand slid along her ribs to grip her waist. His

thumb traced the line of her underwire. A teasing touch that should have been nothing more than a little pleasure. Instead, it made her even more aware of how close he was to her nipple. His mouth was an invasion, and her defenses were nonexistent when it came to this man.

The wide, flat pad of his thumb was relentless.

Again.

He was going to drive her insane, and then she had to sit next to him for another hour?

She slid her hands up between them and turned her cheek to break the kiss. “Shane.”

He nipped her ear, then buried his nose in the curls that escaped her braid. “Buckle up, babe.” He stepped down and waited for her to get situated. She pushed her hair back.

When he continued to stare, she widened her eyes. “What?”

He grabbed the seat belt and slid it across her chest, making sure his forearm brushed her breast and the side of his hand grazed her left. She slammed her back into her seat as he clicked the tab into the buckle. “I can do it myself, you know.”

“Just being helpful.” He grinned and shut the door.

“Damn that man.”

He opened his door and climbed in. Without another word, he turned on the engine, buckling as he pulled out into the merge lane.

They didn’t speak for the next hour. She forced herself to look at the brochures for Yosemite and not at his profile. But as the highway road flowed into a winding road that was filled with rich amber yellows and hints of rust-colored trees, she fell into the scenery and the cloudless blue sky.

A few signs gave directions to attractions nearby. She rolled down her window and closed her eyes for a moment. Crisp air with a hint of water. The flavor was a little different from home but no less recognizable. He turned off a road—at least she was pretty sure it was a road. She braced her hand on the dash when they hit a dip, and she felt air between her ass and the seat.

“Why are we going off-road?”

“This is a road.”

She grasped the handle along the window frame and the dash as the nose of the truck suddenly dipped. “Oh, really?”

His lips quirked at the corner. “Yes.”

Oh, great. Now he was going to grow a sense of humor? She slapped the

roof of the truck when her ass lifted again, and she was jarred back down. “I hope you’ve got good struts.”

Again he didn’t say a word.

“You’re enjoying this.”

“Maybe.” He made a hard turn. The truck groaned over a hill, and she gasped, unlatching her buckle. Majestic and timeless, the mountains exploded out of the trees. Shale gray was the dominant color of the cliffside with rusty tips that made the mountains look like they’d been dusted in cinnamon. The surrounding trees were a deep evergreen color. Oaks and birch trees swayed in brilliant yellows among the green. A river roared beneath the tiny vista.

“This is your place?”

He nodded. “Merced River.”

She ducked her head out the window as he parked. She couldn’t get over how immense the mountains looked.

“Kendall, get back in here.”

She sat on the window frame and nudged his shoulder with her sneakered foot. “Be quiet. I’m communing with nature here.”

He laughed.

She slid back inside and knelt beside him on the bench seat. “Did you just laugh?”

He shook his head solemnly. “Nope.”

She drilled a finger into his biceps. “I think you did.”

“Go commune with nature.”

She spun around on the seat and opened the door and hopped down. “I think I will.” She ran to the edge of the vista, and the water and expanse of field on the other side made her itch to explore.

“Like it?”

She turned around, then rushed forward to take a bag from his overburdened arms. “It’s gorgeous. That view is to die for.”

“Wait until you see the next one.”

“Really? It’s better than this?”

He looked up. “Clear skies. Yeah, it’ll be even better.” He dropped the sleeping bag, then released the ties and snapped it out.

The sun was well past its zenith, but it was still warm enough that she stripped out of one of her layers and threw her shirt at the corner of the sleeping bag, leaving just her skinny-strap tank top. She toed off her sneakers, kicking them onto the grass, stretched out on her stomach, and

propped herself on her elbows. The super-cushioned and insulated material was almost better than her mattress. With the sun on her back and the view, could it get any better?

Shane unpacked their food and held up the huge deli pickle she'd bought. He lifted a brow and set it beside her sandwich. She grinned, but her attention slid back to the mountains. "I can't get over that view."

"So you keep saying." He leaned back and crossed his legs. "My mom took me here every year as long as I can remember."

She looked down at her turkey club. Not sure she wanted to know, but she asked anyway. "After she met Lawrence?"

"No. Not after Larry," he said quietly.

She took a healthy bite of her lunch. The crunch of lettuce and bacon with the kick of horseradish mayo made her groan. "Oh, man, that's good."

He glanced at his sandwich. She laughed. Limp bread soaked through with greasy mayo didn't look nearly as appetizing as hers. She sat up and held hers out. "Bite?"

She was expecting him to say no, but he leaned in and took a large bite. "Hey!"

He shrugged. "You offered." He rolled onto his knees. "Yours is better."

She pulled her arm back. "A bite, not the whole thing."

He flipped her onto her back and clasped her wrist. His lips brushed her fingers as he took the last bit of the quarter of her sandwich. "Much better than mine."

Their legs tangled, and she tried to shimmy back, but he pressed his hips into hers. "Well, then. That good?" She laughed at the definite ridge in his jeans.

He wiped the corners of his mouth with the back of his hand, then caged her in. "Let me see." He dipped his head, and her elbows dissolved under her. He hooked her knee over his hip and lightly rolled his hips against the V of her thighs as he took her mouth.

She slid her fingers into his short hair. The strands sifted and teased around her fingers and wrist as she held on and accepted the slide of his tongue along hers. She sucked on the tip gently, and the kiss went from hard and fast to slow.

She reversed their positions until she straddled his waist, her knees hugging his ribs. She laced her fingers with his and pinned them over his head. The golden centers of his hazel eyes burned. She lowered herself until

there was little more than breath between them.

He lifted his head to bridge the gap, but she backed off. “Uh-uh.”

He let his head drop back down with a growl.

She smiled and lowered her mouth. She flicked her tongue along his lower lip. “You can just lie there and take it for once.”

He widened the space between their clasped hands and his head so she had to come closer. “I don’t remember you being an inactive participant.” He sealed his lips over hers, and she hummed into his mouth.

God, he was way too good at that.

His grip tightened on her as she lightly undulated against his belly. The kiss spiraled out so fast she couldn’t drag in a breath between the breaks of their lips. His tongue was a slice of pure temptation.

With a shiver she remembered how it felt inside her.

This angle was awkward and taxed the muscles of her shoulders and arms. She tried to maneuver his hands toward his head, but he wasn’t budging.

Stubborn man.

She scooted up farther, and he broke their handclasp. “Keep moving up, babe, and I’ll have my tongue between your thighs.”

His lips were berry red from her bites and nips. What would they look like wet from her in the sunshine?

He dug his fingertips into her denim-clad ass. “You like that idea?” He lifted her until she was balanced on her knees. He pushed up her tank with his nose and licked around her belly button. “I want to taste you again.”

“I—”

He tugged open her button with his teeth. “Say yes.”

She shuddered out a breath. She was always saying yes to this man.

His hands slid around to the front of her jeans and unzipped her. “Say yes.”

# SEVEN

He dipped his thumb into the gap of her zipper. The skin under her navel was downy soft. He moved lower to the fringe of lace along the top of her panties. Incredibly tiny panties. Both times he'd gotten her naked, they'd been quick to shed clothes. There was something infinitely sexy about a woman's lingerie.

The triangle of cotton and lace cupped the skin just above her pussy lips. He circled the side of his thumb around the plump V. She jerked under his hand. There was a tiny wet spot there. The baby blue darkened as he gently swiped the flat of his thumb back and forth.

"Shane."

His name was a shaky moan. God, he wanted to get his tongue on her. He peeled her jeans back and over the sweet curve of her ass. Her apple scent made his mouth water. He brushed the tip of his tongue along the wet spot.

She looked down at him. Her teeth sawed her lower lip. Her breasts swayed with each deep breath as he teased her. The stiff denim wouldn't go down any farther until she moved. He didn't want her to go far. Couldn't bear to have her get up even long enough to get her jeans off. Instead he lifted her.

"Off."

Kendall was a quick study. She shimmied out of them and flicked them to the side. She straddled his hips. Too far away. Not close enough to touch or taste. He cupped her ass and slid her forward. His shirt rode up, and her smooth calves hugged his sides.

His stomach muscles bunched as he closed his mouth over her lace-covered mound. She gasped and fumbled to brace herself on something. Finally settling for his shoulders, she leaned forward, and he relaxed back

onto the blanket. He tongued her pussy through the material. The first hit of her taste and he wanted more.

He wanted to go slow, wanted to make it last. He gripped the smooth muscles of her ass, and she flexed under his touch. Her thighs opened wider. He tugged her forward again until her knees were jammed into his underarms. “There,” he muttered. He used his teeth to peel the sopping-wet material off her. The cotton clung to her swollen lips and the tight little bead of her clit.

Her knees slid wider along his biceps, and she lowered to his mouth.

He flicked his tongue either side of her clit. Her taste burned through the lace and exploded on his tongue. Salt and the crisp tang of her scent added to her musky flavor. He skimmed his fingers along the cleft of her ass and widened her again.

She moaned above him. Her thighs quivered, and he clenched his jaw.

She cupped his face. “So fierce, even doing this?”

He didn’t want to be so solemn, but the emotions she dragged out him were too much to give over to smiles and laughter. They weren’t laughter. They were more like the knife-edge of madness. Possessive, exhausting, illogical—he’d only known her for a few days, and she was under his skin. She overwhelmed him with her ability to lose herself in the moment.

He nudged one hand under the leg of her panties from the back, and her pussy grasped the tips of his fingers. No.

*Don’t rush.*

He swiped the very tip of his tongue through the silky cream that had drenched her panties beyond wear. “Fuck, Kendall.”

She tipped her head back, and the elegant line of her lithe body shattered him. He was so fucking hard he could come in his goddamned jeans.

“Braid. Take it out.” He wanted to see all her sunlit hair in his favorite place.

This was a place of happiness.

Not of death and misery.

This was his place, and he could have one last good memory here before the crash of reality intruded.

She unwound the end, and the rest simply unraveled. Why she tried to contain all the curls and life, he didn’t know. But he wanted to see them fly free around her shoulders before he put his mouth over her.

The tiny triangle of downy-white hair unmanned him. He used two



fingers to push back her hood, found the stiff center of her, wrapped his lips around her clit, and slid his tongue inside her as he sucked.

She bucked above him, and he gripped her hips.

He held her still and tried to listen for the cues to what worked for her above the roar in his head. She tasted like autumn. Dark and spicy and so addicting. He swallowed as she drenched his chin. His angle only really allowed a taste. He wanted to fill her. To taste her as she came.

He shifted her until he could get his hand between her knees. He delved two fingers into her swollen folds and pulled down, opening her.

Her hips swayed. He knew she needed more, but he wanted another taste.

The sweet, sharp keen followed by his name on a guttural cry was his reward for patience. He'd heard that sound on that last night. He rolled her onto the blanket and opened her wide, thrusting two fingers into her as he circled her clit with his thumb.

He thumbed open his jeans and took himself in hand. All it would take was a pump or two, and he'd be done. Christ, she was so unfathomably hot.

She reached for him. Even as he locked her inside another cresting orgasm, she tried to touch him.

He shook his head. "Shh. Don't worry about me."

She arched off the blanket and twisted her fingers into the plaid flannel. He turned his hand, and the grasping clasp of her tissues around him made his cock throb even harder.

God, he wanted inside her.

But it wasn't about him.

Not right now.

He groaned. Her legs quaked and shuddered as she melted into the flannel. He laid his cheek against her belly. The quivers inside her felt like tiny aftershocks. He opened his palm over the slice of skin between her navel and her hood and lightly massaged her.

The hiccuping moans finally faded, and she covered his hand with hers. "Shane."

"You're so goddamn beautiful."

She trailed the backs of her knuckles along his hairline, her dark eyes soft and sated. "Every time you tell me I'm beautiful, there's a swear word in there."

He opened his mouth to answer, but she traced her nail over the dip at the top of his lip.

“I like it.”

He rubbed his bearded chin across the concave of her belly and up to her ribs. She left him split open and frayed. The numbness was easier. But easy hadn't worked in the past. Easy had left him adrift with nothing concrete to hold on to.

Their eyes locked as he pushed her tank up and revealed the matching sky-blue cotton and lace of her bra. He sucked her nipple into hardness under the cotton. He let it go, crowding over her. He hissed when her hand slid around the base of his cock.

“Kendall. I told you—”

“I know what you told me. I want you inside me.” She flicked her tongue under his chin where the scruff of his beard faded into skin.

He hovered over her, one hand beside her head, the other tucked against her side. Her curls twisted around his wrist; her skin burned against the other.

He eyed the bag at the corner of the blanket. He'd bought condoms at the rest stop. It was going to look like an asshole move. That he expected this. He just knew his willpower and Kendall didn't live in the same zip code.

She writhed under him and drew the tips of her nails along the underside of his shaft. “Get the condoms out of the bag.”

He looked down at her. “I—”

“I saw you go back in for something when I was buying lunch.” She tightened her grip at his cockhead and twisted.

He shut his eyes. “Fuck.”

She laughed. It was free and sexy as hell. Startled, he looked down at her again. “Something funny about this?”

“Just that you feel guilty.”

“You don't know what I feel.”

The growl in his tone seemed to tickle her even more. She wrapped one smooth leg around his waist, pushing at his jeans with her foot. “It's a beautiful day, and you have a girl who's willing to go”—she dropped her voice to a whispery, over-the-top Marilyn Monroe voice—“all the way.”

He leaned down and nipped her jaw. “All the way, huh?”

She nuzzled her cheek against his, and his arms weakened for a moment. She made him want to give her softness, but that was stupid. Then again, nothing about Kendall put him in the smart column.

She reached over her head. “I can't—”

Her breast lifted until the fullest part of her was an offering. Small and

perfect and cupped in the same color as the sky. His hips circled in the haven of her thighs; the head of his cock grazed her slick folds. The heat of her lured him closer. Skin to skin. He grasped his shaft and groaned as she opened for him.

Madness crawled up his spine. Just one stroke inside her. To feel that warmth.

Her dark eyes widened, and the naked need there had to match his own. She dug into his shoulders. “Shane. The condoms.”

It was on the tip of his tongue to beg. To ask her to take him without it. Would this finally break the numbness? If he got inside her with no barriers?

He shook his head to fight off the gut-deep longing and reached with his significantly longer arms. He ripped the box open and split the packaging with his teeth. Protection for her. For him. He obviously needed it even more than for its intended use.

He snapped it on and sank into her. The sun beat down on his shoulders. He slid out but kept the tip of himself inside her. Her bra still covered her, and her panties were still on, even if they were skewed to the side. He reached behind his head and tugged his shirt up.

She smoothed her hands up his belly to his chest.

He stopped when she rose and the cross of his rosary slid forward to swing between them. Her nails bit into his skin, and the tent of his shirt put them into a weird little cocoon. She grinned up at him as the sun filtered through the waffle texture of his shirt.

Simple as that, the ice inside him melted a little. She pushed his shirt the rest of the way off and nudged the rosary aside to get to his nipple. He cupped the back of her head and slid home again. She clasped around his cock and locked her ankles behind his back.

Her slight little body was more muscular than he realized. She grasped his shoulders and hauled herself up until he fell back on his butt. With his jeans still half on and a lap full of Kendall, he barked out a laugh, then a groan as she took him deeper.

“There.” She slid forward and back, taking him on her own terms. “I knew there was a smile to be found inside you.”

He hid his grin in her neck and swiped his tongue behind her ear. She vised him, and he groaned. He unhooked her bra, wanting to feel her against his skin. If he couldn't have the most fundamental part of them skin to skin, he would have the rest.

She looked around, then unwound her arms long enough to get the bra off.

Her hair was pure sunshine and as carefree as her smile as it bounced around her shoulders. She was the fun and light he'd been missing for so long. Her head tipped back to the sun, and she rolled her hips. His brain might have thrown a pause in the clawing need to come. But his body had other plans.

He didn't want to let go of the sunshine in his arms.

He gripped her hips and drove into her as he felt the burn of his release. He maneuvered his hand between them. She pushed it away and returned his grip to her ass.

"I want to see you come inside me, Shane."

She wrapped her arms around his neck, and he jerked her harder into his hips. She slid her hand up along the back of his skull to the top and latched her mouth to his just as he came. In his head it was her name he chanted as he lost himself in her.

Kendall dropped back onto the blanket. The decadent feel of sunlight on her breasts and a man still buried between her thighs had her laughing up to the sky. Shane's hand spanned her hip bones, the heel of his hand rubbing lightly just above where they were still joined.

She closed her eyes, enjoying the softness of a lover.

She'd never had a lover.

She'd had boyfriends, and she'd had a few one-night stands.

But never had a man who was only worried about her pleasure. As gruff as Shane was, when they were naked, he honed that intensity into making sure she came her damn brains out. She was used to the men from Winchester Falls and the occasional traveler. A bounce, mutual pleasure sometimes, an orgasm if she was lucky. But mostly it was the contact of a person she'd longed for. And disappointment had almost always made her wonder if it was all worth it.

This was more than that.

It might not be forever, but it was hers for now. It had been so long since

she had something that was just hers. Nothing that focused on responsibility and the needs of others. It was so strange to simply be.

She groaned as his thumb slid between them. “Shane.”

“I was afraid you fell asleep.”

She blinked her eyes open. The sun had disappeared behind the tallest of the mountains of Yosemite. Shane’s far too serious eyes settled on her. The anger was missing, and his ridiculously wide shoulders seemed to be less tense. She smiled and slowly undulated her hips. “It’s tempting.”

The burnished gold of the centers of his eyes seemed to glow in the cool forest color that rimmed his irises. He truly had the most beautiful eyes. His thumb traced wide circles around her sensitive clit.

She groaned and tried to escape his touch. Her nerve endings had to be blown out at this point. “I don’t think I could come again.”

“You shouldn’t say that. It just makes me want to make you come all the more.”

He stroked the tiny bundle of nerves, and she tried to prop herself on her elbows and shimmy away from him. He laughed, and she stilled. Two laughs in one afternoon?

“What? Do you really want me to stop?”

She shook her head.

The quirk of his lips was worth it. He brought his other hand up and rubbed along the outside of her clit, and she bowed up and off the blanket. She could feel him hardening inside her again.

“Shane.”

He held himself and her so still as he continued with the relentless stroking. Full of him and the pure, stripping pleasure, she cried out his name, a string of curses, then lost her ability to speak. He held on to her, wouldn’t let her crawl away from the intensity. No person should be able to feel this much. Not this soon.

She fisted her hair and sobbed; then she was in his arms. He hauled her off the blanket and banded his arms around her. She buried her face in his neck. From soft to scalded in so little time. She should back away, but she held on tighter.

She was so freaking tired of being alone.

She wasn’t sure how long they stayed like that. Her legs ached, and the skin along the back of her knees felt raw around his bunched jeans. She dropped her hands. He reached beside them and dropped his shirt over her

head. The nubby texture buzzed against her sensitive skin.

There wasn't any room for words. What could either of them say after that? She pushed her arms through his huge sleeves. The day was bright and warm, but it was still November, and there was a bite to the breeze. He took care of the condom with a napkin and zipped his jeans.

But instead of cleaning up, he stretched out on the blanket and drew her down with him. He spooned around her and tucked her butt into the cup of his thighs. She stared at the mountains as his arm came around her and he settled behind her.

“Shane?”

“Hmm.” His voice was soft and sleepy.

“Shouldn't we be getting back on the road?”

He slid his fingers through her hair in a soothing gesture. “Soon. Rest now.”

“Don't you have a schedule?”

“Kendall?”

Her name was a rumble in his chest. She grinned. “Yes?”

“Shut up.”

She smiled wide and cuddled in.

The next time she woke, she stretched and grunted. Her arm was dead asleep, and Shane was cupping her breast. She snorted and rolled him onto his back, flipping around in his arms. He didn't wake up, simply hooked his arm around her neck and dragged her onto his chest.

Even in sleep he was dragging her around where he wanted her.

She poked him in the chest. The sun was still in the sky, but the first fingers of amber that painted the horizon signaled sunset wasn't far off. She looked down at him. His face was softer in sleep. His rosary circled one muscled pec, nestled into the soft whorls of hair on his chest.

He really was incredibly beautiful. Pretty under all the hair.

She drew the rosary beads over his chest and played with the cross at the end. “Shane.”

He moaned a little but settled quickly, his chest rising and falling gently in sleep. She hated to wake him. She rather liked the softer version of him.

She raked her nails over the smooth skin of his side. He flinched, and his arm tightened around her neck. She did it again, and he jerked. She laughed out loud, and he rolled her, pinning her arms over her head. “Is someone ticklish?” she teased.

His eyes were sleepy and hooded. The softness hadn't quite faded, and his returning smile made her laugh all the harder. "Are you?"

She shook her head, biting her lip to kill the smile. "Nope."

He braceleted her wrists together with one of his hands and slid under the thermal. She squealed at the first touch near her ribs. He laughed at her as she twisted, trying to get away from him. "Liar."

"Shane! No, wait!" She hiccuped and giggled and brought her legs up to protect herself. She kicked and bucked, and he still wouldn't let her up. She scissored her legs around his hips and pushed with all her strength, but she was no match for two hundred plus pounds of muscle.

"Give up?"

"Yes!"

He let her go and flopped onto his back. "If that's your version of an alarm clock, it sucks."

She pushed her hair out of her eyes, dragging her rubber band off her wrist to tie it up in a messy bun. "I distinctly heard laughter in there."

"Nope."

She straddled him. "Yep."

He folded his arms behind his head. "You're hearing things." But happiness was definitely shining in his eyes.

She leaned down and rubbed his nose with hers. "I heard it."

He reached up and tugged her hair free until it curtained around them. "I hate when you bind your hair."

"You'd put it up too if it was always in your mouth."

He toyed with a lock. "I suppose."

She lightly scraped her nails through his buzz cut. "Uh-huh."

He wrapped a hank of it around his palm, then let it slip away. "We should pack up."

She brushed her lips against his. She knew they needed to get back on the road, but she hated to lose the little moment of happiness. There wasn't any tension between them. Well, beyond wanting to get naked.

He cupped the back of her head. The kiss was unexpectedly sweet. Not his usual power play of dominance. Sometimes she wondered if he even knew just how control-focused he was when it came to touching her. The featherlight touch along her lower lip invited her to open instead of demanded. She breathed him in, let him in, and wished for a moment there was nothing ahead of them but time.

Shane smoothed his thumb over her cheek, then dropped his hand to her hip. He held her there against him, sliding his hand down the outside of her thigh to her calf and finally to her foot. He flicked his nail along the sole of her foot, and she laughed into his mouth.

“Time to go.”

She nodded and swung her leg over him and reached for her jeans. When he didn’t move, she looked over her shoulder. “What?”

“You’ve got one hell of an ass, Sunshine.”

She let her hair fall forward so he couldn’t see her smile. “Pilates and hiking.”

“Pilates? Is that where you can hold a pose for a really long time?”

She wiggled into her jeans. “That would be yoga.”

“Damn.”

She winced and rolled onto her back to cinch her jeans. Her thigh and inner muscles twinged. She’d had more action in a few days than she’d had in way too long. “I’m too impatient for yoga.”

He held up her shirt in front of him. “I don’t think I can wear yours.”

She looked down. She didn’t want to give his up. It felt good and smelled like him. “Sorry, you gave it to me.”

“So now it’s yours?”

She stood and stepped into her Chucks. “Yep. Sorry.”

He jammed their leftovers into the bag. “I don’t see how that’s fair.”

She curled her fingers into the overlong sleeves. “Mine now.”

His eyebrow rose. The stone face was back, but his green eyes were lit with humor. “I’ll remember that, Kendall.”

Disappointed that *Sunshine* seemed to have been a slip, she took the bag from him. It was definitely time to get moving before she got in over her head any more today. “Go ahead and throw the sleeping bag in the truck. I want to take a few pictures with my phone.”

“Sure.”

She dug out her cell and framed in the view from their blanket. No matter what came next, she had today and a slice of perfection. She turned and caught him doing the same thing. She stepped out of the way. “Oh, sorry.”

“I’m not.”

She followed him back to the truck but couldn’t wipe away the smile. He loaded up their gear and climbed in with a new shirt on. It was a simple dark blue with long sleeves that accentuated the breadth of his chest and rosy



muscles of his arms. The man was more dangerous now that she knew what everything looked like under his clothes.

“So where are we headed?” Kendall asked.

“You’ll see. But first we’ll stop at that little shop I saw when we drove in.”

“Good thing, because someone stole my sandwich.”

His lips twitched. “It was a good sandwich.”

She buckled her seat belt and looked down at her phone. The picture didn’t quite do the view justice, but it was damn close. She stuffed it into her bag and reached for her brochures.

They were quiet, but it wasn’t an uncomfortable silence. She wasn’t sure what was going on in his head, but it felt like they’d left some of the tension between them on the pretty vista.

They drove out to the main road and took advantage of one of the tourist traps that dotted the area. She snagged a few postcards for her mother and a fistful of candy. Shane—surprise, surprise—had bottles of water and power bars on the counter. He only lifted an eyebrow when she dumped the array of junk food into the mix. She held on to the postcards. As the older man rang them up, Shane plucked the postcards out of her hand.

“I can pay for those.”

“What did I tell you?”

She rolled her eyes. “I’m assuming that doesn’t cover souvenirs for my mom.”

He didn’t say anything, just thanked the man and gathered their bags. Well, good to see some things wouldn’t change even if they were adding sex to the road trip. She went around to her side of the truck and again was surprised when he opened the door before she could.

“You’re going to spoil me.”

He put the bags in the back and smacked her on the ass. “Get in.”

“Ah, that’s more like it.”

They got back on the road. “So, driver, what am I putting in the GPS?”

“Nothing. I know where we’re going.”

She crossed her arms over her chest. “Really? You know how to get to New York from here?”

“Go east.”

“Ass.”

He grinned. “Just relax. I’ll get you there, Kendall.”

Instead of worrying about it, she enjoyed the scenery. The tree lines grew more dense, the sunlight filtering through with a bleed of red and orange. The horizon was a fiery mix of perfection and cliffs and trees and water. And finally the road narrowed, and the cliffs proved just how small Shane's impressive truck really was. They closed in, the shale color marbled with minerals and bleaching from time and the sun. The temperature dropped, and she was suddenly glad she'd stolen his thermal.

"Are you sure you know where you're going?"

The cab darkened, throwing Shane's face into shadows that emphasized the sharp angles of his face, but she could see his lips twitch. "Worried I'll get you lost?"

"More like I've watched way too many episodes of *Supernatural* and don't know what's in those trees."

"You're more likely to see a moose out there than a wendigo."

"Someone watches crap television like I do."

He shrugged. "Sanding can get monotonous. It's either television or music most nights when I'm working. And most of the time Sam and Dean don't get all mushy."

"Heaven forbid."

Without the sun, the only relief in the darkness was their headlights. Finally he pulled around a clearing and parked.

"Where are we?"

"Technically still the park. It's a warm enough night. I thought we'd sleep in the truck bed tonight."

"You know how to romance a girl, Justice."

He reached under the seat and clicked a light under his chin. "Afraid?"

She tucked her hands into her sleeves. "No."

The light went out. "Grab the food. I've got a lantern in the back."

There was still enough light that it wasn't pitch black, but not by much. She jammed her feet back into her shoes and reached for their bag. She slid out of the truck and simply stared.

The cliffs towered above them, making a dome of pinpricks in a navy sky. Dark evergreen trees lined the clearing, leaving them completely alone. Night sounds penetrated her shock. A light breeze kept the trees in a constant state of sway. Instead of scaring the crap out of her, it was so serene she was afraid to speak.

She felt her way along the truck bed and peeked over the open tailgate.

He stood above her with a Coleman lamp.

“I’m not much for camping, but wow.”

He smiled down at her and held out his hand. “We’ll eat and get some rest. If we leave at dawn, we can get into Nevada tomorrow.”

She dumped their food onto the truck bed and let out a quick laugh when he hauled her up as if she weighed nothing. He rested his hand on the small of her back, keeping her close. The two sleeping bags were zipped together and a pair of pillows lay against the tool chest. Glamorous it was not, but the sentiment made her smile.

They ate, but neither one of them seemed inclined to ruin the peace of the night. The sky sparkled as the moon rose. They quietly climbed into the supersized sleeping bag. There was a thin pad underneath it, so it didn’t feel like they were sleeping on steel.

She stretched out next to Shane. The sky dragged her attention away from conversation. She lived in a small town with a view like this every night if she wanted it. But with the craziness of her life, she never quite got the chance to just be.

Shane seemed to give her that. In so many ways.

He curled his arm under her head and rolled her in close. She smiled into his chest. Only the tip of her nose was cold. Between Shane’s body heat and the long day, she slid into sleep.

# EIGHT

Shane woke to a human vine curled around his legs and waist. She slept heavy and still. Better than a thrasher, but the oddity of having her pressed against him had woken him a few times in the night. He'd wanted her close, had made sure to bring her into his space before dropping off to sleep—and yet that desire was as foreign as it was alluring.

Between getting his furniture company off the ground and the early schedule with Justice Construction, he hadn't had much opportunity to date anyone. And the few times he'd found someone to share a night with, he made sure to leave before the morning afters.

But he liked her weight, liked her smell on him, liked her hair sliding across his throat—hell, he didn't have one thing to complain about with her and the horizontal. He wasn't sure if that was a good or bad thing. The only thing he knew definitively was that it was a dangerous thing.

A pearly mist curled around the basin of El Capitan. It was an impressive mountain, and he'd done his fair share of rock climbing with Kain when they were in college. In the end it was the water that interested them more. They'd traveled during the school breaks to find waves in Australia, Hawaii, and South Africa.

It had been a very long time since he'd been in the park. And having Kendall there with him felt natural. Everything about her felt right and scary as fucking hell. Had this been the old man's plan all along? Finding family for him?

He wove his fingers through her sunlight-colored strands. Dew dotted her hair, adding another layer of freshness to her fall scent. The curls coiled around his fingers and wrist. The dawn came with the birdcalls of the hawk

and fluttering song of the sparrows. The world was coming alive, and it was time for them to go.

One more stop and they'd leave California in their rearview mirror. He would miss it. His life and his friends had been so much a part of the cliffs and waterways of Monterey. But there was nothing there for him any longer. Every day since his dad had died, he'd felt a little more detached from the land and the house. Kain was the only thing holding him to Monterey. And it just wasn't enough any longer.

Maybe he'd find something new and amazing in New York. Or maybe their shared house was a conduit for them both to start fresh lives. There was a loneliness in Kendall's eyes sometimes. When her smiles faded and the conversation died away, he caught a look as she took in the miles of trees and foliage of Yosemite. Even in the cliff sides of Monterey, he'd sensed a similar restlessness inside her.

Was it that kinship that drew him to her, or was it more? It felt like more. Why did it have to be now? He didn't even know where he was going to live. And she sure as hell hadn't been in his plan.

The longer he was in her company, the more he wanted to be close to her. He'd known the flush of lust and had fallen in love in his senior year of college. He'd even contemplated forever with the exciting environmentalist. But the lure of the Peace Corps had been her dream and hadn't melded with a business major who already had a job already waiting for him.

And when he and Julie had decided to go their separate ways, the loss had barely made a wave.

Kendall crashed in on him like an Australian Gold Coast undertow. The waves were amazing, but the ride was full of warning signs and breakers that could snap him in half. And like surfing, this woman was just as addicting.

She tucked her chin lower into the blankets, and her calf stroked along his leg. He tried to focus on the butter-light sun peeking around the cliffs as it burned off the fog, but her hand brushed his belly and zeroed in on the ridge of his cock under his zipper. He ground his molars together. "C'mon, Sunshine. Time to wake up."

Kendall moaned into his neck. "It can't be morning."

He rubbed his ear against his shoulder to stop the buzz of warmth and the soft teasing of her voice from distracting him. "Oh, but it is. And we've got to get on the road. Nevada won't get driven across by magic."

She propped herself up on her elbow. The wide neck of his shirt slid

across her collarbone and uncovered half her shoulder. She was heavy-lidded and soft from sleep, and he wanted nothing more than to settle in and spend a lazy day with her. He must have stared just a touch too long because her smile transformed into a sexy smirk. She pushed a wild hank of curls out of her eyes. When it all fell forward again, she groaned. “Still want me to keep my hair down?”

They weren’t tight curls. Just wild waves that seemed to have a mind of their own. “Do you do anything I ask anyway?”

She drilled her finger into his chest. “I’m here, aren’t I?”

He caught her hand and drew it up to his mouth. He nipped the webbing between her thumb and forefinger before letting her go to sit up. If he didn’t get up now, he wouldn’t. “We’ve got a long drive ahead.”

She lifted the sleeve of his T-shirt and scraped her teeth over his shoulder. “Vegas?”

He focused on the mountains and the birdsong. On anything but how bad he wanted to lie back and lose himself in her again. “Too far south.” He looked down at her. “This leg of our tour across America is going to be boring.”

She reached for her jeans. “We’ll find something.”

He swallowed back a groan when she rolled up onto her knees. She’d changed into a pair of sleep shorts with miniature Tweety Birds all over them that she’d picked up before the trip. They were ridiculous and hugged her hips like a second skin. Warner Brothers cartoons should not induce a boner.

He hiked his jeans on and stuffed his feet into his boots before jumping over the side of the truck bed. Remove the temptation, and just maybe they’d get out of there without him doing something stupid. He dragged out two bottles of water, her knapsack, and his toiletry kit from the truck.

“Heads up.”

She looked up and caught her bag. “Thanks.” Unruffled, she tucked the water bottle in her bag. “I’m going to go do the nature thing. I’ll be right back.”

He did the same and started packing up the truck. A few minutes later she came back with jeans and a dark red shirt on, her hair tucked through a black hat. She looked like she was sixteen, for fuck’s sake.

“Do I get my shirt back?”

She shook her head and opened the passenger door. “I told you it was mine.”

“Oh, really?”

“Yep.” She put her bag in and stood on the running board. “Well, come on. The desert awaits us.” She slapped the top of the cab and grinned before disappearing into the truck.

He shook his head and stowed the rest of their gear. If he didn’t know firsthand just how female she was, he’d have thought she was any of his buddies. No muss, no fuss, and as easygoing as a summer afternoon. Both of their lives were about to change, and she acted like she was on vacation. Then again, wasn’t he treating this like a vacation? He should be on a straight path to New York with as few detours as possible.

“Idiot,” he muttered and jumped to the ground. He got in the truck and started it. “Got everything?”

She sipped her bottle of water, her phone in her hand. “Yep. Just checked in with my mom.”

“Have you told her yet?”

“I...” She sighed, and a frown creased between her brows. “I’ll have to since your supplies are going to the house.”

He backed down the pitted road. “Don’t you think she deserves to know?”

“I’m going to tell her, but I wanted to do it face-to-face. It’s not exactly an over-the-phone kind of conversation.”

“Didn’t you do that with your friend?”

She turned in the seat. “Bells is different. It doesn’t affect her life. She just has to be there for me.”

He frowned. Wasn’t that a parent’s job? How many times had he gone to his father to help him figure out problems over the years? From what he could tell, Kendall acted more like a mother than a daughter. She was a grown woman and independent as hell, but something felt off there.

He pulled out onto the main road. The park was full of cars and families. Trees lined the road, and blue skies burned off the pearly gray of the morning. The sun glowed behind the mountains, and it felt more like early October instead of the middle of November. She sat forward. “Oh, wow. It’s gorgeous.”

The drive was familiar. It had been a good fifteen years since he’d been here, but memories overlapped. His mother’s wide smiles and shining dark eyes. Camping and hiking had filled their summers until his mother got too sick to travel.

Kendall opened the window and unclicked her seat belt before leaning out. He reached over and grabbed one of the belt loops from her jeans. “What the hell are you doing?”

She had her phone in her hands. “When am I going to see a view like this again? I need a picture.”

“I’m driving, Kendall.”

Instead of getting back inside, she grabbed on to the handle by the door and sat on the window frame. “You’re driving slow enough.”

“Jesus.” He slowed to a crawl. “Get back in the truck.”

She wriggled back inside and sat down. “Spoilsport.”

“Put your damn seat belt on.”

She slid across the bench seat and held her phone up. “Smile.”

He jammed his molars together.

“There we go. Perfect picture. I wouldn’t want you to smile. It would make the picture look fake. Such a growly bear.” She waggled her eyebrows and got back on her side of the truck. “I can’t believe how amazing this park is. No wonder there’s so many families here.”

Once upon a time he thought he’d bring his own family here. He gripped the steering wheel until his heart rate finally returned to normal. He focused on following the winding road out of the park. “Does Winchester Falls look like this?”

“Not all that different. The mountains aren’t quite as impressive, of course, but we’re close to the Adirondacks. So it’s really just a matter of perspective.”

“How big is the Heron?”

She turned in her seat, a stance he was getting used to. She seemed to need to face him when she talked. “You know just how big it is. I read the will, same as you did.”

Spatially, he had a good idea. He’d been in the business long enough, but a feel for the converted house was different from what was in pictures and the not-so-impressive brochure he’d found online. It showed the square footage and the room rates, but it didn’t give him jack shit about what the Heron was all about.

He glanced at her. “What’s your favorite part?”

She smiled, and her eyes sparkled. “The dock. There’s a path that leads out to where we keep a few kayaks and things, but at the end of the dock, there’s a platform that I love to sit on. It’s got a lot of space for Adirondack



chairs and loungers.”

“Sounds nice.”

“I want to restrain it and seal it this spring. I’m hoping to make it a little oasis for families to hang out by the lake.”

“And there’s a good amount of people that come to stay?”

Her gaze slid out to the rows of evergreens that lined the road and dotted their way up the cliffs that layered in front of Yosemite Mountain. “We get plenty of business.” The pleasure faded from her voice.

“That’s a good thing, right? Turning a profit is the point of running a business.”

“Of course.” Her voice was cool. “Wouldn’t want to get in the way of that profit margin.”

“We’re partners now, Kendall. Eventually we’re going to have to figure out if we want to stay partners or sell the Heron.”

“Oh, I know. Can’t forget about the master plan.” She reached around into the backseat and drew her charger out of the pocket behind her seat. She plugged in her phone and folded her feet under herself. The light clicks of her typing were pretty clear.

Subject closed.

He focused on the signs for the highway. The endgame was a very real aspect of their relationship. He forgot that last night. It was far too easy to do when Kendall was in his space. Reminding her had been a dick move, but it was as much for her as it was for him.

The next two hours were a lesson in silence. The radio was useless in the middle of the desert. “If you’re not going to talk to me, could you at least reach in the back and get my CDs?”

She looked up. “Hmm?”

“What are you doing on that phone?”

“Reading.”

“On that little thing?”

She shrugged. “The first hour of flat desert was all I needed to see.”

Since the dotted lines were blurring for him, he had to agree. “If you don’t want us to go off-roading, then put some tunes on.”

She unclipped her belt and reached over the seat. “Where is it?”

He swallowed a groan. Her denim-clad ass was far too tempting. What kind of freaking aphrodisiac did she have in her perfume? Fucking apples. “Should be right on the floor.”

“You do realize I’m five-two, right?”

“Can’t reach?”

“Hold my leg.”

“Christ,” he muttered. “We’ll just pull over at the next rest stop.”

“Really? You’ve got forty-five miles in you with static?”

No. He did not. “I thought you were reading.”

“I was paying attention. I like to know where I am.”

He slid his hand between her legs and gripped her behind her knee.  
“Okay.”

Her hip hugged up against his shoulder. “Almost got it. Just...there.” She flipped up and tossed her head back. Her hat fell off, and all that hair exploded. His hand was lodged between her thighs.

Fuck.

He tried to pull his hand away, but she didn’t budge. In fact, she tightened her muscles.

“How about we make a little pact?” She slid his CD case across his chest, her fingers splayed over the leather.

Wary, he met her gaze. “What kind of pact?”

She ran her cheek along his jaw and into his neck. “The Heron is waiting for us. That’s a fact of our situation. But let’s just enjoy these next few days. We’re just two people on a road trip.” She grasped the edge of his shirt and pulled it up, letting her nails run over his belly. “I like how you make me feel. How you make my body feel. Can we worry about that?”

His cock swelled behind his zipper. “Do you know what you’re doing?”

“Nope. This is kind of new for me. I’ve never had a fling. Winchester Falls isn’t exactly the type of place that you have no-holds-barred, no-strings, no-second-guessing sex in. Most of the men have known me since grade school.” She traced the skin between his belly and chest and found his rosary. “Been there, done that. At least with the ones who interested me.”

He groaned. Her fresh innocence warred with her words. Of course, so did the wild excitement in her eyes when he tied her hands behind her back. What would she do if he used an actual tie and not her sweatshirt? Would she let him?

With one hand on the wheel and the other in her hair, he tried to concentrate on the road. “Is that what you want from me?”

She ducked her head and circled his nipple with her tongue. “We’re both unattached.” She nipped the hard tip. “You seem to want me as much as I

want you.”

Not possible. If he had his way, she'd be naked, and he'd be inside her as often as humanly possible.

“So I was thinking we could just have fun and worry about New York when we get there.” She moved down to his belly, her tongue swirling around his navel. She thumbed open the button of his jeans. “Now keep your eyes on the road.”

“Kendall.”

She tucked two fingers from each hand into his zipper and peeled it back. He swore as she cupped her tongue around the head of his cock. Her hair slid along his belly, and her warm, moist mouth sealed around the tip of him. And then she sucked.

He drew in a deep breath and bunched his fingers into her hair.

The light sting of his grip faded as quickly as it came. She wrapped her fingers around the base of him and lay across the bench. The rumble of the powerful engine, the intimacy, and the thrill of giving this man a blowjob in the middle of a stretch of desert kicked her heart into a gallop. She reached farther into his jeans and cupped his balls as she painted the underside of his shaft with her tongue. Salty and soft, his skin was addictive. The twitch of muscle and vein under her tongue, the moist air of her breath, and finally she took him as deep as possible.

She looked up, her hair tangled in her view. The granite line of his jaw, the way his Adam's apple worked, and the erratic tic of his pulse at his throat—all of it made her nipples bead and her pussy throb. He was so stoic, so incredibly closed off until she had her hands on him. The minute they met skin to skin, he was hers. She hummed around his cock.

*Mine.*

His fingers tightened in her hair again, and she felt rather than heard the deep growl from his chest. She freed him from her mouth. The steering wheel dug into her shoulder, and the zipper pinched the side of her hand, but she wouldn't stop until his cum filled her mouth. She wanted him at her mercy as she was at his mercy most of the time.

His hips shifted under her. His body was an instruction manual where his mouth never would be. She let him go and drew his sac into her mouth and looked up. The tendons in his neck were in stark relief. She hummed again, and his Adam's apple bobbed. Fascinated with his body, she slid her palm up his belly and splayed her fingers, higher and higher until the cross tickled her hand and then finally her wrist.

She bobbed her head, taking a little more of him with each pass. Her name was a guttural rumble that was ripped from his chest. She dug her nails into the hair-roughened skin that stretched over his chest as the first splash of his cum hit the back of her throat. His fingers twisted into her hair, and the pain was a final signal.

She pumped him until he was empty, and his taste was hers.

Until the moment faded and his body relaxed. She watched each piece of him unfurl—shoulders eased, his neck relaxed, his tendons faded. All except his ironclad jaw.

She tucked him back into his jeans, let him adjust himself for comfort, and laid her cheek against his belly. His skin was hot to the touch as she nuzzled along the silky hair over his ridge of abs. She pushed his shirt up until she could taste the warm skin at the middle of his chest. The beads of his rosary so familiar and comforting. She pulled his shirt down and rose onto her knees to trace her lips over his neck and behind his ear.

“The best part of a road trip.” She nipped his ear and backed herself up and into her seat. His eyes blazed fire in the evergreen coolness. So rough around the edges, so determined not to show an ounce of just how pretty he was, but nothing could disguise his amazing hazel eyes.

Instead of letting her sit down, he dragged her back and latched his mouth over hers. Surprised, she gripped the dash. “Shane!” She laughed into his mouth.

He pulled her hair until her neck was displayed for him. He glanced at the road and drew the tip of his tongue along her neck and to her ear, the same way she'd done to his. Her pussy clenched. Being manhandled shouldn't turn her on like it did. Damn that man.

His fingers slid out of her hair and down her back. “That's not going to be enough.”

No. *Enough* didn't seem to be a word they could associate with each other.

Out of the corner of her eye she saw the sign for a rest stop. “Just how

fast were you going?” How long had she gone down on him?

He nipped her ear. “I have no idea.”

She smiled and eased back to her side of the couch. “I think we could use a break.”

He nodded. His fingertips dug into his thigh. She wasn’t sure just what there was between them beyond the sexual napalm but decided not to care at the moment. She needed to clean up and get a fresh pair of panties on. The man was hell on her wardrobe.

The last few miles were quiet. She squirmed in her seat. She was way too worked up for giving a damn blowjob. It was more for him than for her. Then why was she ready to crawl out of her skin?

“Sunshine.”

Her name was a growl. The first time he’d called her that, it had made her heart melt; now it was going to short-circuit her brain. She was fairly sure he didn’t realize he’d used his nickname for her again. Sanity said she should put out the little flare of hope, but she couldn’t.

“Yes, Oscar?” She couldn’t stop the grin when his cheeks flushed.

“You need to stop that.”

“Stop what?” She shifted again.

“We don’t have time for more than a drink and bathroom run.”

She crossed her legs, using the seam of her jeans to ease the ache. “That’s fine.” Did her voice come out more a moan that time? The buckle held her hips into the seat, but if she tightened her inner muscles and pulsed just a little...

He coasted into the rest stop. She glanced at the dash. It wasn’t even noon yet. The eateries, gas station, and little kiosks outside were teeming with people. He parked away from the rest of the cars, leaned over, and unbuckled her, then hauled her across the seat by her waistband.

He buried his mouth into her neck and against her ear. “Are you sitting there getting yourself off?”

She trembled. She’d never been so close without touching herself. “Maybe.”

He pulled her up against him, his arm curling around her hip from behind. His long fingers slid into her stretched-out jeans. “Just rest against me. All we’re doing is cuddling in the truck.”

“You don’t seem like a cuddler.”

“Really? I believe it was me you wrapped yourself around last night.”

She couldn't deny that. She'd never slept more deeply in her life. She chose to think of it as the fresh air and not his strong arms.

She looked out the windshield. Families, couples, grandparents—it was the middle of the day. Why were there so many people around? It was a workday. The kids should be in school. At the river they'd been alone. Here, people would know.

He flicked open the top button and used his knuckle to nudge down her zipper enough to get into her panties.

She arched. Cripes, she was so freaking close. All it would take was a touch. He gripped her hip. “We can't do this if the entire parking lot knows, Sunshine.”

He turned her hips out at an angle so his hand could slip deeper. She gripped his wrist, her nails biting into his forearm. She tunneled her fingers into his hair with her other hand, dragging him in closer to her cheek as he dipped two fingers into her.

“Were you really going to get off without me?”

She groaned. She didn't know if she had that kind of bravery. She'd taken care of herself when the need arose but never in front of someone. What would it be like to watch him watch her?

“Christ, you are fucking dripping. Just from making me come?”

She concentrated on the slow circles he made with his first and middle fingers. On holding still and letting him take her where she needed to go. She had gotten off on giving him pleasure, but the thought of him watching her get herself off? She clenched around his fingers. “Shane.”

“Tell me, Kendall.”

“Sunshine,” she said through gritted teeth.

His prickly jaw scraped against her cheek. “Did you get off on getting me off, Sunshine?”

She pulsed. She wanted the full feeling, wanted more than just his fingers. She wanted him deep inside her. Wanted all that hard, ridged flesh filling her up. She choked out a breath when he stopped.

“Tell me.”

She nodded.

“Tell me out loud.”

Her head fell back against his chest. “Yes.”

“Yes...what?”

“Yes,” she lifted her hips a little, and he pulled out of her. “No.”

“Tell me, Kendall.”

She rolled her hips under his hand. “Inside me, Shane. I’m so fucking close.”

He smoothed his fingers over her panties ever so lightly. “That’s not what I asked. I wanted to know why you’re so fucking wet.”

She stared straight ahead, every muscle locked. “I liked your taste. I loved hearing your growl through your chest and it vibrate on my tongue with your cock in my mouth.”

“Jesus.” His hand slid back into her panties, followed by two fingers curling deep inside her.

She sucked back a breath and fought the need to jerk her hips up for more. “Watching your face, knowing that I was the reason—” He ground his palm into her clit, and she couldn’t speak around the cresting bliss. With his chin buried in her neck and both of them facing the parking lot, the world fuzzed around the edges. She slammed her eyes shut and let the pleasure take her.

His name a prayer, an oath, and a promise.

She sagged against him and dragged in oxygen. His chest heaved behind her. They were going to kill each other before New York. She slid across the bench seat and reached for her bag. Everything was swollen and sensitive. She wanted nothing more than to crawl back into his arms and soak in the afterglow.

Because she wanted it so bad, she made herself move. Made herself open the door and take a shaky step out onto the pavement. This was supposed to be good fun. Nothing else.

Nothing else.

Ten minutes later, they were back in the truck with drinks, snacks, and another five hours ahead of them. More desert, more flat roads and the endless dotted line, more time in Shane’s truck. More time to want him.

Shane’s music was hit-or-miss. As the desert swallowed hours and the sun streamed through the cab of the truck, her sound track included an obscure Rush album, Def Leppard, and a double live album from Metallica. She managed to fall into a book on her iPhone. This time it was a companionable silence instead of awkward.

At least she assumed so. Shane wasn’t talking, but he did tap along to the beat on his steering wheel. Nevada melted into their rear view.

“Are you sure we can’t go to Red Rock?”

“It’s a little bit outside of Las Vegas. That would add on another full day to our travel.”

She sighed. As much as she wanted to see one of the most amazing views of Nevada, they definitely couldn’t afford that kind of extra time. She scrunched down in her seat and tucked her feet up on the bench. “So much for that idea.”

“We’ll get a few good scenic areas once we hit the middle of the country.”

“You’re right.”

She settled back in with her book, and when he put in another Metallica album in, she snatched his CD case out of his hand. “My turn to pick.”

“Driver’s choice.”

“Then let me drive.”

“No one drives my truck but me.”

She rolled her eyes. “Are you guys in a special relationship?”

“You wouldn’t reach the pedals without blocks anyway.”

“Shut up.” She flipped through the case. “They’re all your CDs, so I should be able to pick something else.”

“I like Metallica.”

“So I see.” She got to the end of the case and flipped back to the beginning. “You do realize you were these are considered classics, right?”

“What’s that got to do with it?”

“Dio?”

“Don’t dis Ronnie James Dio, woman.”

“How could I? He’s from upstate New York. We protect our own.”

“That’s better.”

She grinned. “But what about this one?”

He glanced at her choice. “‘Wind of Change’ is a lyrical masterpiece.”

She ejected *Master of Puppets* and slid in the Scorpions’ greatest hits and cranked the sound. She sang—loudly and about as off-key as she could manage. When she got a laugh out of him, she sang louder. “Rock You Like a Hurricane” was a perfect anthem song.

The sudden swerve of the truck and the *pop* followed by a screech of brakes and Shane’s arm slamming her back into the seat happened so fast she didn’t have time to scream. They rocked to a stop, and the truck slowly listed to the right. The next track on the CD belted out a song she’d never heard about loving hard all Sunday morning.



Then silence when Shane cut the engine.

“Son of a bitch!” He wrenched his door open and hopped out.

The road was endless and empty save for a tumbleweed bouncing along the sandy side. Shriveled plants of unknown origin looked like singed cotton balls. The sun was just above the mountains in the distance. She opened her door.

“Stay in the truck!”

She hopped out. “What? I’m going to get killed by a passing car? Oh right, there are no cars.”

His granite jaw flexed, and shocker—he was silent. He went to the back of the truck, and his face grew even more grim. She wasn’t sure it was possible, but it did. He slapped the tailgate and crouched.

“You have a spare, right?”

“Yeah, I have a spare—but I need two.”

She hurried after him and hissed out, “Shit.” She dragged her hair into a messy knot. The sun might be low, but it was still hot. At the moment anyway. She’d read somewhere that the desert temperatures were a drastic change once darkness set in.

Kendall stood in the center of the highway and looked ahead. Nothing but road. Miles and miles—hundreds of miles, to be exact—of road.

“Get out of the road, Kendall.”

His voice was low. Her skin prickled at the tone. She turned back and saw what had shredded their tires. A rusted length of pipe and the half-hollowed-out muffler were crumpled and sharp. One tire was mangled, and the other had simply torn thanks to the skid into the shoulder.

“I don’t think this is exactly in the AAA coverage area,” she muttered.

He dug his phone out of his pocket. “How’s your signal?”

She ran back to the truck and grabbed her phone. “I’ve got a bar.”

“Better than me.”

She flicked through her contacts. “I have AAA, actually.”

“Do it.”

“Sure, I can call them for you. No problem.”

He gave her a stony look.

“Okay, calling. Jeez.” She went back to the truck for her wallet and followed the prompts. She crossed her fingers as the operator came on.

“Are you in a safe location?”

She looked around. “For now.”

“Is that a yes, ma’am?”

“We’re on the side of the road in the desert.”

“Can I use your phone to determine your location?”

“That would be awesome.”

“Is that a yes?”

Kendall tipped her head back. “Yes.” A sense of humor was definitely not in the tips-and-tricks portion of customer service training.

Shane’s firm hand on her back calmed her. His forest eyes were as serious as the chick on the phone. However, his brand of serious she was coming to crave. Not so much on the phone girl. He stood close to her, probably to hear the conversation, but she didn’t care. She liked when he crowded her.

“Based on the location of the closest towing company, I cannot promise the thirty-minute service.”

“We’re just happy with service.”

She went through the reasons for the call and the tow. The diagnosis was ninety minutes. She turned and banged her forehead into the solid wall of his chest.

“Thank you,” she mumbled and hit the End button.

A surprised thrill chased comfort as he buried his fingers in her hair and held her there. Nothing about him was relaxed, but he was trying to calm her down. She linked her arms around his waist and soaked in his woodsy scent. “I’m assuming you heard.”

“Hour and a half? Yep.”

“If we’re lucky.”

He tucked her head under his chin. “Yep.” His attention didn’t seem to be on her but on the situation and their location, but he continued to stroke the base of her neck. This was the worst possible thing to happen to them, and she felt more comfortable with him now than when they’d started the trip.

What the hell was going on with her?

Where the hell was her outrage and fear? Had he really gotten under her skin this much? The level of stupid was astronomical, but she couldn’t work herself up. Not when they were together.

Finally he drew back. “Keep a lookout. I’m going to make sure everything in the back is secure for the tow.”

She nodded. “Hey, since I’m short as hell, how about you boost me onto the hood. I’ll make sure we don’t have any traffic issues to worry about too.”

“It would be nice if someone drove by, but I doubt it will happen.”

“Not much else we can do.”

“No. That’s true.” He followed her to the front and lifted her. She still had to pull herself onto the hood and swing her leg up. “Do you really need a truck this big?”

“The last thing I delivered for my furniture business was an eight-foot bureau.”

She smiled down at him. “Got a Web site?”

“Yes.”

She pulled out her phone. “Let’s see if my bars are a little better up here.”

He rolled his eyes and patted her thigh. “Don’t fall off, all right?”

“Don’t mess with the tires, all right?”

“I just want to make sure the axle’s okay. Two new tires is bad enough.”

“Just be careful.”

“Worried about me?”

“Hey, if you die, then I get the Heron.”

His lips quirked up. “I’ll be right back.”

She shrugged out of her overshirt and tucked it behind her on the windshield. The wind was cooling off, but the heat from the engine and the sun baking the hood kept her warm. The view was barren and achingly lonely. The desert wasn’t one of her top places to live. She’d made a list of all the places she’d wanted to live when she was a girl. Small towns weren’t exactly the Mecca of excitement, but the middle of the Nevada wasteland was definitely not on her bucket list.

Her signal was spotty, but she managed to get a few texts out to Bells.

She heard grunts and curses as Shane poked around the back. “Shane. I’m not going to play nursemaid if you break something because you’re too impatient to wait for the mechanic.”

“Yeah, yeah.”

She grinned and started another game of Words with Friends with her mother. “Are you sure you don’t need help?”

“No.”

She winced when the truck rocked and the tailgate slammed. Oscar would be coming out again. He lifted himself onto the running board and then into the tire wheel well. “Move over.”

Yep. Oscar was definitely back. A slash of grease smeared his cheek and into his beard, and his face was dusty. “You got under the truck.”

He pushed her over a few inches and stripped off his thermal shirt.

She tapped her cheek. “You’ve got—”

“Yeah, I know.” He wiped at it, and she snatched the shirt out of his hand.

“Hold still.”

He turned his head. “Stop mothering me.”

She grabbed his chin and turned him back to face her. “Stop being an ass. And stop grinding your molars. You’re going to end up with a headache.”

“Too late.”

She got the worst of the grease off, but his shoulders were sprinkled with sweat and grime. His black tank top stretched across his chest, and she officially wanted to jump him. She needed her head examined.

“Lean back and watch the sunset.”

He followed orders for once but kept his arms tightly crossed over his chest. She forced her hand in under his biceps and curled his arm around her. “Enjoy the sunset. We can stress about the tires when the truck gets here.”

“I don’t know how you turn it off.”

She nodded to the red-streaked sky. “That’s how. The situation sucks, but that’s beautiful.”

His shoulders eased, and he hauled her against him. “Yeah, I guess it is.”

# NINE

Ninety minutes had been a pipe dream. Two hours and fifteen minutes later Shane heard the rig before it came into view. The desert played tricks with sounds, especially at night, but he knew that distinctive engine noise. It wasn't surprising that they had to wait out the tow truck. A service couldn't chain up his Silverado to just anything.

He smoothed his hand up and down her arm. "Up and at 'em, Sunshine."

She pressed her nose into his chest and her cold hand under his shirt along his back. The temperature had dropped, but she hadn't wanted to move from their spot. He had to admit it was a good vantage point. Not one truck, car, or bike had come along, but it would have been the best way to flag someone down if they'd had the chance.

"Come on, babe."

"Holy crap. It's dark."

"You conked out right after the sun set."

"Yeah, I guess I did." She burrowed into his chest. "I don't want to move."

He tipped her chin up. "Helluva view, but I think I'd rather get a hotel tonight."

"Wow." The wonder in her voice tugged at him. How did she keep pulling him in?

"No city lights to spoil the view, that's for sure."

"No. Not a light—" The howl of a coyote cut her off. "Did you wake me so I wasn't food? Or because the tow truck was coming?"

"Now a little bit of both." He slid off the hood and reached for her. "Get in the truck."

She opened the door, and the wash of light showed off a haughty brow. “Get in the truck please?”

He tipped his head back. *Give me strength.* “Get in the truck before a coyote thinks that sweet ass of yours is tasty.”

“Jerk,” she muttered. But she didn’t argue.

He jammed his fists under his arms. There wasn’t a damn thing out there to block the wind off the desert. He waved to the tow truck.

Kendall flipped on the parking lights. The driver pulled a U-turn and slowly backed up to the truck. The engine chugged into idle, and a kid jumped out of the truck, weighing a buck forty if he was lucky. He was all wiry muscles and a few inches taller than Kendall.

Great.

“Hey. Thanks for coming out, man.”

The kid pushed back a battered 49ers hat, and he realized he wasn’t a kid at all. Sharp blue eyes shone out of a deeply grooved and tanned face. “I’m Jasper.”

Kendall opened the door. He turned and stared at her, hoping the stay-the-fuck-in-the-truck message was written on his forehead. But of course, she ignored it. She jumped down. “Hi. Boy, are we glad to see you.”

Jasper yanked off his hat. “Ma’am.”

Before Kendall could blaze past him and make friends, he snagged her hand in a firm grip, keeping her at his side. He held out his other hand. “Shane Justice. We’ve got two flat rear tires.”

“What did you hit?”

Shane kept Kendall’s hand in his and rounded the front of the truck to the driver’s side. He opened the door. Kendall tried to unlace their fingers. He looked down at her and held tight.

“Really? You’re going to get caveman on me now?”

He leaned down to her ear. “We don’t know this guy. I prefer—”

“What? Dragging me around like a child?”

“If I let go, do you promise not to make him your best friend?”

Her eyebrows snapped together. “You don’t know me well enough to say stuff like that, Shane.”

“Every store we’ve been in, you’ve had the clerks eating out of your hands.”

“Jealous much?”

She was naturally easy with people like his father—like *her* father.

Something he'd never been able to master. It just wouldn't ever be one of his skills, even if he had found himself smiling a whole lot more since Kendall had come into his life. Despite this ridiculous situation. The only other person he'd been this at ease with had been Kain. And that was with twelve years of history. He hadn't been with Kendall for twelve days.

"Cautious."

Her dark eyes softened in the low light from the dome light of the cab. "He's harmless."

"You hope."

"I could take him." She flexed her biceps, then dragged him down and nipped at his chin. "I'm not helpless, Shane."

He let her hand go reluctantly. "I know."

"You sure about that?" She took the flashlight and clicked it on under her chin. "We're being rude to the man who's come here to help us. So lighten up, all right?" She widened her eyes and crossed them before stepping back out. "Jasper. You gotta see this huge muffler. Maybe you can help Shane drag it off the side of the road so this doesn't happen to anyone else."

"Sure. Let's see what we got."

Shane rolled his eyes. The woman could talk the devil into a deal. While she showed off the tires, he gathered the phone chargers, a few bottles of water from the back, work gloves, his wallet, and her knapsack of tricks. This was going to put a serious dent in their travel money. At the best of times his tires were expensive. In Bumfuck, Nevada, who the hell knew how much they'd be. Luckily it was truck country, so they had a chance his size would be in stock.

She was laughing, and Jasper had a starstruck look on his face. Typical. The woman was dangerous. Shane came up behind her and laid his hand on her neck and shoulder. She smiled up at him. His chest tightened as he swiped his thumb along her nape.

Jasper put his hat back on. "We'll get you folks back to Lund. I'll give a shout-out to the Coopers at the church. We don't have a hotel, but they have a room they let folks stay in. Nothin' fancy, but it'll do for a night."

"We'd appreciate that."

"Now let's get this muffler off the road and get you guys into town."

Shane nodded and handed Kendall her bag. The wind kicked up, and rust flakes scored his jeans and boots by the time he and Jasper got the muffler across the road. It was damn heavier than it looked. No wonder it took out

two of his tires.

“The truck that dropped this bad boy probably sounds like a jet engine,” Jasper said.

Shane grunted as they heaved it well into the bush. “That stupid muffler is going to cost me over five hundred.”

“More like seven, I’m afraid. Your tires are big ones.”

“Dammit.”

“You gonna be able to pay that, son?”

“Yeah.” It would take more than half of what they had left. With the price of gas, they were going to have to get creative. “Any day laborers out your way?”

Jasper took off his gloves and tucked them into his hip pocket. “Not in Lund. We’ve got people movin’ on left and right.”

“Yeah, that’s everywhere.”

“Where are you two headed?”

“We’ve got a place in New York.”

He whistled. “That’s one helluva drive.”

Shane rubbed the back of his head. “Sure is.”

“At least your wife is a good sport.”

“She’s not my wife.”

“Girlfriend, then. I wouldn’t let that one get away for very long, son. She’s a bottle of sunlight and smiles. There’s always someone out there a little smarter than we are who’ll snap that up.”

Shane looked over his shoulder. Kendall was perched on the end of the tow truck, her feet swinging. The light from the phone cast her face in overbright white. She looked up, a lopsided grin on her face. “Ready, Oscar?”

“Yeah, yeah.”

“Oscar? Didn’t you—”

“As in the Grouch.”

Jasper laughed. “She’s a pistol.”

“You have no idea.”

His laugh got louder as he stuffed his hands back into his gloves. “Let’s get this on the flatbed. We’ll get you on the road by morning.”

“I’ll hold you to that.”

“Oh, and I’d go with married as your answer when you get into town. The town is a bit particular about a woman and a man together if they’re not



married.”

Shane paused with his glove half on. “Pardon?”

“The town is kind of old-fashioned. God-fearing, and most of us are of the Mormon church.”

“Well, shit. Er...shoot.”

Jasper grinned. “What you do isn’t my business, but with the church being the only place to stay...”

Shane tugged his gloves on. “I see your point.”

Getting the truck on the flatbed was easier than he expected, but the drive itself took over an hour. Jasper called the church and okayed an overnight stay. The town boasted five hundred and thirty-seven residents. He couldn’t imagine where. Main Street was a desolate stretch of open spaces and a church on either end with a single stoplight in the center.

“These are the towns in Stephen King books,” Kendall whispered.

He pressed his lips together to swallow a laugh. Finally a gas station with one pump and a one-story building behind it came into view. Jasper’s name was in red letters over the bay doors. He kept on driving till the end of the street where a pristine white and brick church was lit up with floodlights. The spire was spotlighted to show off the simple spire.

“Go on in and ask for Delinda. She’ll fix you guys up for the night. I have your phone number. I’ll call you with a figure in the morning.”

“Thank you, Jasper.”

He smiled down at Kendall, who sat between them on the seat. “You’re very welcome, Mrs. Justice.”

Her mouth dropped open, and Shane pulled her from the truck before she could say anything. He waved, holding the duffel he’d grabbed before they loaded the truck onto the flatbed. The tow truck chugged away, and still she stood with her mouth open in shock.

“Small-town life, babe. Jasper told me it was better to drop the hint we were married so we could find a place to stay tonight.”

She peered up at him. “Seriously?”

He took her hat from her and plopped it on her head, smoothing her curls behind her shoulders. “Afraid so.”

“But we live in the twenty-first century. Surely they don’t still—”

“Believe it, babe. You saw the sign as well as I did. With a town this size, how much change do you think goes on?”

“Crap.”

He slung his arm around her shoulders. “Want to play virgin and patient husband later?”

She socked him in the stomach, and he gasped out a laugh. “Tie-her-up is fine. Role-playing is a no. Got it.”

“How can you joke? We’re staying in a church basement. It’s probably blasphemy to have sex,” she whispered.

“I doubt that’s what the preacher and his five kids think.”

“How do you know he’s got five... Oh.”

There was a photo beside the door with the community bulletins. A pretty blonde woman stood with a baby in her arms and four in varying ages around her.

Shane linked their hands and went up to the door at the side of the building. He pressed the doorbell and took her bag, slinging it over his shoulder.

“I can carry my own stuff—”

“Let me play the doting husband, will ya?”

The door opened, and the pretty woman from the picture stood before them, smiling. “You must be the couple Jasper mentioned.”

“This is Kendall, my wife.” He didn’t even trip over the word. The idea wasn’t nearly as terrifying as it should be. He’d just met her, and she’d blown his world to hell, but the idea of her and forever didn’t send him running. He needed a damn lobotomy. “And I’m Shane Justice.”

She ushered them in and led them to a small kitchen. “I’m Delinda Cooper. My husband is finishing up a visit to a ward member, but he’ll be back in a little while.” She gestured to a chair in the adjoining dining room. “You two look tired. Can I get you something to eat?”

Kendall smiled back. “No, we don’t want to be a bother.”

“It’s no bother. I’ll be right back.”

Kendall sagged into a ladder-back chair and dropped her head onto her folded arms. “It’s not even eight o’clock, and I could sleep right here.”

He smoothed her hair absently and looked around the room. Oak furniture infused with beeswax polish calmed him. It was a room that would have suited his mother. Understated and well cared for, the eight-foot table was perfect for large gatherings. Even in a town as run-down as Lund, he imagined there would be a feast for Thanksgiving.

And this would be his first holiday alone. The pang of loss curled his fingers into her hair. She looked up at him; surprise changed to a soft

questioning glance. Kendall read him far too easily. He drew his hand away, but instead of letting him go, she snagged his pinkie. He could pull away. She'd left it open for him to pull back if he wanted, but he didn't—couldn't. Soaking in her softness and laughter was addicting, and he found himself going to that well more often than was wise.

Delinda came back with two covered plates, and he let her hand go. "You two must be just exhausted. Why don't you eat, and I'll make sure the room is ready."

"We don't want to trouble you—"

Kendall stood and took the plates. "We really appreciate the hospitality. I run a bed-and-breakfast myself. My mother is just like you. She needs to take care of all the people who walk through the doors."

Delinda blushed. "I don't get much of an opportunity to do it, but I love it. Five kids keep me on my toes, though. And Jonathon."

Shane shut his mouth. Kendall had a sixth sense about people. The two women chattered on about kids and the husband. Before he knew it, he was sitting in front of a plate of meat loaf, mashed potatoes, and brussels sprouts, and Delinda had disappeared again.

"How do you know what to say to these people? It boggles my mind."

She forked up a brussels sprout and held it out to him. "Some people just like to take care of people."

He turned his mouth away. "I suppose."

She laughed. "Eat your brussels sprouts, little boy."

He gave her a bland look. "No."

She popped it into her mouth. "They're delicious."

"I'll take your word for it."

"No, really. She seasoned them with all sorts of deliciousness. I'll have to get the recipe for my mom. Most of our recipes revolve around perch or trout fish."

"Lots of fishing goes on? I'm trying to picture you with a fishing pole."

Her grin faded, and she focused on her plate. "Yeah, well, it's not pretty." Before he could ask her more about that, Delinda came back in.

"There are towels on your bed and a minifridge stocked with water, juice, and some fruit. Help yourselves."

Shane stood. "Thank you for putting us up tonight. We appreciate it. Just let us know how much we can pay you—"

"Oh, there's no payment. We just help when it's needed."

Shane sat. That wasn't the way the world worked.

Kendall covered his hand. "Surely we can donate to the church."

Delinda's smile was wide and nearly rivaled Kendall's in punch. "You do whatever makes you happy."

And that was the correct answer, Shane thought. But it didn't have the oily, preachy tones he'd been expecting. The idea that there were people out there who still did things out of the kindness of their hearts was foreign to him. His father's charm was friendly, but in the end, it served a purpose. It drew people in, made them trust him, and helped build his business.

But really, was it any different? Obviously his father continued to help his clients even when the money wasn't coming in. That was the only way he'd have gotten into so much trouble.

Kendall squeezed his hand to bring him back to the conversation. "Shane isn't quite used to the small-town mentality. I'm bringing him home to Winchester Falls, and he'll learn."

"Oh, are you two newly married?"

Shane swallowed a laugh when Kendall's face blanked. "We decided a change of scenery would be good for us. A new adventure," he said. Not a lie. It certainly had been a new adventure for both of them.

Kendall's eyebrows lifted. "Ah, yeah. That's got me a little nervous. Big change of pace for us as a couple."

"I bet." Delinda looked down at their plates. "You two must have been starving."

Shane glanced down, surprised to see his plate was empty save for the green bits.

Kendall smiled. "I really need your recipe for the brussels sprouts. My mom would kill for it. They're great, aren't they, honey?"

Shane shot a sidelong glance at her and popped one in his mouth. The salt and garlic and...God, was that bacon? He nodded and stabbed three more. "Amazing."

"I'll write it up for you tonight."

"That'd be great."

Kendall stood and went for the plates, but Delinda waved her off. "I'll just bring them over to the house and put them in the dishwasher. I'll show you to your room."

Shane took both bags and followed the women. They talked about the more colorful aspects of having strangers in their lives, and he realized just

how much Kendall loved her place. Her eyes brightened, and her entire face lit up. He dropped the bags inside the door. The room was full of more oak furniture in the understated Shaker style he loved so much. Simple lines and slatted inserts that were such a signature of the style were echoed in the bed and side tables. He smoothed his hand over the butter-soft surface. More beeswax polish and a sweet berry scent filled the room.

The walls were an unobtrusive cream with a matching beige carpet that let the furniture shine. Fat green bottles and deep red candles ringed with holly over crystal gave it a homey touch.

“Oh, Delinda, it’s beautiful. I can’t believe you did all this in a basement room.”

“We have a lot of help with the church.”

Kendall faced Delinda. “Well, we appreciate it more than you know. A bed is all I want.”

Delinda’s smile softened. “The front is locked up, and our house is just through the back door of the kitchen and across the yard if you need anything.”

Shane came up behind Kendall and laid his hand on her shoulder. “No, just the bed and shower.”

“I’ll leave you to it. Breakfast is at eight.”

“Thanks,” Kendall said and held out both her hands, gripping Delinda’s. She gripped back, and Kendall released her. After a final good-bye she turned the lock and leaned against the door. “This is gorgeous.”

He trailed his hand over the end of the sleigh bed. “This bed is old and done by a master carpenter.”

“Good, because I plan on sleeping like a queen on it. After a shower.”

“You go ahead.”

“Yeah?” She smiled up at him. “I have no shame. I’ll take it first.” She grabbed her bag and dashed into the bathroom and closed the door behind her.

Part of him wanted to follow her and see how big the shower was. But knowing basement plumbing as he did, he preferred to wait out his disappointment. And the sharp need to touch her, to feel water on her skin, to lose himself inside her again was too acute.

It was too much with the word *marriage* dangling over his head. Even if it was a lie. When he was around Kendall, nothing felt light or casual. He shook off those thoughts. He didn’t want to think about forever, not when

everything was so in flux.

STEAM FOLLOWED KENDALL out of the bathroom. She'd cranked the heat until her skin was pink, but her muscles were loose, and her back had stopped screaming for the moment. Endless hours in the truck were taking their toll. She flipped the towel off her hair and froze.

Shane had stripped down to his jeans. Dirt streaked his neck and arms, but his back was a perfect smooth, tanned expanse of skin. Muscles bunched in his shoulders and rippled over his back as he dug into his bag. He turned to her, and the sardonic lift to his brow crumbled all the layers of resolve she'd built in the shower.

She craved his touch. They were in a church basement, and she still wanted to curl herself around him and feel him pulse inside her. The devil had to be sitting on her shoulder. She glanced at the bed with the slats for a headboard and the pristine white sheets. It should make her feel chaste.

But all she could think about was gripping those slats until they bit into her palms as he slammed into her. Over her, filling her until she was screaming his name. Until nothing mattered but how they fit.

"Christ, Kendall."

She winced. Exactly. "I'm sorry." He crossed the room, standing before her with his chest a fraction of an inch away from the knot of her towel. She looked up at him. "You better take a shower. I'll try to be asleep before you get out."

"You think that will make this easier?"

She closed her eyes. "Maybe." He didn't say a word, but she felt him move away and missed his warmth and the endless buzz that surrounded her when he was in her space. The *click* of the door behind her freed her to move into the room. She quickly slathered on her lotion to combat the lack of moisture in the desert. She'd grabbed clothes for the next day but nothing to sleep in.

"Great."

She turned to Shane's bag and found an old, stretched-out undershirt in the stack of clothes jammed into the corner of the duffel. Trying not to

overthink things, she quickly pulled it on and slid beneath the sheets. Her nipples beaded under the ultrasoft cotton. No, she was not going to get herself worked up.

She could hear him in the shower. Imagined his economical movements. Shane wasn't the type to linger. He was always in a hurry, always prepared to get the job done.

Especially when the job included getting her off.

And that was not helping.

She turned her nose into the pillow. Vanilla and the soft scent of clothesline-fresh sheets mixed with the heady scent of cranberry that teased the air. Nothing about the basement was dank and stale—no, Delinda Cooper wouldn't allow that in her house or her church.

Church.

As if she needed the reminder.

She buried her face in the pillow and screamed. She'd napped with Shane before. With the desert-sunset romance setting, she'd managed to nod off for a few hours. Surely she could do the same in a church. The least romantic idea in the history of romance. She could relax and draw in the peace for a good night's rest.

She flipped onto her back and folded her hands over the sheets across her middle. She drew in a breath and closed her eyes. Deeply through the nose and out through the mouth. One after the other until her heart stopped fluttering madly. She heard the door of the bathroom open, and she continued to keep her eyes closed.

Her imagination was more than enough. She could see the ridges of his stomach muscles and the endless ropy muscles of his arms and the tight strength in his thighs. Even the long, masculine feet. She remembered them peeking from the frayed edges of his jeans. Her breath shortened.

*Keep cool, Kendall.*

She heard him moving around the room. The bed dipped, and the tang of mint in the air and the woody scent of his soap killed any hope of keeping her heart rate in check. Her head fuzzed with the rush of blood and how quickly it flushed the rest of her. Her nipples tightened again, and her sex swelled. She shifted under the sheets, closing her legs to hold herself together.

He kept a few inches between them when he finally settled onto his back. She couldn't stand it any longer.

She opened her eyes, and he had one arm tucked under his head. The wide planes of muscle and chest hair shouldn't make a better pillow than the down that cupped her head like it was made for her. Memories of the crisp hair under her cheek the night before didn't help. She wanted to feel that again. But she didn't trust herself.

Touching Shane made her want more.

She'd slept the night before in the flatbed of the truck, and nothing had happened then.

She rolled onto her side, away from him, but the bed wasn't exactly big enough for Shane. Her butt bumped into his arm. His very tense arm.

Evidently his relaxed pose was about as believable as hers.

She held still and curled her arms around her pillow. The want permeated the air, and yet both of them stayed on their sides of the bed. She opened her eyes, and a picture of Jesus stared back at her from the wall. She groaned and closed her eyes. All it needed was Jesus on there to add to the torture.

She slid into a fitful sleep. The cool sheets grew warm, and her dreams dragged her deeper. Hair-roughened legs tangled with hers; the heat at her back and the cool medal of his rosary burned into her flesh. His hand cupped her breast, pushing aside the shirt to knead and pluck at her nipple. His chin dug into her neck, and his other hand curled under her and around her neck in an embrace that was everything. Hope and home, love and life, warmth and want.

She laced their fingers together and brought them to her mouth.

Everything.

When she opened her eyes, the gauzy veil of dawn touched the room. There were no arms around her, no Shane in her bed, and the phantom pleasure of his touch faded with reality. She sat up and caught sight of Shane in the wide wooden chair, his legs splayed out, his cheek pressed into the cushioned back, and a throw over his shoulders.

He couldn't even sleep with her?

Just dreams. Just like everything about them. Fantasy and dreams. She had to remember that. There could be fun on the road, but it had to stay fun.

She slid out from under the sheets and got dressed. Shane slept on while she used the bathroom and French braided her hair to keep her curls under control. She stared into the mirror. "At least you have some semblance of decorum."

"Kendall?"



She gathered her toiletries and went back into the room. "I'm all set. You can have the bathroom."

He stretched and cracked his neck but wouldn't look her in the eye. "Okay." He glided by her, making sure their skin didn't touch.

The silence between them as they packed was like another person in the room. They passed each other with murmured excuse-mes and no eye contact. Every time he almost touched her, it ratcheted up the tension until she couldn't stand it. "Why did you sleep in the chair? We slept together fine last night."

He stacked a pile of shirts until they were a tight cube of cotton and jammed it into the corner of his bag. "I was restless. I didn't want to disturb you."

"I sleep like a rock."

He didn't look up. "I've only slept with you once, Kendall. I don't know that about you."

She cracked her molars together. "Fine."

He looked up at that. "Don't get pissy at me. We agreed to keep this light, remember?"

"Oh, I remember. It was my idea."

His evergreen eyes chilled. "Ready to go?"

"Definitely."

She followed him up the stairs, resolutely staring at his boots instead of his perfect ass and his massive shoulders under the cobalt-and-black plaid of his shirt. The tails of his shirt fell just past his belt. Stupid impressive shoulders.

The bustle of children and the scent of sweet syrup and butter hit her on the last step.

"Hi!"

Shane stopped at the doorway, his entire body tense with apprehension. "Hello."

Kendall peeked around Shane to see the towheaded little boy grinning up at him minus a front tooth. She slid her hand along his lower back, and Shane automatically hooked his arm around her neck. She was pretty sure she had to look like a guppy when he dropped a kiss on her forehead and gave the little boy a raised brow.

The boy transferred his attention to her. "Wow, why do you have old-lady hair? You're just a girl."

She laughed and dropped down on one knee. “C’mon, it’s white like Storm from X-Men.”

The kid giggled. “What’re the X-Men?”

Kendall let her chin fall on her chest. Man, when did she get old? Shane snickered behind her, and she kicked him in the shin. “Comic books and cartoons.”

“Oh.” The kid shrugged.

“Thomas!”

“Gotta go. Pancakes are ready!”

Kendall looked up at Shane. His lips twitched. “Oh, be quiet.” She lifted her hand to her hair. Time to put some more blonde in when she got home. She knew her roots were coming in, but she hadn’t realized it was that bad. She stood and followed the voices into the dining room.

A pitcher of juice sat in the center with a bowl of eggs, sausage, and a platter of pancakes.

Delinda set a pitcher of juice on the table. “Come on in, you two. Eat.”

“Oh, we couldn’t,” Kendall said.

“As you can see, I made enough for my horde and you two.”

Shane held a chair out for Kendall and sat next to her. She took a pancake and eggs for herself and watched Shane demolish a plate of pancakes. He and the boys seemed to be in a contest. The giggles and scrape of silverware were homey sounds that she’d missed terribly.

She picked at her flapjack, giving up to sip some juice.

A shrill work whistle screamed out of Shane’s pocket. She laughed. “Is that—”

“I got bored with my ringer. Besides, you know I like the Flintstones.” With a grin and a shrug, he stood. “Excuse me. That’s Jasper.”

She watched him walk out, trying to reconcile the cartoon side of Shane’s personality and keep up their charade at the same time. She turned and found Delinda smiling at her. “Sorry.”

“Don’t be sorry. I remember looking at Jonathon just like that.”

“What? Like you want to wring his neck?”

“And take a bite out of his cute butt.”

Kendall barked out a laugh. “Yeah, well, they happen at the same time for me more often than not.”

“Passion’s a good thing. There’s a reason I have five kids.”

Kendall’s eyebrows rose. “It’s not just the God’s-will thing?”

Delinda laughed. "I suppose that's part of it. I always wanted a big family, but mostly it's because we can't keep our hands off each other."

"I know how that feels." Too well. She couldn't imagine how it would feel to be able to give in to that. To trust in a relationship enough that it would allow her that kind of freedom.

She looked up as Shane came back in. "Hey."

He slid his thumb along one of her curls that had come loose around her face. "Almost ready?"

She nodded. "How's the truck?"

"Jasper's just about done with it. He's sending one of his guys over to pick us up."

His face was stony, which wasn't an unusual thing, but his eyes were flat. He hadn't gotten good news. She stood. "We can't thank you enough for putting us up, Delinda." She laid her hand on Thomas's blond head. "You've got a gorgeous family."

Delinda stood and hugged her. "You guys travel safe. If you can do a road trip, you can live through anything in a marriage."

Shane stilled beside her, but his hand found hers, and their pinkies twined. "We really do appreciate all you've done for us."

The lines between his brows deepened. Yeah, there definitely hadn't been good news from Jasper. She lifted her plate, but again Delinda waved her off.

"Kids, gather up the plates."

One by one, the children stacked up plates, with a bit of ribbing, and waved as they headed out the side door to the house.

"You've certainly got great kids."

Delinda gathered napkins and cups. "Luckily they're young enough that a sticker chart still works. Travel safe, you two."

"We will."

Shane let her hand go the minute they got through the doorway. He dropped his duffel and paced along the stone walk.

"All right. Tell me what's going on."

He jammed his hands into his pockets. "We're fucked is what's going on."

She winced. "How bad?"

"Nine hundred twenty-three dollars fucked."

Kendall hooked her hand through his arm and stopped him. "That's got to be most of our money."

His arm was rock hard with tension. His face was that careful blank she was coming to know as his I-don't-want-to-worry-Kendall face. She'd had boyfriends for months before figuring out their quirks. Less than a week with Shane and she was so in tune with him her skin itched. It was so fast. So much more than it should be. And God, she wanted it—wanted him—so very badly. She tugged one of his hands out of his pocket and laced their fingers. “We’ll figure it out.”

The little tick in his jaw fluttered, and he nodded. He rubbed her hand between both of his and slipped away to pace again. A battered pickup came into view a few minutes later. A kid rolled down his window. He was a carbon copy of Jasper minus thirty years. “You Shane and Kendall?”

Shane swiped both bags off the ground. “That’s us.”

The kid smiled wide with perfect white teeth gleaming out of his tanned face. “I’m JC. Hop in.”

They both rounded the truck, and Shane opened the door for her. “In you go.” She looked down. No running board this time. The truck was so old there was no handle. Just as she was going to boost herself, the bags hit the floorboards, and Shane’s wide hands grasped her hips. One touch and her skin charged.

She gave JC a small smile. “Hey there.”

“You all right, ma’am?”

She winced. No matter how many times she heard it with the bed-and-breakfast, she hated that word. “Yeah, just too short.”

“I hear ya. My dad is a kick-ass mechanic, but he definitely didn’t bring height to the gene pool.”

Shane stepped in because he was tall enough—the jerk—and slammed the door behind him. He dropped his arm over her shoulder. She gave him a sidelong glance. What the hell was with the proprietary bullshit? Her death stare had little effect; his focus was on the road ahead.

Kendall shifted and jammed her back into Shane’s chest. Instead of moving, he stretched his arm across the bench seat. Ass. Ignoring him, she turned to JC. “We really appreciate the pickup.”

“It’s too blasted hot to walk, that’s for sure. Dad was taking the Silverado off the lift when I left, so you should be ready to go.”

“We’ve got a lot of ground to cover.”

Shane grunted behind her.

“Yeah, Dad told me you guys were heading to New York. Helluva haul.”

Shane shifted, and the end of her braid loosened. She nudged him, but he didn't stop. Her hair tie dropped into her lap. She rolled her eyes and snapped the band around her wrist. Still no expression on his face.

"Three thousand miles plus a few detours."

JC's toothpaste-commercial smile flashed again. "I made the trip with a couple of buddies after college. We stayed at a bunch of hostels and worked our way across the states. We zigzagged a bit so we could see the high points. Was a fun two weeks."

She looked at Shane, but he shook his head. That would definitely help them with the money situation. Then again they had subzero sleeping bags, so they could sleep in the truck if they had to. JC chattered on about his trip, and it was a short drive to the garage. He pulled in and stopped in front of the pumps. "I've got to get a part. Just head on past the pump. Dad's got the bay doors open."

"Thanks for the ride." Shane hopped out and reached for her, then set her down in front of him. He played with the ends of her hair just above her waist, tugging lightly. Her skin tingled, and the restless itch returned sevenfold.

Kendall waved and shut the door. "All right. What was that about?" Shane hadn't touched her all night, most of the way through breakfast, and now he was all hands?

He shrugged. "I like your hair down."

That wasn't it. Yes, he liked her hair, but that wasn't the reason he'd been so handsy in the truck. "It's not even nine o'clock and I'm already sweating, and you want all this down? No." She lifted the heavy mass off her neck and rolled the tie off her wrist. "You try having all this hair."

He covered her hands to stop her. His chest brushed hers as he shook out the curls. She closed her eyes at the light tugs. Just when she thought she understood him, he threw her off with this power play crap. And she didn't want him to stop. He finger combed the curls and cupped the back of her neck. "You're too goddamn beautiful for your own good."

She peered up at him through heavy lids. What the hell did that mean? His fingers kneaded the base of her neck. His beard was softer with growth against her cheek as he nipped at her ear. "Keeping my hands off you gets harder every day, Sunshine." And then he was gone. She opened her eyes, and he was stalking toward the bay doors with both their bags.

"Son of a bitch."

Her whole body was on fire, and he left her.

Again.

She scraped her hair back and tied it into a high ponytail. Damn that man for keeping her so off balance.

# TEN

Shane dug his wallet out of his pocket. He untucked his T-shirt to bunch around his zipper. He was a goddamned walking erection lately. All that pale corn silk followed him in dreams. He could feel it against his thighs, across his chest, and the scent of her scraped him raw. Fucking apples.

He'd woken in the night to find his chin buried in her neck, her scent invading his dreams. He'd been curled around her, holding on to her as if he couldn't bear to let her go. He tipped his head back, scratching at the dense scruff that climbed down his neck.

He dragged in a deep breath of oil, gasoline, and the lingering overlay of cigarettes. Familiar scents. Enough to snap him back to the task at hand. Jasper's bill. He had just enough on his credit card to cover it, but the fear of something far worse happening to them made him cautious to use the last of his credit. Everything about this trip was out of his control. Kendall included.

He forced his lips into a smile. "Jasper."

"There's my favorite twosome." Jasper peeked around him. "Well, part of it. Where's your pretty girl?"

"She's coming."

Jasper tucked a rag into his back pocket. "I did the best I could to keep the cost down."

"I know you did. And I appreciate it. "

"Hard times are everywhere."

"Kendall and I know that all too well." A new thing for him to deal with. Living an easy life within the family empire was the only thing he knew. Scraping his way across the states wasn't the plan.

"Hell, the only reason we're still going strong here is because of my son.

He's got an affinity for classic American cars and brings in a lot of traffic from the Richie Riches. They like their old muscle cars to show off. Of course they fuck them up by driving like assholes, but it keeps us in business."

Shane's belly loosened, and his hard-on eased. "I'm from Monterey, man. I see the assholes firsthand."

Jasper dragged his hat off and smoothed his hand over his buzzed head. "That coastal road? Yeah...that's one helluva road to hit with a good engine."

Shane tipped back on his heels. "I had a Mustang when I was in my twenties. I scared the hell out of my dad with that car."

Kendall stalked in, her mouth tight and murder in her eyes. Damn, she was gorgeous when she was angry. He knew he'd been pushing her buttons, but if the kid in the truck had been a puppy, the drool would have soaked her shirt. She had no idea just how appealing she was, which was part of the problem. A woman like her should be settled with a man who wouldn't let her out of his sights. Just what kind of men did she have in her town who wouldn't have snagged her with a ring?

His shoulders tensed again. Rings and marriage had never been in his periphery. His focus had been his furniture company for so long. The minute marriage had been mentioned, he'd been fucked-up about it. Each time another guy looked at her with anything close to interest, he was fucked-up about it. He couldn't remember the last time he gave two shits about a woman enough to get bent. And it had to be this woman?

She held his future in her tiny hands. A future that had been manipulated by the one person he'd thought he could trust. He had to be out of his mind to think he could control any part of this situation. All he could do was drive through and hope to shit they got to New York with both of them intact. Kendall kept her distance, and their sham of a marriage was null and void here. His wallet dug into his palm. Son of a bitch.

Jasper shuffled off to a desk along the wall and came back with a work order. Shane traded it for cash and stuffed the receipt in his wallet. Kendall came forward and smiled at Jasper. "Thanks for finding us a place to stay last night. Delinda and her family were amazing."

"They're good people."

"The best."

Shane jammed his wallet back in his pocket. "Well, we better get on the road."



Kendall jerked her thumb at him. “We’re behind this one’s schedule.”

Jasper held out his hand to Shane. “Good luck.” He turned to Kendall, but she stepped forward and wound her arms around the wiry older man.

“Thanks again.”

Jasper blushed and fussed with his cap. “Don’t mention it.”

Shane opened the passenger door and tucked their bags away. Not trusting himself to touch her right now, he gave her a wide berth to go around the car. She hoisted herself in and settled into her corner with her car charger for her phone. They waved as he pulled out onto Main Street. Silence permeated the cab of the truck. She didn’t speak, and he didn’t have anything to say.

Three hours later, they’d crossed the border into Utah.

The dusty road was as flat as Arizona with the hazy blue of mountains to come. The sun blazed, belying the middle-of-November date. Kendall stripped down to a T-shirt. She had lightweight khakis on, and her legs crossed in her usual fashion. The silence was heavy, but he didn’t know what to say to her. He didn’t know how to handle the jealousy and the emotions she dragged out of him so effortlessly. None of this was in his plans. And all he had right now was his plan.

Those days he’d left her with Kain he’d finalized his life in California. The fact that it had been so easy to do didn’t sit well on his shoulders. California had been his home for most of his life, and yet the moment he’d lost his father, the disconnect was like cutting a string. When he hit New York, he’d get to work on the orders he was behind on, figure out a space for his shop. Maybe a little apartment over it until he got himself established.

Work was his solace, and it made sense. It was all he had—all he’d ever wanted. Now he had a bed-and-breakfast he didn’t know what to do with and feelings for a woman who made him think of sunshine and...well, something other than work.

Kendall finally looked up from her phone. “There’s a rest stop coming up.”

“Need to stop?”

“I could use a bathroom break and a refill. I need caffeine.”

He nodded. “We need to make it—”

“Quick, I know. Five minutes is all I need.”

She shoved her feet into her sneakers and pulled out her wallet as he drove up to the gas pump next to the mini-mart. “Go on ahead. I’ll fill up.”

She nodded and slid out, then slammed the door. While he was alone, Shane fanned out the money in his wallet. Six hundred dollars to get them through the next few states. He drew off one hundred for gas. Make that five hundred. With his background he could find a day laborer job, but that wouldn't haul in much more than gas money. And that was only if he was lucky and a crew needed an extra pair of hands. Shit.

He hopped out and paid the attendant, pumped his gas, and followed Kendall into the store. She had a sneer on her face when he found her. "That was gross."

"The joys of gas station bathrooms."

"There's no joy. I need to bathe in Purell."

His lips quirked. He missed her voice. The ride was getting stale because he couldn't get his act together when it came to this woman. "Luckily I don't have to touch anything."

"It's a good thing, believe me. Want something to drink?"

"I'll get it."

She rolled her eyes. "Suit yourself." She disappeared into the aisles, and he took care of business. He met her at the registers. Diet Coke, water, and a bag of peanut M&Ms. She did like her junk food. He wasn't sure where she put it, but she sure liked it. He put his Coke on the counter and pulled out a ten.

"Don't be stubborn about money now, Shane."

Ignoring her, he gathered his change and their bag. "I figure we've got another six hours, and we can stop for dinner. I'd like to drive through as long as we can."

"My butt says no, but yeah, that's probably for the best."

"I'm sorry I've been a bear, Sunshine."

Her eyebrow rose. "I'm sorry. Did you apologize?" She cupped around her ear. "I heard that right?"

He sighed and hooked his arm around her neck to drag her into his chest. "Funny girl."

She circled his waist and tucked her hands into his hip pockets. "We kind of forgot the fun part of our road trip."

"Yeah. The church thing was definitely a sexy-road-trip killer."

She looked up at him, her sly grin back and her eyes twinkling. She squeezed his ass. "Well, we've got a few more states to debauch."

He lowered his head and found her mouth. He traced the seam of her lips

with his tongue, and she dragged him closer. She softened for him, her tongue teasing his as playful Kendall emerged. *Keep it light. Just enjoy the moment.* There wasn't anything they could do about their situation but get through it. And at least he got to touch her. He bent his knees, and she shifted her hands out of his pockets and up his back.

He held her closer, dragging in the taste of her until his muscles stopped throbbing. He dropped their bag and gripped the waist of her pants and hauled her up. Her arms went around his neck, and her legs curled around him. Just like that they were locked in. But he couldn't be pissed off. Not when she tasted so fucking good.

"Get a room!"

He tore his mouth from hers, and her laughter pushed some of the cobwebs out of his head. The disgusted *tsk* from a woman old enough to be his grandmother made him blush. He set her down and bent for their bag. "You make me forget myself."

"I think you should forget yourself more." She walked ahead. "I like this Shane," she said over her shoulder.

He took off after her, and she skipped into a run. His legs were a hell of a lot longer, and he hoisted her up under his arm. She kicked out at the air. Her laughter filled the parking lot, and people turned to them with smiles.

"Shane. No, put me down." Her laughter released his own, and he put her down next to the truck, caging her in. Her curls fluffed around her shoulders as her ponytail sagged. He slipped the tie out, and she rolled her eyes. He didn't care what she wanted right then. He dipped his fingers into her hair and tipped her head up. In the semisecluded part of the parking lot he took his time kissing her until he heard that soft quake in her throat. He nipped her chin and chased the sound, trailing his lips down her neck until he reached her clavicle.

She wound herself around him, up off the ground, hanging on to him as he pushed her into the door. He ground his hips into the V of her legs. "You drive me insane."

She slid her hand up the back of his head, holding on tight, resting her forearms on his shoulders. He attacked her neck again. Anything to keep the scent and taste of her surrounding him. Her thighs flexed at his waist, his name a chant between kisses. He tore his mouth away and sank his teeth into the smooth skin between her shoulder and neck. The thin-strap tank top hugged her chest and torso like a second skin. No bra.

He groaned.

She was a tiny thing with little palm-sized breasts. She fit him better than any other woman had in his life. But he didn't want to take her against the side of his truck. He wanted to stretch out with her and lose himself in her scent and softness for hours.

"Dammit."

The pads of her fingers dug into the top of his head. "What?"

"Look around."

She peered at the small parking lot, her dark eyes finally clearing. "Not exactly the right place for this."

"No."

"So let's go find a secluded spot and steam up the windows."

He nibbled on her earlobe. "We need to get some miles under our belts."

She flipped open the top button of his jeans. "Not the belt I'm worried about."

He grabbed her hand and gently lowered her to her feet. "You have no idea how much I want to do just that. Part of me wants to move enough clothes so that I can get inside you." Her eyes widened, the doe color obliterated by her pupils. "I laid next to you all night and couldn't stop thinking about wrapping your fingers around the slats of that headboard and driving into you until the walls came down. Until whatever deity wanted to be offended tapped me on the shoulder and told me to stop. And I wouldn't have stopped."

The pulse in her neck fluttered madly.

"I wanted to dent the damn mattress, and still it wouldn't have been enough."

Her chest heaved, and she sawed through her lower lip. "Where can we find another place that's got that headboard?"

He laughed. "Christ, you make it hard to be smart."

"I don't want you smart. I want you to let go and smile. I want you to drive into me like that until neither of us can stand. I want it so much it scares me."

He pressed his forehead to hers. "You scare me even more, Kendall. I had a plan. *Have* a plan. Not had a plan. Fuck. We both know that New York is the endgame."

"Don't think about New York. Just let it be about us. No promises, no tomorrows, nothing but this." She laid her hand against his chest, her palm

digging the cross of his rosary into his skin. “Just us for as long as it takes.”

He nodded and caught her mouth in a harsh kiss. He’d been planning for as long as he could remember. Day-to-day wasn’t his way. But for her he’d try. For a chance to hold on to this a little bit longer, he would.

He bit her lower lip until it went a deep berry red. And when her lips were swollen and full, he kissed her harder. Then he pulled away and laced his fingers behind his neck. “Get in.”

Without a word, she opened the door and climbed in. He cracked his fist into the front corner panel of the truck, and the pain cleared his head. Driving was what mattered now. He’d have her tonight. And they would be a little closer to New York, even if he was wondering if New York still held all the answers he was looking for.

Kendall woke with a growling belly. Damien Rice’s soothing voice filled the cab of the truck, and sunlight streamed over her shoulder.

“Morning, sleepyhead.”

She squinted at the dashboard clock. “Why’d you let me sleep so long?”

“What am I supposed to do? Prop up your eyelids with toothpicks?”

She jammed her overshirt behind her back against the door. “You could”—she gasped—“talk to me.”

“I was talking, and then you were snoring.”

“I do not snore!”

“You keep telling yourself that, Sunshine.”

She crossed her arms over her chest. “Ass.”

“Nag.”

She swung her leg out and nudged his thigh. “Was that a smart-ass remark there, Oscar?”

“No, you’re just a nag.”

She dug her toe into his thigh. “Jerk.”

“You want to make a pit stop? There have been signs for a place called Mom’s.”

“Where are we?”

“Someplace called Salina.” He shrugged. “I need something more than a

Coke.”

She lifted the empty bag on the bench. “You ate my M&Ms.”

“You snooze, you lose.”

She took a swig of her lukewarm soda and winced. “Yeah, maybe we can get a sandwich or something.”

“I was thinking the same thing.”

She stretched and turned to look out her window. “Wow, desert is gone, huh?”

“Yeah, all about the mountains here. It’s cooler too, so you’ll probably need that shirt before we go in.”

She looked down at her tank top. “What? I’m covered.”

He gave her a sidelong glance. “One wrong move and everyone can see the trio of freckles around your nipple.”

She pulled the shirt away and looked down. “Huh. I don’t think I noticed those before.”

“They’ve been there all your life.”

She shrugged. “I don’t look at them. Do I look like the kind of girl who stands in front of the mirror and checks out all my flaws?”

“What flaws? Christ, Kendall, you’ve got a rockin’ body.”

She laughed. “I’m too skinny. I’ve been told that all my life. And when I had braces? Kids in my class kept asking me if I was going to fall forward because my head was too heavy.”

“You’re tiny, but it’s all muscle and softness. Believe me, I’ve enjoyed it all.” He pulled into the parking lot and found a spot along the back of the building.

She watched the flush slide up her chest and felt it in her cheeks. “Yeah, well, you’re already getting laid. You don’t have to lie about the merchandise.”

“I don’t know if you noticed, but I’m not a smooth talker. That was my father’s way. That’s how Kain works, but that’s not me. I say what I mean.”

She’d only been teasing him. He was so incredibly intense sometimes. “All right.”

He unhooked his seat belt and cupped her face. “I don’t know if I ever want to get to New York. I’ll be bashing heads if I find out there’s a town full of idiots who have no idea how beautiful you are.”

She covered his hand. His eyes were so fierce. “It’s a little different when you’ve gone to school with all the guys you know since kindergarten,

Shane.” And none were like him. No one had ever treated her like spun glass one minute and an exciting sexual equal the next.

“Doesn’t stop people from growing up and grabbing a clue.” He curled one arm around her waist. He feathered his mouth along her cheek, bypassed her mouth, and coasted down her neck to her shoulder. He nosed off one strap of her tank top and pulled down her shirt until the tops of her breasts showed. He lowered his head to swirl his tongue around her nipple, then sucked until it beaded to a point. “Now look.”

Her nipple was a deep pink from his strong pulls, and a tiny triangle of freckles shone against her fair skin. He dragged the first knuckle of his finger around the tip. “Creamy and freckled and tipped with pouty little nipples. This is what I see when I look down. This is what I can’t keep my mouth off of. Just a small part. There’s so much that I want to touch and taste.”

“What am I supposed to say to that?”

“You don’t have to say a damn thing. Just believe me when I say you’re beautiful.”

She smiled slowly. “I’ll try and remember.”

“I’ll keep on reminding you.” He reached behind her and dropped her shirt in her lap. “For now, put this on.”

“Bossy.”

He grabbed his wallet off the dash and got out. She let her head tip back against the bench seat. The overwhelming man was like a shot of adrenaline. She jumped out and followed him into the whitewashed brick building. It wasn’t a big place and reminded her of a million different mom-and-pop cafés in the Adirondacks. A sign invited them to seat themselves, and a woman with an honest-to-God beehive hairstyle came out from the back with a smile. Pastel purple shadow and mascara-heavy lashes finished her retro look.

“I’m Maude. You folks hungry?” She dragged an old-style ticket pad out of her apron. “Drinks?”

“Iced tea.”

“Make that two,” Shane said.

“You got it.”

Kendall looked around at the checkered plastic-coated tablecloths and simple salt and pepper shakers beside milk bottle vases. A single white carnation with its fluffy petals leaned against the opening of each vase. “Did we go back in time?”

The corner of Shane's lips tipped up. "The side of the building said 1929."

"Maybe 1959 for this table."

"Maybe."

Maude bustled back with their drinks. "Need a few more minutes?"

Kendall picked up her menu and scanned quickly. "Roast beef club for me."

Shane took the red-and-white plastic board from her. "Burger and fries."

Maude scribbled their orders. "Salad bar?"

They both shook their heads. "Okeydoke. Be back in a jiff." She winked.

Kendall turned to Shane with a huge grin. "Can't wait to see if everything comes out on a Corelle plate with blue flowers."

Shane took a sip of his tea and choked.

She waggled her eyebrows.

Three men in jeans and button-down shirts came in—two with wide buckles under expanding waistlines and a third who was long, lean, and could have been a stunt double for Sam Elliott. Not quite as handsome, a touch craggier if that was at all possible, and probably twenty years younger than the actor. He had an interesting face—an arresting face. He definitely didn't have an off-the-rack JC Penney's shirt on like the other two. His was tailored to fit his rangy body.

He smiled and tipped his cowboy hat at her as they walked by and took a seat at a larger table a few feet away.

She turned back to Shane, laughed at his quirked brow. "Oh, stop. I just thought Sam Elliott walked in the door, that's all. But he's too young to be him. Could be his son, though. Jeez." Again just a mild, blank look. She shrugged. "*Road House*, baby. He was hot."

Shane laughed. "What am I going to do with you?"

"I have a few ideas."

Shane's eyes lit with that inner fire that left her buzzy.

Maude exploded from the back door. "William Doyle, as I live and breathe. What are you doing off that ranch? Lucinda usually keeps you boys watered and fed."

The Sam Elliott look-alike sighed. "I had to get off the ranch before I killed all those idjits working on my stables."

Kendall shifted to listen. Shane tapped her wrist. She turned her hand and caught his but didn't stop listening. This she understood. Small towns were



about gossip. And she was tired of thinking about her own problems.

“Those boys are hard workers.”

“No, they have ability but no drive. Goddamn lazy shits. Pardon, Maude.”

“Well, the kids these days don’t have the sense God gave a flea.”

“They work plenty hard when I stare at their—uh, when I’m present. But I have a whole ranch to run. I don’t have time to babysit,” Doyle said.

He nodded to the two men across from him. “Pat and Charlie have foals to deal with and new horses to buy for the expanded stables.”

Kendall turned around. “Isn’t that what you used to do?”

Shane shook his head tightly. “That’s not a quick day job, Sunshine.”

Kendall pulled out her phone and looked at the calendar. Eleven days until Thanksgiving. If they pushed it and traveled all day and night and Shane possibly allowed her to drive, they might be able to put in twelve hours a day and make it to New York within three days.

He covered her phone. “You’re scheming.”

She looked up. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“You’ve got that I’m-about-to-blow-up-Shane’s-world smile on your face.”

“No, I’ve got the I’m-about-to-save-our-asses smile on my face.” She stood up.

“Kendall.”

She ignored him and walked down to the table of men. “Hi. I couldn’t help but overhear what you gentlemen were talking about.”

The man had taken off his hat, and it sat on the chair beside him. Salt-and-pepper hair fell around his ears. Freaking Sam Elliott. It was uncanny. He arched a bushy brow. “Ma’am. Just what do you think you could do to help my predicament?”

“It sounds like you need a foreman. A good one who’s used to leading men and making sure they do what they’re supposed to.”

“And I suppose you know how to do that?”

She smiled wide, and Doyle smiled back. “I’ve been known to order a man around a time or two.”

“I just bet.”

She laughed. “But no, not me. My friend Shane Justice has a lot of experience.”

Doyle’s brows lowered over steel-blue eyes. “Justice?”

Kendall nodded. “Years of experience with construction and being a

foreman. We're traveling to New York to relocate—"

His eyes sharpened. "From where?"

She tipped her head. "California."

Shane stood and laid his hand along her lower back. "Don't mind Kendall. She has no idea what goes into a project you guys are talking about."

She elbowed him. "I know a project that has your name on it when I hear one."

Doyle looked between them. "I need it done within the week, son."

Shane stiffened next to her. "The week? How far along are you?"

"We're in the finishing stages. The frame and masonry are done, but I need the inside finished. Carpentry, organization, and whipping the men into shape. My current foreman ran off with my maid last Tuesday."

"Theresa?" Maude sputtered.

"Yep. I knew that girl was trouble the moment Lucinda hired her. Too pretty for her own good. Beggin' your pardon, ma'am."

Kendall shrugged. "Shane's been telling me the same thing all week."

Shane's fingers curled around her hip. "I'm looking for quick work. We had a little trouble with my truck and blew through our traveling money. Kendall was right about the relocating." His chin lifted. "I'm starting over in New York but haven't gotten myself established."

"You aren't Larry Justice's boy, are you?"

Kendall started. Just how far a reach did Lawrence have?

Shane's spine stiffened. "I am."

"What are you doing out here? Justice Construction has most of the West Coast sewn up."

"Things have changed."

Doyle grunted. "I've heard of your father's company."

Maude snorted inelegantly. "Doyle here owns most of this part of Utah. He's heard of just about everyone."

"I know Bob Welsey."

Shane's jaw lost its granite stiffness. "Small world."

Kendall looked up at him, then to Doyle. "I'm pretty sure I'm missing something here, but I bet I just heard an ironclad reference in there."

Shane glanced down at her. His fingers skimmed the slice of skin between her shirt and khakis, then rested on her hip again. "Welsey is one of those clients Kain bought."

Doyle's brow lifted. "Oh?"

"My father passed away. Kainoa Construction has taken over most of his clients thanks to a buyout."

Doyle's face cleared. "I see. I'm truly sorry to hear that, son. I've heard nothing but good things about Larry Justice and his workhorse of a son."

Shane inclined his head. "I've got some property in New York and want a change of pace."

She clenched her jaw. *They* had property in New York.

Doyle nodded. "I understand how that is. That's how I started my ranch. Wanted out from under my daddy's thumb in Montana. If you can give me seven days and whip those boys into shape, I'll get you two to New York. You get it done sooner, we can talk a bonus."

Shane tugged her ponytail. "Can you be away that long?"

"I'll check in with Mom and Bells. As long as we get there by Thanksgiving."

"I'll get you there," Shane said quietly.

Doyle stood up and held out his hand. "Finish your lunch, and I'll show you the cow pie you just stepped in, Shane."

Kendall shook his hand. "I had a good feeling when you walked in the door, Mr. Doyle."

"You can call me Will. Kendall, was it?"

She nodded. "Kendall Proctor. You can call me your guardian angel."

Will laughed. "With all that pretty angel hair, I can't call you anything else, now, can I?"

She grinned up at Shane. His calm green eyes were steady, and a new strain pulled at the corners. She slid her hand into his and gripped. "We'll see you after lunch." She tugged Shane after her. "This is a good thing. Stop looking like I kicked your puppy."

Shane gave her a tight smile. "Depends how deep those cow pies are, Sunshine."

They sat down, and Maude dropped off their food. "Handy little story there, missy."

Kendall looked up at their waitress. "There's no story. We are traveling to New York, and we are short on cash."

"Will Doyle is good people. I don't want to hear that you screwed him over, you hear?"

Kendall picked up a potato chip from the center of her plate. "Shane's the

best thing that will ever happen to William Doyle.” She popped the chip into her mouth. She was sure of it.

# ELEVEN

“What do you think?”

“Where are the men now?”

“Lunch break at the mess hall down the road. Meals will be included as well as a room for you and your traveling companion up at the house.”

Shane slapped sawdust off his jeans and looked around. Six thousand square feet of stables. Well, what would be stables after he was done. Doyle hadn't been exaggerating when he said it was almost complete. That was a good thing. Most men in his situation would have lied through their teeth to get a new foreman to finish the job. The stable had a mix of new- and old-world flavors with the exposed beams and steel-framed girders that were prepped for drywall. Insulation had been done already, and it was just a matter of finalizing the project.

The tips of his fingers tingled with the need to do and create. He knew the building side of things. Code violations and masonry practices varied from state to state, but that was easy enough to verify. He had a sixth sense about space. He knew exactly what a job needed and how much time to devote to it. It was this side of him that his old man relied on to get a job done.

Lawrence Justice was a big-picture guy. He'd known how to sell, how to buy, and how to place the right people into the right jobs. But he never understood the magic of a space. He knew a building would bring in revenue, but he didn't care about the end product. Only the happy customer and a check in the bank mattered to his father.

Which was why they worked so well together. Shane didn't give two shits about glad-handing clients. He couldn't stand dealing with the schmoozing and the dinners and the parties. And as much as Larry had dealt with that

portion of Justice Construction, Shane had still had to make an appearance every once in a while.

Where he was truly happy was finding the magic in a hunk of wood. Whether it was a bookcase, a chair, a table, or a built-in unit—that was where he shone. Most of the time a client didn't know what they really wanted. And he was tired of pouring all his energy into the soul-sucking business side.

That was only one of a million reasons why he'd gravitated to carpentry. Renovations and the feel of wood under his hands made sense. It was where he belonged.

But he'd put his foreman's hat on one last time to get them to New York. To find a way to take care of Kendall.

"Do you think this is something you can take on?"

Shane turned to Doyle. "How many men do I have at my disposal?"

"Forty."

"Christ, and they're not further along?"

Doyle smiled. "I had a feeling about you."

Shane leveled his eyes at the older man. "You fell under Kendall's spell. Most men do."

"Well, there is that. She's a dangerous one, son."

Shane blew out a tired breath. "You don't know the half of it."

Doyle hooked his thumb behind his buckle. "I'm sorry to hear about your father, but that's the reason I'm hiring you. Justice has a good reputation, even out here. Your Kendall is the pushy sort who gets things moving, but I have a feeling you're the one who actually gets them done."

That was his claim to fame in the company. His father found the jobs, and Shane got them done. Under budget, above code, and within schedule. "I don't make friends on the job. Being friendly makes them think they can pal around with me. And all I want from them is good, clean work and fast work."

"Good. Jefferson, the foreman who left, he wanted to be everyone's friend, and look at the mess I've got to deal with."

The bite of rough-cut wood under Shane's palm made him itch to work. He hadn't had wood or a tool in his hand for weeks. "If you can approve overtime and maybe a bonus for the men to spring them into action, I'll have you done in under a week."

Doyle tipped back his hat. "And you think that will get them moving?"

"If you're not lying about a hardworking crew, we'll be golden. I'd say

five days.”

“Five?”

Shane nodded. “Ten-hour shifts, forty-five-minute lunch, and a handful of ten-minute breaks, and I’ll get this done. If I see slackers, I need to know that I’ve got the final say about whether they stay or go.”

Doyle’s mustache twitched up a fraction of an inch. “I can’t wait to see you in action, son.”

Shane did a slow turn at the center of the stable. The main area had a twenty-foot ceiling and the frame outs for a loft and a grooming area. “This is a really big room for just housing horses. What exactly do you do?”

“We’re a stud farm as well as a thoroughbred training center.”

“Racing?”

“No, just really good horseflesh for ranches, show horses, and professional riders.”

Shane nodded. The larger-than-normal space made sense. Especially if they did breeding on-site.

“Let me show you the rest.”

Shane followed Doyle through to the main room. Stalls were set up, and a stack of doors lay against the back wall. A small office was off the front, and a crude desk on sawhorses held blueprints as well as a computer. Filing cabinets lined the naked drywall.

“This is the foreman’s office?”

Doyle nodded. “All you should need is in the files and on the blueprints. The cabinets have all the breeding files for the horses, so leave those alone.”

Shane looked down at the blueprints, then peeled back the first two pages. He’d study them and figure out what needed to be completed. “Who’s been the acting foreman?”

“Dell Murphy.”

“Am I going to have trouble?”

“Doubtful. He’s a damn good supervisor, but he likes the working more than the behind the scenes.”

Shane understood that part all too well. But for a week’s worth of headache, he’d get Kendall and himself to New York and finally get to start over. “We haven’t exactly talked money.”

“No. I wanted you to see the state of affairs before we did.”

Shane straightened his shoulders and faced Doyle. “If your boys are as good as you seem to think they are and everyone’s willing to work, then I

think I'll be pulling your ass out of the fire."

Doyle took off his hat, pushed back his hair, and set his hat back on with a low tilt to the brim. "You're a smart man, and I've got eighteen mares coming in for insemination in ten days' time. Lucky for me I've got enough money to match my demands."

Shane inclined his head. "That's good to hear." Doyle named a figure, and Shane had to physically stuff down his surprise. For five days of work—seven on the outside. "You've got yourself a foreman."

"Excellent." Doyle stretched out his hand.

Shane shook it. He heard murmurings in the barn. "No time like the present to get acquainted."

"Let's go get this done, then."

Shane followed him out. On the way through, he counted fourteen lounging man-boys who were barely out of high school as well as a handful of people honestly working. A few lifers were doing enough to get by, and a man in his early forties was surrounded by a circle of men who were obviously getting direction for the rest of the afternoon.

As Doyle walked behind him, men straightened up and suddenly looked busy. But it was all for show. Just how many times did one square foot of the floor need to be swept? Shane stood in the doorway, warm sun and a cool breeze at his back. The space was already phenomenal.

He ran his hand over the smooth, soft white oak frame. An eleven-foot door with heavy wrought-iron hinges and studs gleamed with a clear coat of varnish. The oak was solid and stately and fit the overall feel of William Doyle. Hay and cement dust motes swirled in the sunlight. With work and effort, the stables would be amazing.

Shane eased back against the doorjamb, cataloging the three dozen men gathered around. He memorized faces and would eventually put names to them, but a trio of men in their thirties put up a red flag. Strong backs, knowledge in their eyes, and bellies gone slightly soft with beer and laziness.

They would be the ones to watch.

Doyle crossed his arms and waited until Dell Murphy noticed him.

Murphy turned when his audience stopped being entertained. He pulled his battered ball cap off, and the middle-aged man's harried smile made Shane's shoulders relax. The man wasn't power hungry. He was doing the best he could. "Just getting the men set up for the afternoon, boss."

"That's why I'm here. You've been doing great, Murph, but I've got a



seasoned foreman in from California who's going to help us out."

Murphy's shoulders straightened. "I've got it under control."

"I handed you a raw deal, and you did a great job, but I've got a stable full of mares coming in next week. I need this done." Doyle turned to Shane. "This is Shane Justice. I want you to work with him to get the men scheduled. We've got some long days ahead, and I'm willing to pay overtime if you boys are willing."

The murmur through the crowd along with nods ironed out the rest of the knots in his back. Money talked, and Doyle was going to back up his claim.

Shane dropped his arms to his sides and walked up beside Doyle. "I'm not your pal, I don't like excuses, and I'm well aware that you'll hate me by week's end. But if you give me five days, I'll give you enough overtime in your paycheck to make it worth it. Buy your girlfriend something pretty, have a round on me at the local bar, I don't care what you do—but do it after we're done here. I don't want hungover idiots shuffling in ten minutes, fifteen minutes, or an hour late. Be here to work, and Doyle will pay you handsomely. Anyone not willing to do the work, let me know now."

There was a light grumble, and one of the trio spoke up. Color Shane shocked. He was tall and slightly more athletic than his entourage, but he was still soft. "Who are you to come in and take over?"

Doyle opened his mouth, but Shane held up a hand. "For the next week, I'm your boss. Don't like it? I'll be happy to give your overtime to men hungrier and willing to work harder than you."

"You don't know anything about me, buddy."

"I know your type. Those two with you probably do twice as much work as you do."

The dark-haired man beside him found his boots fascinating, and the shorter man with a shaved head stared at Shane with glittering eyes. Oh yeah, trouble right there. Shane inwardly sighed.

He dismissed the man and turned to Murphy. "How about we go into the office and talk? I'm sure you'll get me up to speed."

Doyle clapped his hands. "All right. That's what I like. Thanks for your help, everyone."

Shane just hoped the handful of troublemakers he'd seen could control themselves until he got the hell out of there.

Shane pushed through the afternoon. The initial complaints from the men had died down quickly. As he'd thought, most of them were hard workers, but they needed direction. With clear goals in mind, they were able to focus and get their jobs done.

The incentive of overtime didn't hurt either. He hitched his tool belt on and followed his nose to the fresh-cut pine they were using to frame out the stalls. He nodded to Murphy, and they both fell into an easy rhythm of cutting and nailing. The afternoon passed, and the shadows deepened before he lifted his head.

Rhythm lost, he looked up to see what had caused a commotion. He should have known. Kendall walked through the barn, her sunny hair scraped back in a high tail that twitched with her bouncy walk. She was a beautiful woman, and while unconscious of it most of the time, a room full of men would make any woman strut her stuff. Kendall was no different. He moved into the hallway between the stalls and crossed his arms.

A grin split her face wide with crinkles and lightly bronzed skin and enough bawdy bravado that he wanted to lift her up against the nearest wall and taste her sunshine. The number of men who were probably thinking the same thing tightened his fists under his arms.

Instead of denting her smile, Shane's scowl made her laugh. Even more men took notice. "There's my Oscar. I've missed you."

His brows snapped lower when she leaned in and nipped at his jaw.

She looked over her shoulder. "Am I not supposed to kiss the boss? Is that frowned upon?"

"Jesus, Sunshine."

She gripped his forearm, and the soft press of her breast kicked him where it hurt. "Well, I can't be in too much trouble." She jammed her hand into the crook of his arm until he loosened and let her in. "I didn't realize there were so many young guys on the crew."

He focused his gaze on the dozen pairs of eyes that looked their way instead of the woman by his side who smelled of horses, hay, and wildflowers. A sprig of wheat hung drunkenly from her hair. He picked it out, hooking his hand around her waist.

Half of the men fell back into line, but a few still remained. Especially one who was far too cocky for his peace of mind. He'd gotten the lowdown on the trio he'd been worried about. And as he'd figured, Murphy had spilled all sorts of information.

Lon Mackie—an ex-football jock who continued to live vicariously through the memory of his glory days—watched intently. He hadn't gotten the memo that those glory days were fifteen years back.

She gave Shane a side eye. “You didn't just stake your claim or something equally asinine, did you?”

He dug his fingers into her belt loops. “Why? Have designs on someone new, Kendall?”

“Well, there are quite a few men to choose from here. Ones that certainly have a better disposition than you, Oscar.”

He stiffened and dropped his hand.

“God, you're no fun to tease.” She laughed and hitched her shoulder under his arm until he had no choice but to push her away or let her in against his body. Because she smelled so good, he opted for the latter.

“I'm a sweaty mess.”

“Manly sweat and sawdust make me weak in the knees.”

“They do not.”

She giggled. “How do you know?”

He rested his chin against the top of her head. He hadn't known he'd missed her until she showed up. His muscles loosened, leaving his shoulders to ache. In just a few days she'd burrowed into him until he couldn't think without her in the vicinity. That was dangerous and stupid. She wasn't his to keep. Wasn't his to worry about.

“Where have you been?”

She peered up at him. “Earning my keep.”

He frowned. “You don't need to do that. This job will pay for us to get to Winchester Falls as well as have plenty of spending money. Hell, we'll even have money for the house if it needs upgrades.”

She stiffened. “Why would the Heron need upgrades?”

“Every house needs upgrades.”

She pressed her cheek against his chest, oddly quiet. Especially for Kendall. He nudged her back. “What?”

“Now you're going to get talkative?”

His lips twitched, but he managed not to laugh. His Kendall was a

mouthy one. “We’ve agreed not to talk about New York until we get there, but I need to know what I’m in for.”

“It’s a B and B, plain and simple. We have a dock, a half dozen good-sized rooms, and four acres of land that we own. We’re on a lake, and the area isn’t overly developed. It’s beautiful.”

He heard the wistfulness in her voice. Even with just a few words he could picture it. He’d looked at the area on the Web and knew it was close to the national parks in the northern part of New York. But not exactly on state land. Their lake was smaller, more remote.

Good for a getaway.

Good for a developer who would want to cash in on the picturesque Northeast.

“Do you actually have herons?”

He felt her cheeks stretch into a smile against his chest. “Yes, quite a few, actually. More Canada geese than I’d like, but we have a cheerful mutt named Brody that keeps them moving for the most part. I take the fishing trawler out a lot—both for tours and just to even out when I get to...”

Shane smoothed his hand down her ponytail and cupped her nape. He did the same with wood and didn’t need her to explain. He lowered his head and caught her mouth in a slow, thorough kiss. After a long day in the dust and listening to men cracking on each other, her taste was as welcome as an icy beer. He drank her in, forgetting where he was for a moment. She tasted of candy and heat, of things he’d never known he wanted. That Kendall taste he couldn’t get enough of.

The shrill whistle jerked him back to his surroundings.

“Does that come with overtime?” Lon cracked. “I’ll be workin’ plenty of hours, then.”

Shane bristled.

Kendall flicked her finger along his beard and tapped his chin. “He’s teasing.”

Shane gave him a hard stare across the hallway. Lon put his hands up. “Boss perks. Got it.”

“Relax. He’s just jealous.” She popped her foot up and went on her toes to brush her lips against his.

He wrapped his other hand in the coiling fat curl of her ponytail and looked down at her. Her dark eyes flashed, and his half-ready cock hardened. “I think I need a break.”

Her eyes widened, and a half laugh escaped her. “Wouldn’t that be a little obvious?”

“I don’t care.”

“What if I do?”

He wrapped another length of her hair around his fingers until he hit the top of her tail. “Do you?” Her throat worked as he let her go and clasped her hand, leading her down the hall. “I just need a second.” He whisked her into the large stall at the front of the stables. The men were working at the back, framing out the twenty stalls that lined the walkway. This room was blessedly empty.

The sweet scent of hay lured him closer. A shaft of sun highlighted one bale, and he drew her down beside him. He pulled her into his lap until a knee perched on either side of him.

“Do you really think we should do this on the first day?”

“I haven’t seen you in hours. I just want—” He cut himself off to nuzzle her neck. Salty with the day, her taste filled his mouth. She lowered herself until the seam of her jeans rubbed along his strangled cock.

“Oh, well, then. I see.”

He grunted and caught her mouth. “No talking,” he mumbled.

She moaned into his mouth, and he filled his hands with her ass, grinding her against him. The quick shudder of her breath and the roll of her hips was worth a little hiding. He wanted to rip off her jeans and slam inside her until dust motes, sweat, and exhaustion were just a by-product of her. Until he heard the sound that meant she was close. That twist of her fingers in his hair, the way she palmed the top of his head when she was almost there.

He groaned into her mouth at the first scrape of her nails in his scalp. She surged against him, her breasts flush to his chest and her arms wrapping him in a cocoon of apples and a hint of lemon Life Savers. Christ, she was going to kill him. He latched his mouth on to her neck and tried to slow down the train.

The only stop he wanted was inside her, after his breath was a gasp because she rode him into oblivion. He pressed his forehead into her neck and gripped her back, trying desperately to hold her still. “Kendall.”

The purring moan that was half whine made him grin into her skin. “Don’t stop. Right there, I’m so close,” she moaned. Restless hips undulated against his aching cock, and he would have happily done anything not to stop. A whole different kind of banging came into the forefront of his

hearing. In between the rasping breaths that made him so hard he was entirely sure he'd lose his fucking mind, he could hear the compressor from a nail gun coming their way.

He slammed her down on his lap and ground into her. The quick rasp of her voice made him groan.

"So close," she whispered into his ear. Her breath was hot and hitching.

He dug his fingertips into the supple muscles of her back, and he rose against her rolling hips. "Christ, are you going to come just from this?"

She palmed the top of his head and latched her mouth over his. Fucking shit, she was. He kept up the steady bump against her even as his abdominal muscles shrieked and burned in time with his thigh muscles. She turned her cheek so theirs were side by side, and her breath cracked. He stilled under her as she ground into him so hard he knew he'd be wearing the indent of his zipper.

Her cheeks were flushed, and her head tipped back as she finally made the tiny shuddering moan he'd forever hear in his dreams. He brought his hand up between them and laid it on her chest. Her heart slammed like a kick drum under his palm. He nipped her chin.

She sagged against his shoulder. "I'm sorry."

He gripped her ponytail and brought her gaze up to his. Her pupils were wide open, leaving only a sliver of iris and her face flushed from wanting him. Humbled, he felt his heart turn. "What the hell for?"

"I didn't mean... I—" She groaned and bumped her forehead into his shoulder. "I don't know what came over me."

"You're damn lucky it wasn't me." Her laugh was sexy and low. He let her hair slide from his fingers and tipped her chin up. "You are so unbelievably fucking hot."

She flicked her tongue along her dry lips. "Only with you, evidently."

He dragged her in. Unable to leave her swollen lips alone, he teased open her mouth for a last lingering taste. She lightly scratched her way down the back of his skull to rest her fingers at his neck. Voices and the snick of nails pounding into pine brought him around again. He set her beside him on the hay bale and untucked his shirt. His dick was so hard he needed a minute to adjust. Her nails dug into his upper thigh. He dragged her hand down to his knee and laced their fingers.

With her cheek against his shoulder, he slowly relaxed.

"I didn't mean to do that."

He squeezed her hand. “You damn well should. Daily. Fuck, Sunshine.”

“I don’t want to get you into trouble.”

“I haven’t taken a break since I got here. Besides, you’re better than any coffee or soda I could go find.” Needing a minute to get himself together, he brushed an absent kiss along her temple. “What have you been up to?”

She nuzzled against his shirt. “I met Lucinda, the housekeeper. She’s mildly terrifying in a completely nurturing way.”

He laughed and enjoyed the feel of her against him. “I can’t tell if that’s a good thing or not.”

“I’m still deciding. I like it here. I’ve been near a lot of animals over the years but never horses. Once Evelyn—that’s the horse trainer—figured out I had a strong back, she had me in the stables.”

He took a sniff. “You don’t smell like horseshit.”

Kendall snorted into his shirt. “No, I got lucky there. She taught me how to rip apart hay bales and feed and water the horses.”

That was why she tasted a little salty. “I’m doing this so you don’t have to slog through a job.”

Her head popped up. “I earn my keep, Shane. So don’t worry about me. I like it. As long as I don’t have to muck out the stalls.”

Keeping her busy was a good idea. Especially with the level of work he’d be doing. He didn’t have time to make sure she wasn’t getting into any trouble. He nodded. “I get that. It’s a good plan.”

“Well, gee, thanks. I’m glad you approve.”

He pressed a kiss to her temple. “Don’t get all snarly. Besides, you smell like hay and sunshine. I like it.”

Her eyes softened, and he cursed himself for wanting to please her. Such a bad fucking idea. In less than ten days the reality of their situation was going to kill the happy peace between them. He squeezed her hand and stood. “Thanks for being my ten-minute break.”

A little frown line settled between her eyes before she grinned up at him. “I’ll see you for dinner?”

He smoothed his palm along the back of his neck, missing her touch already. “Not sure. We might be pulling a long shift today to get things back on track.”

She nodded. “Okay. I’ll find you later.” She brushed past him, and he snagged her wrist, hauling her back up against his chest. As usual Kendall melted into him, gentling him where he forgot to be gentle.

He opened his eyes first and caught the sweet smile on her upturned face. Dusky lashes rested against her sun-kissed cheeks and finally fluttered open. She made him want to be easygoing. It was an alien feeling. He tucked a stray tendril of hair around her ear. “Get out of here. You’re distracting the men.”

Her smile widened. “I always wanted to be a distraction.”

If she only knew.

She slipped away, her hips swaying as she bounced out the front doors into the sunshine. He stepped out of the stall to hear a long whistle from a half dozen men. “All right, all right. That overtime isn’t going to happen if I don’t see a dent in at least ten stalls. Move!”

There were a few grumbles but mostly snickers as hammering, saws, and pops of compressed air filled the room. This he understood.

KENDALL HIKED UP through bronzing fields dry with fall and the still-blazing heat of the sun. Utah hadn’t gotten the memo that it was mid-November. Now that she was away from Shane, she tied the sleeves of her overshirt around her hips and let the breeze cool her shoulders.

The man was so hard to read. He was wild and rough around the edges, and each time he touched her she splintered into pieces. She didn’t know when she’d ever felt more out of control and happy at the same time in her entire life. Free to do her own thing, she’d found herself working harder than when she was at the Heron.

But the backbreaking work cleared her mind. Evelyn Marsh was the perfect outlet for the days that tumbled in front of her. Kendall jogged the last few yard to the old stables and smiled when her new friend waved her into the foaling section. Evelyn was a leggy brunette who was as coltish as her charges. She was lean and sun roughened. Crinkles at the edges of her eyes spoke of the outdoors, but Kendall couldn’t name Evelyn’s age to save her life.

She wasn’t young, but she was virile and powerful in a way Kendall hoped to be someday.

“Come see my new baby.”

Kendall hooked her palm around the faded wood and peered through the bars of the wrought-iron framework over the door. “Oh, Evelyn.”

“I know. Isn’t she just the most beautiful thing you ever did see?” Evelyn knelt in the middle of a fresh spread of hay with a softly snuffing mama



horse. The mare had a deep blue-black coat. The new baby was shaky but matched her mama in coloring save for a snowy slash of white down its nose. “Her name’s Hannah.”

Kendall slowly crept in and lowered herself in front of the spindle-legged baby. Hannah took a tumble, her hooves clunking together before she righted herself and scampered back to her mother. Kendall jammed her fingers between her knees and watched in awe as the mother nuzzled her baby. “They’re beautiful.”

Evelyn crawled over to the mare and stroked her head. “Callie did an amazing job.”

“When did she give birth?”

“Just last night.”

“And the baby’s already walking around?”

“Yep. Horses don’t crawl. Hannah will be clumsy for a bit, but she’ll be running around the paddock by tomorrow.”

Amazed, Kendall fell back onto her booted heels. “So fast.”

“As cyclical as everything is on a farm, one thing moves at lightning speed—change.” Evelyn stood and slapped her hands on her knees to dust off the hay. “My, don’t you have a blush in your cheeks. Somehow I don’t think that’s from just being outside.”

“It is pretty hot.”

Evelyn hooked her arm into Kendall’s. “You’ve got sex eyes.”

“I do not.”

Evelyn laughed. “You do. And that quick response says to me that you definitely had it or almost had it.” She grabbed her hat off the post outside the stall. “Or you just enjoyed a little whisker burn with your visit to the new stables.”

Kendall swiped her hand over her face with a wince. “Is it that obvious?”

Evelyn shrugged. “Either you found yourself a randy cowboy at the stables—which isn’t hard—or you went and saw your little boy toy.”

“I don’t have a—”

“Everyone’s buzzing about Shane Justice. I saw you two roll in together this morning. I get the feeling that you aren’t quite boyfriend/girlfriend, but you’re not strangers either.”

Confused, she peered up at her. “How...”

“That man watches you like you’re a steak and a hot fudge sundae wrapped up in a silky bow.” Evelyn sighed. “I remember when Doyle used to

look at me like that.”

Dumbfounded, Kendall followed her out of the barn. “You and Will?”

“We scratched the itch sometimes. After his wife died, he wasn’t all fired up to do much more than lose a few random hours in the middle of the night. It suited me until it didn’t.”

They walked in companionable silence. Was that all she and Shane would be? Random hours that filled the time until New York? That was all she wanted. All she was supposed to want. But after last night’s weirdness, she didn’t know. Even if she’d hopped on his lap easily enough a few minutes ago.

She found herself wanting to share the Heron with him. Instead of just telling him about her favorite spots, she wanted to show them to him. She wanted to see him there on her dock and look out on the water with his warm chest at her back.

Which was stupid. He’d probably want to sell and wash his hands of her. There was so much she wanted to do with it, but the only steady customers she had were fishermen. And she couldn’t turn them away, or she’d be out of business in a month.

She’d blocked out the reality of her situation for days now. She was so afraid the B and B would be gone and so would he. Maybe if she kept talking it up, she could convince him to see the Heron like she did.

And just maybe he’d see the bed-and-breakfast as something more than a moneymaker that would fetch them the highest dollar for a sale.

Evelyn’s voice gentled. “I’m not sure what’s going on in that head of yours, but I’ll give you a piece of unsolicited advice.”

“Lay it on me.”

“Good sex can color the whole world in sparkles and fairy dust. Wait until the sparkle fades before you own up to love and babies and forever. Sometimes the fairy dust is just a good orgasm.”

“I must be covered in fairy dust.”

Evelyn guffawed and slapped her back. “From head to toe, kid.”

Kendall slammed the lid on the box again. It wasn’t time to take New York out of its box and look at it too closely yet. “I think I’m going to enjoy my Tinker Bell status for a bit.”

“I don’t blame you. I’ve seen your boy, and he looks like he’d be very good with the, um...fairy dust.”

Kendall’s lips twitched. “He’d kill me if he heard the analogy.”

“I have a feeling you know your way around his growly nature.”

For some things she did. And other ways, she wasn't sure how she'd ever reach him.

# TWELVE

Kendall flexed her tight shoulders and slammed a hook into each end of the hay bale so she could load it into the large cart. She sawed down the sides until the straps snapped and loosened the whorls of golden straw. She repeated the process six more times until she had a massive pile ready for the yearlings and colts. She hopped into the little tractor and slapped it into gear.

Day three and she was finally getting the hang of her small chores. She hadn't been delegated to mucking out the stalls, but she had a feeling that had more to do with Shane's station in the pecking order this week than anything she was doing on Doyle's horse farm.

She hadn't seen Shane for more than a few minutes in the evening before he poured himself into the shower and bed, returning at daybreak to do it all over again. Most nights he stayed down at the barracks with the other workers, checking in on her between whatever projects he was working on.

Keeping busy had been the deal of the day for her since the first night. She understood that he wanted to wrap up the job as quickly as possible, but with each day that passed, it was becoming clearer that her fantasy was falling apart. She avoided her mother's calls and didn't have it in her to talk to Bells about her situation.

She worked herself into exhaustion just so she didn't have to analyze whatever it was between her and Shane. Cross-country sexathon, fling, or was it more? She couldn't lie to herself anymore.

It was more for her.

Was she deluding herself? They'd known each other for little more than a week, and already she felt more for him than she had any other man in her life. Was it just fairy dust like Evelyn said, or was it that once-in-a-lifetime

connection that everyone looked for?

She dumped the feeding station into the middle of the pasture and waved to Evelyn, who was putting Porthos through his paces. Besides the baby foal, Porthos was her favorite horse. The ring created in the paddock was filled with jumping fences and agility barrels. She hooked her arms over the sun-bleached fence around the perimeter.

This was her favorite part of the day. With three days under her belt, she still marveled at the horses' grace and beauty. Not to mention she had a healthy respect for the fact that most of them towered over her.

"Beautiful, aren't they?" A man's voice came from over her shoulder.

Kendall smiled. "He's going to be one helluva show horse."

The man leaned against the post and definitely hadn't gotten the memo about invading a woman's personal space. "I can show you how to ride."

She kept her smile in place but focused her attention on Evelyn and the barrels she raced around. "Evelyn already gave me a few lessons."

"Ah. She's a damn good rider. I could take you for a ride out to the meadow, maybe have some lunch. I'm Lon Mackie, by the way."

"No, thanks." She gave him a sideways glance. "You're on Shane's crew, aren't you?"

"Yes."

"Thought so." And she'd seen him watching her when she went in to visit Shane during her midday break. "I'm sure Shane keeps you too busy for a picnic."

"Work is never more important than a pretty girl."

Kendall arched her brow. "I'm sure another woman would be very happy to hear that."

"But not you?"

She jumped down from the fence. "Not me." She peered up at the tall man. He was still handsome, but she had a feeling he'd been truly devastating before ten years of liquor and cigarettes had done their damage. There were dozens of Lons back home.

"I'm entitled to an hour off with the overtime I've been putting in."

"And I'm sure you can find someone to do that with."

He leaned in again, and she took a step back. "Slim pickings around here."

She shielded her eyes and squinted up at him. "Oh, yeah? That makes me want to go all the more."

“Now, I didn’t mean it like that, Kendall. I can call you Kendall, right?”

She ducked under the rail and glanced over her shoulder. “It’s very sweet of you to ask, but I’m not interested.”

“I’m not good enough for you, city girl?”

She stopped and stared. “I’m sort of with someone, Mr. Mackie.”

“*Sort of* means you’re available. And call me Lon.”

There’d been no talk of exclusivity with Shane, and yet just the idea of him with someone else made her stomach churn. “I…”

“Come on, what could it hurt? I know how to have fun, unlike that uptight—” He shrugged and gave her a lopsided smile. “Let’s just say I’m a helluva lot more fun. We could go out after my shift is over. We may be working overtime, but I don’t have to be here all night.”

“No, thanks, really.”

“It’s not just me. You gotta be bored staying at the big house. There’s a bunch of us that go out. You don’t have to worry about me. I’m harmless.”

About as harmless as bees around a hive. He had his heels dug in, and it was easier to make him think her answer was maybe. “I’ll think about it.”

His blue eyes sparkled. “Great. That’s all I’m asking. We’ll be at Starrla’s on Main Street.”

“All right.”

“Great. Don’t forget now.”

“I won’t.” She strode along the edges of the ring to stay out of the way, waving to Evelyn to let her know she was in the paddock. “See you later, Lon.”

Fielding the attentions of the men on Shane’s crew was getting to be a full-time job. And Shane was far too busy to notice. She knew how to walk the line between friendly and showing interest. Lon might require her rude card if he got any more aggressive. She didn’t like to pull that out unless it was absolutely necessary.

Evelyn patted Porthos’s neck and grinned down at her. “Lon sniffing around?”

“Like I’m in heat, for heaven’s sake.”

“Well, as far as he’s concerned, you are. He’s persistent. Harmless but persistent.”

Porthos snuffed at Kendall’s shoulder, nibbling on her ponytail until she tucked it up on top of her head. “I keep telling you I’m not food.”

“You smell like apples.”

“Is that what it is?”

“Evidently he likes your shampoo.”

Kendall patted his nose. “I don’t mind when *you* flirt with me, big guy.”

“He’s not giving you any trouble, is he?”

“No. Lon’s one of those guys not used to a no. I can handle him. I just don’t want Shane to catch on.”

“Why?”

A flash of his possessive kiss after her first day in the stables came back to her. “Things between Shane and I are a little complicated.”

Evelyn swung her leg off the horse’s saddle and dropped to the ground. She ran a gentling hand along Porthos’s neck. “Now we’re getting interesting.”

“No, Shane and I are less than interesting.”

“So you keep telling me.” She clucked at Porthos and led him into the shade of the stable and uncinched his buckles.

Kendall went around to the other side of the horse. They were getting into a routine, and every day Evelyn bugged her for details. And each day she had no idea what to say. “We’re sex and no entanglements, and we like it that way.”

“That only works for so long.”

“We have until we get to New York.”

The saddle slid toward Evelyn, and she hefted it with ease. She slapped it in its holder. “Wait, what?”

Kendall cringed. “I didn’t mean to say that.”

“Yes, I think you did.”

No, she really hadn’t. Crap. “It’s complicated. If I tried to explain it to you, there would be more questions.”

“I’m good at complicated.”

Kendall snorted. “No, you’re not. You like simple. That’s why you like horses better than people.”

“You”—Evelyn pointed a finger at her—“are way too perceptive. But I really am good at complications. I just don’t choose to get involved most of the time.”

“Why would you get involved with me, then?”

“Because I *like* you.”

Kendall choked out a laugh and sniffed at the same time. She tipped her head back to stop the sudden tears. She was good until Evelyn had shown

honest concern. There were so few people in her life she'd allowed to get close enough to notice when she was having a bad day.

"But if there are tears, then we don't get to talk anymore."

Kendall flipped a bucket and plopped down on it. "Crying doesn't solve anything. I'm just breaking the cardinal rule of a fling." She sniffed again and patted her eyes with the backs of her hands. "I always sucked at rules."

"Ah, so this wasn't supposed to be anything serious with Oscar?"

Kendall couldn't help a small smile. Everyone had taken to her nickname for Shane. He was stern with the men and didn't try to make friends. It was his job to be the hammer, and he was good at it.

And she ached for that smile that was imperceptible to anyone but her.

"We're business partners—though it doesn't seem like it. Thanks to a ridiculous will, Shane and I are co-owners in a bed-and-breakfast. The plan was to make it across the country and figure out if we're going to sell the house and split the profits or run the place together."

"That sounds very clinical for something that can't possibly be that simple."

"It's not. God, even saying it out loud sounds ludicrous."

Evelyn crouched in front of her. "Just tell me, honey."

She hadn't told anyone, hadn't really faced just how much change there would be when they got home. She'd been so stupid to think she could go on having a fun road trip with him when she got home and everything in her life would change.

Maybe she really did think she could convince him to share the B and B and start a life.

Maybe she was an idiot.

"My father died a few weeks ago."

"Oh, honey." Evelyn covered her hands. Kendall relaxed under her touch.

"It hurt Shane more than it affected me. Lawrence hadn't been my father since I was five. But he raised Shane like a son."

Evelyn stood and pushed a bucket of water in front of her. "We'll rub down Porthos, and you can tell me everything."

Kendall nodded. "My father left when I was a kid. I never knew why, just that he up and left one day. And then it was just me and my mom." She'd been young enough that adjusting hadn't changed her life, and missing Larry had faded over time.

Doing something so mundane helped. The smooth muscles and warmth of



the horse evened her out. They hosed Porthos down and moved on to brushing his coat.

“So I lived my life, and my father left the house to me and my mom. And eventually we made it into a bed-and-breakfast to help with bills. We had all this land right on the lake. It just made sense.”

“If I didn’t hate people, I’d agree with you.”

Kendall laughed and relaxed a little more. “My mother loves being around people. And I’ve learned to enjoy it. After ten years it’s all I know.”

“I sense a *but*.”

The sounds of brushing filled the silence. How did she explain that her mother had loved an undeserving man? That Lily’s heart was the reason change was coming like an uninvited guest. Was she destined to revisit the same mistakes because she was probably mistaking passion for growing feelings?

Another Justice was changing her life.

Every day she’d spent with Shane made her want more. The sex and the excitement were enough at first. But now she ached with missing him. She stared at the ceiling each night. She worked herself into exhaustion, hoping that she’d drop into sleep, but her body and her heart longed to curl into his reassuring warmth. The need to pull a smile out of his serious face was more tempting than thinking about the future.

She was ignoring the facts.

He didn’t want forever. As much as she hoped he would want to become her partner so that she could keep the Heron, he was probably going to want the money. This was his chance to start over. The fantasy of seeing him in the B and B with her was just that—a fantasy.

The deep brown of Porthos’s coat blurred. She’d been doing her level best to hold on to the days and create a precious time separate from Winchester Falls, but the reality was leaking into the fantasy.

“My mother loved my father too much. Even when he didn’t love her back. She never moved on. She never took Larry’s name off the deed to the house. When he died, the only thing left was my house, and everything was split between me and Shane.”

“So wait, he’s not your brother, but he’s got rights to the house?”

“Lawrence adopted Shane, raised him as his own.”

“And now you have to share the house with him?”

Kendall nodded. “I love the Heron. It’s been nice to be away and see the

country, to be with Shane. Everything's going to change when we get to Winchester Falls."

"So what are you afraid of?"

"That he'll just want to sell it and walk away." She swiped at her wet cheeks with the heel of her hand. "I don't want him to walk away."

Evelyn came around and leaned into the horse's neck, absently patting his broad face as she gave Kendall her undivided attention. "From you or the house?"

The concern in Evelyn's voice killed whatever was left of her resolve. "I'm afraid it's both. And it's stupid to think that way. We've only known each other for a little over a week. I've got to be confusing my feelings with the afterglow of great—and I do mean great—sex."

"What about him?"

"Where's the advice jar?" Kendall forced herself to swallow the lump in her throat. This felt like a therapy session. No more tears. She would not let a Justice make her cry again.

Evelyn's steady, dark gaze bored into hers. "Don't avoid the question, Kendall."

"I don't know. I really don't. From the moment we got near each other, it's been like this."

"All sex and no talking?"

She could feel the flush crawling up her neck and flooding her cheeks. High emotions and lust were a terrible combination. She and Shane barely knew how to talk to each other. And she was deluding herself to think they could be anything more than a fling.

Even if being with him felt more right than anything had ever felt before.

Porthos nudged her shoulder; his peach-fuzz-soft lips snuffed at her ear. "We're good at the sex part, but these few days without him being around, it makes me wonder if there's anything else between us."

"I can't answer that for you, but relationships have been started on less. You're what? Twenty-something?"

"Twenty-seven."

"Huh." Evelyn grinned at her. "I was going to say twenty-four. But that's good. You're not so young that you don't know what you want. I was fucking stupid at twenty-four."

"I've been running the Heron since I was sixteen."

"Oh, honey. You've never been a kid."

She shrugged. “No, and that’s why I was trying to have fun with this trip. Hell, I even went to college near home. This is the first time I’ve ever been away for more than a weekend.”

“Maybe selling the Heron wouldn’t be a bad thing. Set your mom up in a cute little house, and go travel. In fact, I’d take you here in a heartbeat. You’re a natural with the horses.”

Kendall straightened. “You would?”

“I would. I love having you around.”

“I don’t know what to say.”

“Just know that you have options.”

Kendall nodded slowly. “Thanks.”

“I have to put this big baby back in his stall. I’ll see you up at the house?”

“Yes. I need to get cleaned up.”

“A bunch of us are going to Starrla’s. You should come.”

“Wow, there are people actually going? I thought that was just a line that Lon was feeding me.”

Evelyn laughed. “It’s the only place to go, really. I feel like dancing tonight.”

“Maybe I will.” She stroked Porthos’s neck one last time, then headed toward the new stables. The whir of a skill saw and the echoing snap of the nail gun almost made her turn around. Her head was already slamming from being out in the sun too long.

A coating of hay dust made her itchy, and all she wanted to do was pop a few ibuprofens and stand under the shower spray for an hour, but she hadn’t seen Shane all day.

She liked seeing how much the space transformed from the morning through the afternoon. The crew worked hard, and despite Shane’s growly nature, she spotted him smiling at the top of a set of scaffolding outside the stables. With a blowtorch in his hand?

“You’re not going to burn down this almost perfect establishment, are you, Oscar?”

He smiled down at her, his teeth a slash of white against the grime on his face. A sweat-soaked black tank hugged his chest and tight abs. Battered jeans hung low on his hips with a heavy leather belt keeping everything in check. Too bad. She liked the dimples just above his truly spectacular ass.

He dragged his leather-clad hand across the toasted wood. “Just accenting some carving.”

“Is it safe to come up?”

He nodded toward the ladder that made up the end of the scaffolding. She climbed, reaching for Shane’s outstretched hand. God, he was even more breathtaking up close. What was it about a sweaty man doing manual labor?

He tapped the brim of her hat. “What have you been up to? I missed you this morning.”

“I was at the stables. Needed to clear my head.”

He raised a brow.

“Your things made it to the B and B. I’m going to have to tell my mom what’s going on.” She really didn’t want to do that until she was home.

“You should have told her a while ago, Kendall.”

The skin between her shoulders tightened. She hated when he called her by her name. Lately he only did it when he was perturbed. “I know. I just know how she’s going to react, and I don’t want to deal with it.”

“How’s she going to react?”

Possible tantrum, definitely with a million questions, and quite probably with tears. “It’s going to be a long phone call.”

He fired up the torch and put his protective glasses on. “Is there anything I can do?” Already his attention was on the large wood plaque under Doyle’s iron brand. The WD was an exact replica of the one on the center of the gates on the front of his house as well as the logo used on everything at the farm.

“I’ll take care of it,” she said.

“Are you sure?”

She leaned on the railing of the small cage they were in. With each pass of his torch, the grain in the wood bloomed to life. The engraved portion stayed in the stark-white pine. “It’s beautiful.”

His lips kicked up at the corner as he continued his gentle sweeps.

He cared. There was love in the work he did. The men inside the stables scurried around with intent. He didn’t micromanage them; he just made sure they knew that each job was important. Stern Shane was someone she would listen to as well.

She had listened. And she’d definitely obeyed a few orders. Her nipples tightened at that thought. She turned back to Shane and waited until he turned off the torch.

He pushed the glasses on top of his head. “Are you sure you’re all right?”

She flashed him her carefree smile and hoped to God it met her eyes. “How could I be anything but okay? I’m watching a hot guy play with fire.”

Can't get much better than that."

He frowned. Before he could question her further, she went on her toes and pressed a kiss to his cheek. "Am I going to see you tonight?"

He looked over the chaos below, then swiped away the sweat on his forehead. "I'm not sure. If I want to keep to this five-day deal, then I have a lot more work to do."

She crossed her arms. "Then I think I'm going to go into town with Evelyn. A bunch of people are going."

"Good. I don't want you sitting around up at the house."

"It's getting a little old."

He mirrored her stance. "I'm doing the best I can, Kendall."

She touched his arm. "I know you are. I'm just restless. You know, anxious to get back."

"Right."

All that mattered was getting through the next few days. Not her ridiculous epiphany, not the sexy way he stood there all confused and unsure of how to handle her, and definitely not her stupid mood this afternoon.

She gave him another smile and monkeyed her way under the bars to find the ladder. He gave her a quizzical look as she scrambled to the ground and headed for the main house.

# THIRTEEN

Shane kneaded the tight muscles along his neck and shoulders. All he wanted was his bed and five hours down. Three days of fourteen-hour shifts were getting to him. He didn't mind pitching in, especially with the bonus Doyle was offering to get this job done ahead of schedule.

But the moment Kendall had left him that afternoon, he'd been preoccupied. He couldn't put his finger on what was wrong, but he knew something was up. Maybe she was just worried about the end of the trip or explaining things to her mother, but his gut said it was more.

He swung open the heavy front door to the retro kitsch bar. STARRLA'S in a garish pink-and-blue neon that reminded him of *Cocktail*, the movie, filled the wall as soon as he walked in. And with the neon came hair metal that matched it.

Skid Row played at top volume, and a crush of women dominated the dance floor with a few straggler males on the outskirts trying to get into the action. He recognized a handful of the men from his crew.

The sharp tang of mixing perfumes and colognes exacerbated his headache. Instead of turning around and heading to his truck, he pushed his way to the bar. At least he could get a beer while he checked in on Kendall.

He'd lost track of the days since they'd started this trip. Every day felt like the same with a new backdrop. The Friday crowd was dense with people looking for a good time with a few troublemakers with short tempers sprinkled in. When he got elbowed in the chest a third time, he decided he was going to be one of the short tempers.

Christ, he couldn't remember the last time he'd been in a bar on a Friday night. He wasn't sure how he was going to find her in this place. It wasn't a

large place, but it was packed with people.

The sharp stomp of boots made him turn around. Blondie's sultry and yet strangely crazy voice carried on a wave of girls who decided it was time for a sing-along. A whip of blonde hair drew his attention.

A howl of bawdy laughter sharpened his focus. A group of men surrounded a table along the edge of the dance floor. Two blondes and a brunette were on the table singing their hearts out.

With arms stretched to the rafters, one of the blondes spun around. A filmy white shirt with far too few buttons snapped hugged Kendall's lean body. A bright pink bra peeked through the material, and a denim skirt skimmed low on her smooth belly and high on her muscled thighs.

Arousal, jealousy, and anger crashed through him in equal parts. She laughed and flung her hair back as the music switched to another stomp-along song that advertised all she wanted to do was dance. She bumped hips with the brunette he finally recognized as Evelyn.

At least she was with people she knew. He downed a large swallow of beer and reined in the anger. Until he saw Lon and his two lackeys egging her on. When Lon reached for Kendall and she waggled a finger at him with a teasing smile, Shane saw red.

He snapped the bottle down on the bar and cut through the dancers without breaking his stride. The minute Kendall saw him, her smile faded, but her hips didn't stop moving. God fucking dammit, they undulated slowly. She dragged her fingertips between her breasts, and another button popped, leaving the pink cup on display.

For everyone.

Lon slid his hand along her stomach, and Shane lunged forward. Kendall twisted out of the shithead's hold and switched places with the other blonde who was much happier to receive his attention.

Lon tried to push the girl away and go for Kendall again, but she hopped off the table and cut her way through the crowd toward Shane. Knee-length boots with an unbelievable heel made her hips twitch as she walked, and his cock hardened.

"You came."

He lowered his head to her ear; then his lips buzzed the shell. "Good thing you can handle yourself, Sunshine. I was just about to rip Lon's arm off and stuff it up his ass."

She giggled. He jerked back. He was expecting a slap or at least a growl,

but no—as usual, this woman defied all logic. Her eyes were shiny with at least a few beers, and her lips were slick with some filmy lipstick that made him think of all the things he could do to her mouth.

She backed onto the dance floor. He stiffened, but she gripped his hands and drew him into the amoeba-like pulse of people.

He didn't dance. He stood still as she slithered her way around him. An old Bon Jovi song came on, leaving her bouncing and singing along to the words. His lips twitched as she tried to get him to move against her. He liked the undulation of her hips against his thigh and her aggressive touch, but she sure as shit wasn't getting him to dance. No matter how cute she was. He grasped a handful of her wild curls and hauled her in closer.

Doing one better, she jumped into his arms. He braced himself as her knees dug into his hips, and her arms slid around his neck. He'd started off tired and angry, and now his palms were filled with the sweet curve of her ass and the corn-silk softness of her hair teasing the backs of his hands.

She tunneled her fingernails up the back of his neck, clutching him tighter in that way that made his knees turn liquid. Christ, she was so fucking beautiful. Life and laughter lived in her warm chocolate eyes. She mouthed the words to the song. *If we stand side by side, there's a chance we'll get by, and I know that you'll live in my heart till the day that I die.*

And when her lips found his, he wanted to believe it. He wished to God he was her man for more than just a few weeks. The whoop from the girl beside him brought reality crashing in on him. He let Kendall slide down his torso and set her gently on the floor. With his hands anchored in her hair, he took one last taste before finally letting her go.

Heavy-lidded dark eyes met his. She did an about-face and reached behind her for his hand. He twined his fingers with hers and let her lead him through the crowd. She waved at Evelyn and the other girl who were still on the table holding court.

Once they got outside, she continued to drag him along. The night air was crisp, and the moon hung nearly full and bright as a spotlight. "Is it wrong that I missed the truck?"

"Is that right?"

"I did." She turned to hook her fingers into his other hand so they were completely tethered. "I would like to get into your truck right now and climb on your lap and fog up the windows until we can't think."

Not thinking sounded like a damn good idea. All he'd been doing today



was thinking. It was exhausting. And here she was—simple beauty with her siren’s smile. She’d allow him to shut off and bury himself inside her without promises. He could lose himself in her until sunrise. But he wanted to give her promises, and that scared the hell out of him.

He’d been close to so few people in his life, all of them now gone save for Kain. He didn’t want to use Kendall as a scapegoat for the loneliness that had been following him around since his father’s death—and before that, if he was honest with himself.

He hit the locks on his key fob and couldn’t stop the grin when she clambered into the truck and turned to him with a come-hither finger. Her hair curled into the barely-there blouse; her nipples jutted through the filmy bra and paper-thin texture of her shirt. He climbed inside and reached up to flick the dome light off. He settled in the middle of the bench seat, then dragged her across the seat to sit on his lap.

She shivered in his arms.

“Do you want me to put the heat on?”

She shook her head and reached under his shirt, pushing it up his chest and over his head. “I’ve been thinking about this chest since I saw you this afternoon.” Her palms slid over his shoulder and across his chest. She dragged her nails through the light swirls of hair around his nipples until he hissed. She lowered her mouth to one nipple and circled the tip with her tongue. Her breath fanned across his skin, raising all the fine hairs on his arms. “Where’s the rosary?”

He groaned, trying to wrap his mind around answering such a simple question. Except she repeated the same motion over his other nipple, followed by a tiny bite, and the answer floated away.

She moved over to the middle of his chest and nosed along the ridge of muscle. “I like feeling the beads on my skin when you’re over me.”

“Fuck, Sunshine. I put it away when I’m working.”

He could feel her smile into his skin as she moved up to his clavicle to flick the little dip there before she sucked and kissed her way up his neck. “You cleaned up.”

He tipped his head back to let her have more access. “The beard was getting too thick.”

She swirled her tongue around his Adam’s apple before nuzzling her cheek against his jaw. “I like the scruff. It’s soft and a little prickly. When I see myself in the mirror after we make—after we have sex, I can see the

whisker burn around my mouth, along my neck, and sometimes on the undersides of my breasts. I like that.”

Her hiccup over the words gave him the first strings of focus. He grasped for a few more, dragging himself off the sensual cliff she put him on. The dangerous glitter in her eyes hardened his dick.

Times like this he wanted to give her everything. She made him feel clumsy and rough, and yet she seemed to like that best. They had so few days left, and he wanted to offer everything he had.

He reached between them and brought her fingers up to his mouth. He scraped his teeth over her wrists, releasing one hand. “Undo my buckle.”

She grinned. “That’s exactly what I had in mind.”

He nuzzled along the fragile skin of her wrist and felt her pulse flutter. She pulled the end of his belt out of the loops of his jeans and tugged to release the pin. The chink of his buckle was the only sound besides her soft breathing. He hissed as her cool fingers slid into his jeans to undo the top snap.

“Unzip me.”

She dragged the tab down over the bulge of his dick and sac in their strangled position. “If you let me have my other hand, it would go faster.”

“I don’t want it to go faster. I want it to go so slow you’re screaming by the time I finish with you.”

Her huge eyes glittered in the moonlight as he flicked his tongue over the center of her palm. He trailed his thumb along the underside of her forearm to the bunched sleeve of her shirt and across to the tiny buttons. He dragged the backs of his knuckles over her breast.

“Pull my belt free, Sunshine.”

She looked up at him as she grasped the end of the buckle and slowly pulled. She held it in front of him, her teeth gnawing on her lower lip.

“I know what you want.” He took his belt and transferred it to his other hand, then removed her hand from his zipper and drew it behind her back. Her eyes went wide, and her nipples tightened under the moon-spun fabric. He’d never thought to make a woman immobile during sex until Kendall. He always liked the way a woman wiggled and squirmed under him or on top of him, but Kendall made him want to bind her so he could have his fill.

He wanted the time to taste, to feel her tremble under his touch. The bar was only a few hundred yards away, and people littered the front steps to smoke, but he and Kendall were in the shadows at the back of the parking lot.

His truck was too big to fit in the regular spots, so he'd had to make his own.

He'd never been so glad for his monstrous, gas-guzzling truck.

He brought her other arm behind her. By touch, he cinched his belt around her wrists. "Lace your fingers." She did so, and he wrapped the tail through the buckle, tucking the pin away so she wouldn't bruise.

As always her eyes got huge, and her chest rose with each ragged breath. He rolled the little excuse of a skirt up until it pooled at her waist. He leaned her back against the dash. Two tiny buttons held the blouse together, leaving her breasts cupped in the bright pink.

She watched him intently as he snapped the top button open with his teeth. She jerked under him, arching closer. He tongued open the second and smiled at the front clasp of her bra. "I do love your choice in bras tonight."

With a shallow breath she laughed. "The look on your face earlier said otherwise."

"When it's for me, I like it. When someone like Lon is drooling over you..." His mood darkened. "I don't like the way he looks at you."

"I don't care how he looks at me. I only care about how you look at me." She licked her lips. "Right now you look like you're ready to eat me alive, and that's what I want. I don't want to think about anyone else."

He released the catch of her bra, and her small breasts were freed because of the arch in her back. With an unsteady hand, he smoothed down her neck, tipping her head back so he could see the elegant lines as he felt them. He could feel her swallow under his fingertips as he slid between her breasts and down until he could grasp her hips in both hands.

He circled the undersides of her breasts with his chin and watched her nipples bead in the dim light. Her skin looked like porcelain under the heavy moon. Smooth and perfect with raspberry-tipped breasts pouting up for him. He covered one and sucked hard.

She bucked off his lap. He pushed her underwear aside and slid two fingers inside her. Silky wet, she coated his hand as he pulsed within the swollen tissues of her pussy. His cock strained against his underwear.

"Fuck, Kendall."

"Yes," she whispered.

He tried to slow down. His jaw ached from grinding his molars together to fight back the growls. She left him stripped bare. He might as well be the one bound. He wanted to climb inside and soak in that intrinsic slice of sunshine that lived within her skin.

He didn't have a condom with him, so he'd have to be content with watching her fall apart around his hand. Restless hips undulated against him in sinuous circles. She was splayed across his dash, her forehead kissing the window as she writhed above him.

Fitting a third finger inside her pussy, he hissed and hammered into her. She clenched around him, and God, he wanted it to be his cock.

She ground down on his hand. "Harder. I need more."

"I didn't plan this." His voice came out more of a growl. "I don't have anything."

She rose on her knees. "I don't care."

He pressed his cheek against her chest, then pulled her upright. With his hand trapped inside her, she shifted back and forth. He brought his other hand up to cup the back of her neck until their gazes collided. "I care."

"I'm protected. Girl stuff," she said on a pant. "I've been on an IUD since I was twenty."

"You can't—"

"I'll chance it." Her dark eyes were wide with intent. "I trust you."

He shook his head. The one thing he'd wanted was to feel her wrapped around him without any barriers. And here, he could have that. He flicked his thumb under her clit. "I want to. God, I want to. But I don't want to take any chances with you."

He changed the angle of his fingers and felt her body free-falling into orgasm. She stilled completely, her thighs quivering around his wrist.

He was already halfway gone over her; there was no way he could survive knowing just how perfect she felt. How could he ever walk away from her, then?

She screamed out her frustration, and he took every grinding punishment she could give him until she finally shuddered to a halt. Her chest heaved, and a fine sheen of sweat slicked her beautiful breasts.

He reached behind her to undo the belt and cradled her when her arms came up around his neck. She rested her cheek against his shoulder and sighed.

Nothing about Kendall was what he expected. She was one of the warmest and most giving people he'd ever been in contact with. Without guile, she was everything he hadn't known he wanted.

The playful edge they'd started with was as distant as the little town they were headed for.

She sat back on his lap. She brought her hands up to his face, then ran her thumbs over the hollows of his cheeks. “I’m not sure where you went at the end of that, but I just wanted to apologize. You were right. I was in the moment and shouldn’t have demanded that. You were only being safe.”

If only it was because of safe sex. He wasn’t sure he could hand her any more of himself.

He gently pulled her bra forward and snapped it closed in between her breasts. “I knew you’d be mad at yourself after the lust faded.”

She quickly did up the buttons that survived. “Right. Of course.” She climbed off his lap and twisted the denim skirt around and down until she was covered.

Already he wanted to jam it up and lap at her pussy until she screamed again. Until he could drive into her and the ache in his chest dissipated. Instead, he slid behind the wheel and dug for his keys. His belt lay discarded between them, the mangled end of the strap reminding him just how amazing she looked as she came apart in his arms.

The ride back to the ranch was a quiet one. Kendall’s silvery profile was pensive. Their agreement to have a fun road trip was falling by the wayside. The flash of her phone’s screen lit up the interior of the truck.

“Son of a—” She tapped the screen a few times and lifted the phone to her ear. “Bells?”

He tried to listen but got distracted by Kendall’s body language. She curled in on herself, her arms tight across her chest as she leaned forward to listen. Most of her side of the conversation was mumbles and yeses and nos. Whatever was going on, it wasn’t good.

His fingers ached by the end of the ride. As they were pulling up the drive, she finally hung up.

She pinched the bridge of her nose and took a deep breath. “How much time do you have left on this job?”

He parked and turned to her. “If I push it, I’ll be done by Sunday.”

“I’d appreciate anything you can do to get us on the road by Monday. The hot water heater went, and our usual handyman is working on it, but it might be above his abilities. I’ll need to get a plumber in.” She fiddled with her phone, flashing the screen on and off.

“I’m good with them.”

She looked up. “I can’t ask you—”

“Ask me to what? Work on my house? We’re partners in this now,

Kendall. “

“I know, but this isn’t your problem.”

“It is. And even if we need to buy a new one, it won’t be half as expensive if I get one from our wholesaler and do the work myself.”

“We lost two bookings because of it. And now with the holiday...” She tipped her forehead against the glass. “I just need to get back.”

“What will your mom do until you get home?”

“Bells will take care of her.” She opened the door and hopped down.

He did the same and stopped her at the front of the truck. “You’re not alone in this anymore. I don’t know how else to make you understand that.”

“I’m not used to having someone to rely on.”

“Not even your mother?”

“She...” Kendall flipped her hair over her shoulder. “Let’s just say she’s not good in a crisis.” She laid a hand on his chest. “Are you coming up to the house?”

“No, I’m going back down with the men. I want to get an early start.”

She nodded. “Thanks for listening, Shane.”

He shrugged. “Not a big deal. We were going to have to talk about it sooner or later.”

“Evidently sooner won that bet.”

He tucked her hair behind both ears. “You okay to walk up alone?”

“Just fine.” For the first time, she looked the woman he’d met at the will reading. Her shoulders were stooped a little, and her sassy, sexy walk was missing.

Reality was here to stay, evidently.

# FOURTEEN

Saturday had come and gone with Oscar in full effect. The crew was exhausted, and Shane was on the knife-edge of surly. Evelyn was at a horse show a few towns over, and Kendall had already done all her chores. There was no way she could ignore her mother's phone call this time. Especially when it came directly after a text that demanded she answer the phone.

Well, not without a serious case of the guilts.

"Mom, I wanted to tell you earlier."

"You could have told me before shipments started arriving at the house, Kendall Marie Proctor."

She winced and dropped onto her butt in the field. Salina was enjoying another mild day. It was hard to remember it was almost Thanksgiving when the temperatures felt more like September. Taking advantage of the dry grass and some alone time, she stretched out and looked up at the painfully blue sky.

How was she supposed to tell her mother that Lawrence Justice had let her down again? She didn't believe in miracles anymore, but her mother certainly did. She'd wanted to break the news face-to-face, but as usual, she'd had to adapt. Her situation was about to crash headlong into reality in a few days anyway. Had it really only been ten days?

"How's the hot water heater?"

"Broken. Now stop stalling."

So she started at the beginning, and her mother stayed quiet as she explained about the co-ownership, that the Justice money was as reliable as the man she knew—minus the sarcasm to spare her mother—and that they'd have another Justice under their roof.

“You mean to tell me that I sent you out to California for an inheritance, and you’re bringing a man home with you instead?”

“Sort of—”

“So you’re not bringing home a strange man that Larry raised as his son? And that same man isn’t coming here to take half of our house?”

“That part is positively true.”

“And you didn’t think this was information I needed to know?”

Kendall shut her eyes and counted to five. She could do this and not incur the wrath of Lily Proctor. Her mother wasn’t exactly calm when it came to change. “I wanted to talk to you, to be able to—”

“No, what you wanted to do was manage me. This isn’t one of those times you can pat me on the top of my head and deal with it yourself.”

“I—”

Her mother cut her off again. “I let you think that you’re running the Heron single-handedly most of the time, Kendall, but I know about every bill, every loan, and every overdue notice we have in our name.”

Shocked, Kendall tried to assimilate that information. How many times had she tried to include her mother in the day-to-day operations of the business? Her mother always waved her away and said she’d take care of the kitchen and the front desk and let Kendall handle the rest.

“You honestly think that the only thing I do is find creative fish recipes and smile pretty at the front door?”

Her mother’s acerbic tone pushed down whatever arguments Kendall was about to bring up. “Of course not.”

“Yes, you do, but that’s all right. You might need to show the world that you can handle everything, but I have a few tricks of my own, Kendall Marie.”

“Obviously we need to have a little chat,” Kendall grumbled.

“I’m your mother, Kendall, not some helpless woman wringing her hands at home. Do you think you could do all those tours and trails if I didn’t have things handled at home?”

Kendall fisted her hands into her hair. Her mother always had such a bright smile on her face, never letting on that she knew just how bad things had gotten. “I didn’t know. I’m sorry.”

“No, I’m sorry.” Lily’s tone gentled. “I’m sorry it took Larry’s death to make that clear to you. Even sorrier that you thought you had to keep this from me. That you didn’t think I was strong enough to hear this.”



Kendall sat up and hugged her knees into her chest when her mother's voice broke. "No, Mom. That's not it."

"It is. I thought I was doing what was best for you, but I was so far off."

"You did the best you could."

"I did. And Larry did what he could."

"He didn't do anything. You were the one who raised me, loved me." Kendall's voice was harsher than she intended, but her mom had nothing to answer for. Plenty of people had it far worse than she did.

"When you get home, we'll talk about it. I just don't want you to hold back the bad news anymore. I'm getting tired of playing Sherlock to find everything."

Kendall laughed. "Did you really go through all our papers?"

"You're frighteningly organized, sweetheart."

When she had a bank account like theirs, she had no choice but to be organized. "I don't know how it's going to work when Shane and I get there. I'm so afraid he'll want to sell."

"We'll do our best to convince him otherwise."

"And you're okay with this?" It had taken days for her to wrap her mind around the fact that she now had a stranger—well, a man who used to be a stranger—in her life and soon to be in her home. And that he legally had as much right to be there as she did. She wasn't sure she had totally come to terms with it. It was such a nebulous future when they were so far away.

"Larry had a reason for doing this."

"Yeah, a selfish reason. He screwed up his business, so all he had left was our house to give—" She clutched her knees harder. Forced herself to turn off the anger. When it came to Lawrence, there were only two emotions that made sense to her, and neither would help right now.

"Did you ever think it was a way to make sure his son wasn't alone?"

"Why would I? He left us alone."

"No, he didn't. We had each other. We *always* had each other."

Kendall pressed her forehead to her knees and felt a tear roll down her nose and then another. She'd never thought about that part. How could her mother continue to think in such generous terms about Lawrence? Even now?

But if Lawrence hadn't written the will like he had, she'd never have known what it was like to...what? Be in love? Could it be love in such a short time? Or was it just that fairy dust working overtime with orgasm-blurred edges?

“Does that also mean he has to pay for half the repairs? Because that part would be really helpful. Especially now.”

Kendall couldn't stop her snorting laugh. “You got the part that he's coming to us without any money, right?”

Her mother blew out a breath. “Lawrence made everything so much more complicated than it ever needed to be. So now he's given me two children to take care of.”

Kendall rolled her eyes. Leave it to her mother to slot Shane into a son status. She adopted nearly everyone who came into the B and B. Why should Shane be any different? “Shane's thirty years old, Mom. I don't think he's coming back with me to get nurtured. He doesn't have anywhere else to go.”

And that statement settled in her gut like a wet sandbag along the river mouth in flooding season. No matter what happened after they got home, Shane was there because he had no choice.

No matter how she painted it, no matter how she talked up the Heron, in the end he was there because he was trapped. Once he realized just how trapped, he'd be out of there so freaking fast.

God, she didn't want him to go. Even without seeing him in her space, in her home—now their home—she knew she couldn't stand to watch him walk away.

“When do you think you'll be home?”

Kendall blinked back into the conversation. “I'm going to make sure we do everything we can to get in before Thanksgiving.”

“Good. Sully did what he could with the water heater, but it's pretty well shot.”

“All right. I'll think of something.” Kendall rubbed her forehead. She'd find the money somewhere; she always did.

“Just come home safe. We'll figure out the rest of it when the time comes.”

“What if he wants to sell? Or for me to buy him out? I just don't know if we could pull that off.”

“Don't put the cart before the horse. Get him here first. Maybe he'll fall in love with the place just like we did.”

“Maybe.”

A shadow loomed over her, and she peered up to see the man in question standing in front of her. How long had he been there? She shielded her eyes against the glare of the sun. Jeans—so faded and battered there were wear

marks in the most amazingly interesting places—hugged whip-lean hips. A plaid shirt fluttered in the light breeze, and a skintight white tank undershirt molded his mouthwatering body.

His face was inscrutable.

Was it any wonder the man twisted her into knots?

“I’ll give you a call from the next town, Mom.”

“Is everything okay, Kendall? Your voice changed.”

Shane crouched in front of her and brushed a tear away with the pad of his thumb. He tucked a hank of her windblown hair around her ear, then kissed her forehead. The tears that had stopped now stung again. She met his gaze, her heart tumbling when the corner of his mouth kicked up into a sweet smile.

“Yeah, everything’s fine. I love you.”

His eyes warmed, and his gaze dropped to her mouth before returning to give her that intent stare that always made her blood run hot and her skin tingle.

“Love you too, sweetie.”

Kendall tucked her phone into her hoodie. “Hey.”

“You all right?”

She nodded. “Just told my mom everything.”

“And?”

“She’s anxious, less pissed off than I thought she’d be, and has a honey-do list long enough to cross the lake. And guess what? It has your name on it.”

He cupped the back of her neck, drawing her out of her tight ball and into his arms. His mouth was gentle and fierce at the same time. She slid her fingers into his hair and used her other hand to grasp his open shirt.

He went down on his knees before her, pulling her flush to him, his fingers splayed across her back. She changed her grip to his shoulders and let herself fall into the sunshine kiss.

She was tired of doing everything alone. Was it so wrong to want someone to lean on? He tore his mouth away from hers and pressed her cheek against his chest. His heartbeat roared under her ear. His fingers tunneled through her hair, massaging her scalp, her name a murmur on the wind.

“I touch you, and I forget myself, woman.”

She grinned into the ribbed cotton over his warm chest. “I like that I make you crazy.”

“You would.”

She pulled away and met his gaze. That flicker of wild was still in his eyes, but it was banked. “I’m assuming you came out here for a reason.”

“I’m doing the final walk-through with Doyle in a few minutes. I was wondering if you wanted to come with me.”

“Yeah?” The bands around her chest that had felt so restrictive a little while ago loosened with pleasure. Tomorrow and New York were coming soon enough. For now she’d see just what he could do in a week.

“I pushed the crew hard last night, and we were able to finish up. I’m lucky the tires on my truck aren’t slashed.”

“You definitely earned your title this week.”

“You had to tell them that fucking nickname.”

“I’m sure they only said it behind your back.”

“Not bloody likely.”

She laughed. “Oh, no. Really?”

He lifted a brow. “Really.”

She cupped his face and smoothed her thumbs over his scruffy cheeks. He might have cleaned up the beard a little, but it was still there. “My Oscar.”

His brow gentled from the stern lines of dismay. So fierce, her Oscar. “Do you want to head out tonight?”

“Could we?”

He grasped her hand and pressed a quick kiss to her palm. “We’ll get moving before sunset.”

“Are you sure you won’t be too tired?”

“We’ll drive until I burn out.”

“Okay.”

He pushed back and got to his feet, dragging her up with him. “Let’s go get that bonus check. I damn well deserve it.”

He kept her hand in his as his long legs ate up the golden field. The old stables blurred by, and the mountain view remained her one constant. That and the man who was dragging her off on another adventure.

The new stables came into view. The A-line main structure with the Doyle Ranch brand above the iron and wood doors was impressive. Instead of going with a dark stain, William Doyle had decided to leave the white pine color naked save for a protective varnish. It made everything look softer and cleaner against the severe black wrought iron.

Will stood outside the door, his hat tipped back as he surveyed the

building. Shane stopped beside him, the two men silent as they looked over the building. Shane's shrewd eyes scanned the tidy gravel path. Will, however, had a huge smile on his face.

"I can't believe you pulled it off. Better than I imagined too."

"Justice delivers." Shane's voice was steady and calm.

Kendall felt a pang in her chest. Maybe this Justice delivered. He would be the first one in her experience.

"Well, let's go inside and take a look, shall we?"

Shane nodded and waited for Doyle to pull the broad doors open. "There's a keypad there that was installed this morning as we were finishing up. The steel pins bolt through the top and the bottom of the door to secure the barn. Especially here, with the expensive equipment for your vet."

"Good, good."

Doyle opened the door, and Kendall lost her breath. More of the white pine flowed out into a huge staging area for the on-site vet they were expecting to come in from Salt Lake. Stainless steel counters and glass cabinets could have felt sterile, but with the warm wood to frame them out, everything looked high-end and professional.

She followed them in as they discussed the equipment and specs of the building that must have been important. She let them talk as she smoothed her hand over the velvety wood. It had a chiseled log cabin vibe than wasn't her particular taste, but she couldn't deny the excellent craftsmanship.

Pieces of Shane were sprinkled all over the stable. As they moved down the wide walkway between stalls, they came across huge tack bins in rough-cut wood. She'd seen Shane work on those late into last night.

She and Shane had been so restless the last few days. As if they were bouncing around each other but not quite sure what to do or how to act.

The two men paused to talk as they ran out of real estate. The back door was open, and Evelyn and her crew had returned from the horse show and were unloading equipment for the horses that would be coming in a few days. She waved to Evelyn and left the men to their own devices.

"Hey."

"Hey there." Evelyn's bright, warm smile eased the rest of the tension that had been following her around all day. "I couldn't believe that they really finished it up. I had to come up and see for myself. Your Shane is a miracle worker."

Kendall laughed. "More like a taskmaster. But he got it done. I'm glad to

see you. We're actually heading out tonight."

"Oh, no. Really?"

"Yeah, I got an SOS call from my mother. No rest for the wicked when you own your own business."

"Nothing terrible, I hope?"

"Nah, just an inconvenience that cost us two bookings. That part wasn't good, but the fix is relatively simple." Kendall shrugged. "Hot water tank."

"Yuck."

"Exactly."

"Good thing Shane's so handy."

Kendall glanced at Shane. His arms were crossed, his hip cocked as Doyle spoke to him. In her head, she could see just how perfect he'd look in her home, in her bed, in her life. And that scared the shit out of her. Even worse, she was terrified she was going to find out just how life would feel without him.

Evelyn snapped her fingers in front of Kendall. "Earth to Kendall."

"Sorry."

Shoulder to shoulder, the women stood together. Evelyn hooked an arm around Kendall. "I can't blame you on the distraction."

If only it was just drooling. "I haven't had much time with him lately."

Evelyn frowned and moved to stand in front of her. She took both her hands. "I'm sensing a *but*."

Kendall shrugged. "No buts. Just part of me is looking forward to going home, and part of me is dreading it."

"Have you talked to him?"

"I will."

"You know if you talk to him, you'll probably find out that it's not nearly as bad as you think."

No, it was so much worse. Worries were multiplying like mosquitoes by the lake on a hot night. He pulled at her like no other man ever had, and yet he held so much of her life in his hands. Their balance was off. Maybe that was why she felt so out of sorts.

She just needed to assert some of her independence again, that was all. Get home to her routines and back on solid, familiar ground. Maybe then the ache in her gut would fade, and she could get back to normal.

Evelyn rubbed her arm. "I'm going to miss you, kiddo."

Kendall shook off the crazy reel of what-ifs and focused on her friend.

“I’m going to miss you too.”

“Never forget that job option is open to you. Bring your mom along too—maybe a fresh start would be best for everyone if that’s what happens.” The worry in Evelyn’s eyes oddly made Kendall feel better.

“You’re good people, Evelyn.”

“Don’t let it get around, kid.”

She made a cross over her heart. “You got it.”

“IF YOU EVER need a reference, you’ve got one. This exceeded my expectations by miles, Shane.”

The pride he understood, but the aftershock of restlessness made his shoulders feel heavy and tight. He’d worked his ass off to finish this project. Hell, he’d poured more of himself into this one job than he had in years. But it wasn’t for Doyle. It wasn’t even for the pride of a job well done.

His gaze slid to Kendall and Evelyn in the shade of the stables at the end of the building, and his shoulders eased. It had been a good-bye, he realized. That was his future right there. That pocket of sunshine that was Kendall. Not another job like this, not another project that utilized years of knowledge and yet left him strangely unsatisfied.

It was the excitement of what he’d find with her.

He was anxious to start something new for the first time in years. The only thing he’d taken enjoyment in was his furniture making, but now he had a glimpse of more than sawdust and a cedar-soaked basement to find happiness in.

Maybe he had so much more to look forward to.

He turned to Doyle. “I appreciate that, but this is my last job.”

“It’s a waste of pure talent. You were born to lead men.” Doyle followed his gaze. “I can see why you’d want to change your life, but don’t forget that lust doesn’t put food on the table.”

Shane tucked his thumbs under his arms. No, it certainly didn’t. “I’m starting my own business.”

“But you just said you were hanging it up.”

Shane shrugged. “Not quite. You like the tack boxes and carvings?”

Startled, Doyle looked around at the extras Shane had added to the stables. "You did that?"

He'd made the additions on his own. "Yes."

"Well, hell, boy. I thought those were bought by my first foreman." Doyle smoothed his palm across the careful etching outside one of the stalls. Shane had framed in rosettes at the corners of the iron bars on the upper part of the stall windows. Again he'd used the torch to warm the cool white pine. Just a little something extra. Something that was just him.

Doyle wandered to the tack boxes he'd built out of leftover pine and materials. He'd built ten to be shared between the twenty stalls.

It felt like his stamp was finally on something lasting. He'd crafted buildings for use. Office buildings and houses were built to someone else's specifications. He'd made them look exactly like what the blueprints had called for. Nothing of him remained besides a solid structure.

And for a long time that was enough. But he wanted more. He wanted to leave a mark. Had it taken losing Larry to realize that? He'd been adopted into his name, into his business, into his family, but Shane had never really made anything that was just him. Not until he'd toyed with his furniture business on the side.

Not until now, when he'd had the urge to leave something of himself behind. Ever since he'd started this job, things had felt just a little bit off. He and Kendall were out of sync, and he wasn't quite sure how to get them back on track. And if he was going to have a sleepless night, at least it would include something that soothed him. Woodworking had always soothed him. Now he had Kendall to add to that list.

The fact that it was a painfully short list was starting to bother him.

Doyle returned to stand in front of him. "You can be sure that I'll be the envy of every horseman in the area. I have you to thank for that."

"You had the perfect setup. All I did was finalize the work."

"You did much more than that, but we won't get all mushy about it." Doyle handed him an envelope.

Shane tucked it into his back pocket without looking at the amount. He held out his hand. "It's been a pleasure."

Doyle shook it. "If you ever need anything, you have but to ask."

Shane smiled. "I'll remember that, sir."

"Are you sure you won't stay for dinner before you get on the road?"

Shane looked back at Kendall one last time. "We need to get to New



York. She's been gone too long." And he was anxious to get on with living and finding something permanent.

"Takes a brave man to uproot everything and follow a woman."

It would take far too much time to explain their crazy situation. "We're partners," he said instead. It felt right to say that and mean it for the first time.

"Well, how about I have Lucinda make you up a basket. At least you can refill when you're on the road."

"I'd appreciate that."

Doyle clapped him on the shoulder. "Good luck, son."

"Thanks. I think I'm going to need it."

Doyle's mustache fluttered with a gusty laugh. "I think you're right."

Shane followed the women's voices and paused. It struck him at the oddest times how much he was drawn to her. She was beautiful, there was no doubt about that, but he'd gone out with plenty of beautiful women. None of them reached under his breastbone and shoved his heart up into his throat like Kendall did.

Half the time he couldn't talk around that fucking lump. The rest of the time he just wanted her mouth on his. Her skin against his mouth and that throaty hum of satisfaction she made filling the air. It had been days since he'd touched her.

And he couldn't even explain why. Sure he was busy, but on the downtimes, he'd lost himself in woodworking until he was too blurry to see the numbers on a measuring tape. His body ached for her, and his brain was in overdrive. The endgame of New York was more like a beacon of the future now. And he didn't know how he felt about that.

Was he just trading one life for another? Did he really want to mold himself around another person's dream again? When he'd first learned about the Heron, he'd been hell-bent on figuring out a way to get out from under the partnership.

Now...he didn't know what he was feeling.

When Kendall was near him, all he could think about was keeping her right there with him. That was the only thing he seemed to be able to define. He wanted Kendall.

He walked up to the women, invading Kendall's space to see what she'd do in front of someone else. She slid herself into his body, locking into that perfect puzzle-piece snap they seemed to do unconsciously.

He looped his arm around her hip. "Almost ready to go?"

“We just need to pack up our things.”

“I’m all packed. My bags are at the main house.”

“I’m going to miss you, kiddo. You were a better stable hand than half of my staff,” Evelyn said.

Kendall lit up, her smile wide and sparkling. Even beamed at someone else, he felt the punch. He curled his fingers into her soft corduroy pants. She dropped her hand behind her and squeezed his thigh briefly before stepping forward to embrace the older woman.

“I can’t thank you enough for teaching me all about the horses. The minute I can afford one, I’ll be adding one to my roster of animals.”

Surprised, he lifted an eyebrow. “Just how many animals do you have?”

Kendall grinned up at him. “It’s quite the assortment of dogs, cats, and we even have a den of foxes that has made themselves at home. Not to mention the herons all over the marshy part of the lake.”

“Those aren’t exactly pets.”

“You tell that to Pete.” She laughed when his eyebrow spiked. “Pete’s been around so long I don’t even know how old he is. He’s the reason I named the B and B the Heron.”

“Huh.”

She turned to Evelyn. “I’ve got your e-mail, phone number, and address. We’ll keep in touch.”

“You damn well better. I don’t like to talk to most of the people around here. You, I like.”

“The feeling is entirely mutual.”

Kendall slid her hand into his, and they walked companionably into the waning sunshine. It might feel like it was a mild fall day, but in reality, November was creeping away, and the days were much shorter. She leaned into him, stopping to look out on the fields.

“I’m going to miss this place.”

Shane drew her in front of him. The air was crisp and fresh, and the sweet scent of hay and sawdust eased him. “I will too.” He rubbed his chin over the top of her head. “Got a view like this in New York?”

She sighed. “It’s not so gold. The Adirondacks are alive with all sorts of autumnal colors. Where I am tends to bring in the purples and deep reds to add to the cool colors of the evergreens. And the mountains are right in my backyard.”

He settled his hand on her shoulder and rubbed light circles along her

nape. “Sounds beautiful.”

“It really is.”

Before he could question her more about Winchester Falls, she turned and grabbed his hand, drawing him forward. “I think we should find a shady spot a few miles away so I can get reacquainted with the truck.”

“The truck, huh?”

“Of course, the truck.” She grinned over her shoulder and took off in a loping sprint. He let her get ahead, enjoying her athletic grace before he jogged after her. The trill of her happy laugh filled the air as the sun set on the horizon.

Shane loaded the last of their bags in the truck bed and a box of sandwiches and drinks in the small compartment behind their seat. Kendall had stayed at the house more than he did, so her good-byes took longer as she enveloped half a dozen women into individual hugs.

Christ, she hadn’t hugged him as much as these near strangers were getting.

Actually, in a span of time, he was almost the same level of stranger as these people were. He and Kendall had been at the Doyle Ranch for five days.

Fuck.

He tightened his grip on the frame of the truck bed with impatience. He was too tired to be thinking about this shit. His muscles felt like overcooked spaghetti, and his head was in the clouds. If he were smart, he’d take Doyle up on the good night’s rest, but the thought of staying another night had him itchy. And he could tell Kendall wanted to get on the road just as much.

She finally backed up with a swipe at her cheeks. Now he felt like shit. She’d been a good sport about everything. Not complaining, being flexible to whatever they’d needed on the trip. He just wanted to move forward.

To get started on whatever waited for them in Winchester Falls.

Kendall looked up at him with starred eyelashes and a watery smile. He opened her door for her and tugged on the messy braid she perpetually wore. She patted his chest. “Ready to get on the road, Oscar?”

“Very.”

She stepped up on the running board and brushed her chest against his; then her mouth hovered near his for a moment before she climbed inside. He closed his eyes. He missed having her near him like that. Even if it had been a banishment of his own making.

He shut the door and waved to everyone, then climbed in himself. They were quiet on the rutted road that led to the smooth asphalt on the edge of the property. She had her phone out again, taking one last picture of the landscape before the main road.

She looked over her shoulder, eyes still a little watery, but excitement gleamed under the sad. “Where to next?”

“Looks like Colorado is in our future.”

She dug into her trusty knapsack and hauled out a huge notebook with tabs and thick pages.

“Do I want to know?”

“Well, since we’re now not able to make the stops we were before—thank you, muffler of destruction on the highway—I figured it would be a good idea to keep a notebook of what I want to see someday.” She smoothed out the pages as she turned them. She looked up at him. “What? I had a lot of time to myself at the main house and a ten-year-old to entertain.”

He frowned. “I didn’t know you were doing that.”

She shrugged. “It wasn’t a big deal.” The Red Rock Canyon and a snow-filled scene with a luxurious lodge flashed by with each page she flipped.

He flexed his fingers on the steering wheel as he pictured her cutting and pasting a notebook of somedays. Why did that bug him? It wasn’t his job to give her all those someday trips.

But dammit, part of him wanted to do a leisurely trip to some mountain resort. He wanted to lay her out on an over-the-top expensive bed with the Colorado Rockies as a backdrop and watch her dark eyes go blind for him. He wanted to feel her clasping arms and legs and warmth surround him.

But all he had was this truck and an uncertain future in Winchester Falls to give her. It didn’t seem like much in the grand scheme of things.

“Where would you go first?”

He looked at her sharply. “Me?”

“Yes, you, Oscar. We’ve been talking about what I’d do, where I’d like to see, but not about you.”

“I’ve been a lot of places, Sunshine.”

“So there’s nowhere else you want to go?”

“I still haven’t been to England, Ireland, or Scotland.”

“How come?”

“Not much surfing to do there.”

She laughed and tucked herself into her comfortable corner. He’d see her in the corner of the cab of his truck forever because of this trip. “I’m trying to picture you in a wet suit.”

“Kain and I haven’t had much time to do the surfing trips we used to do, but when we were in college, we went everywhere. Australia and Hawaii had the best surf besides California.”

“I think I’ll have to add Hawaii to my notebook here.”

“I don’t think I’ve ever been anywhere that was so lush and perfect at the same time.”

She pressed her notebook against her chest and folded her arms over it, her eyes bright and interested. “You went because of Kain?”

“His family’s from there, and he had to make the yearly trek home to see his mother. I tagged along a few times.”

“I can’t imagine just jumping on a plane and going to paradise.”

He’d been able to do a lot of things thanks to Larry. And yet Larry had left Kendall alone with her mother. He still couldn’t reconcile that man with the father who had been so generous with his time and love, not to mention his money. That part just never made sense.

“It sounds like you have your own paradise at the Heron.”

The wistful smile faded a little, and she sat straight in her seat again. “Oh, you know how that goes. When you’re surrounded by the same thing day in and day out, you want to see something different.”

“Tell me about the Heron.”

“I told you about it.”

“We’ve got hours to kill, and the moratorium on the subject is off.”

“Who says?”

He laughed. “I say.”

She unclipped her belt and slid across the seat, her hand sliding up his thigh. “I don’t see why you should be the one to get the final say.”

“What are you doing?”

Kendall brushed her chest against his arm, her breath a hot distraction along his neck just behind his ear. “Reality is boring.”

Everything inside him wanted to let her distract him, but he was finally

starting to see that she really didn't want to talk about home. And he needed to know why. "It's our reality, Kendall. It will be anything but boring."

She stopped, her dark eyes going wide. "What?"

"You keep talking about Winchester Falls like it's the end of everything."

"Isn't it?" Her gaze darted away, and she shrank back to her side of the truck.

"It doesn't have to be. Tell me about the Heron."

She looked down at her belt as she fastened it, then at some speck on her pants. Anything but him. "The Heron has meant everything to me for so long. And now you're going to be there."

"And that's a bad thing?"

"No." She stared out the window. "It's terrifying."

Signs for the highway started to appear. He turned onto a lane that probably led to a house. But instead of continuing along the dirt road, he pulled off under the wide boughs of an oak and shut off the engine. He unclasped his belt and did the same with hers, then made sure they were facing each other. Tipping her chin up, he met her troubled gaze. "Why?"

"It matters too much."

He mattered too much? His gut tightened, and the air around them charged. So much had happened between them so fast. But maybe this was the way it was supposed to happen. More and more he was convinced that starting over would be good for both of them.

# FIFTEEN

Kendall leaned forward, cupping his face. She wanted him to want to be with her so much. And she could see a flicker of hope in his eyes. The embers of gold in the center of his hazel eyes was so beautiful. She'd be happy to see them every morning of her life and let them be the last thing she saw before she went to sleep.

And that was terrifying.

She'd never let herself rely on a man, but she wanted to do that with him. But the niggling fear that he'd leave burned just under her skin. It was a mix of excitement that was never far away when she was with this man and trepidation and she wasn't sure which part to listen to.

"The Heron is mine."

His eyebrow lifted, and she smiled as she smoothed her thumbs along the sharp angles of his cheekbones and into the softness of his light beard. "You might own it with me now, but it's always been mine."

"And your mother's."

She shrugged. "She loves it almost as much as I do, but if she moved away tomorrow, she'd be excited for another adventure."

"You seem to have a lot of your mom in you. You were certainly gung ho for this adventure."

Kendall laughed. "I was, wasn't I?" She pressed a kiss on his lips, sighing as they firmed and he tried to take over the kiss. Shane was the most controlled man she'd ever met, but the moment they got within each other's airspace, all bets were off. And one of the most addicting things about him was just how much he wanted her.

She was so afraid she'd shrivel up without that fire.

That was one more thing that frightened her. Needing him was almost worse than the thought of losing him. Because neither was in her control. She slid her palm up to the top of his head and held on as the kiss spun out and the world tilted.

He ripped his mouth from hers. "You're trying to distract me, Sunshine."

She brought her thumb up to trace his lower lip. So soft where the rest of him was hard. "Sorry."

He nipped the pad. "No, you're not."

She looked up. "Maybe not. I've just missed touching you." She pulled his hand from her waist and slid it up her rib cage to her breast. "Really missed touching you."

He groaned and squeezed, lifting its weight, his thumb finding the center with a deft swipe. "We're talking."

She nodded and fastened her mouth on his. He held on tighter, his fingers twisting in the back of her shirt as he pushed it up. Twilight winked from the horizon, and full dark was just minutes away.

"Fast," she whispered against his mouth. "Just to take the edge off. Then we can talk all you want."

He bent her back, his mouth racing down her throat to her breast. He tugged her V-neck shirt aside and flipped the cup of her bra down enough to get his mouth on her nipple. She arched against him, and a storm erupted in the cab of the truck.

A flurry of clothes and zippers were pushed aside. He tore at her shirt until it was up and over her head. She cradled the back of his head as he sucked one nipple, then the other through her bra. Within the space of a shuddering breath, he had the straps down and the clasp undone.

He lifted her and scooted his legs under her. His boots hit her door, and his head bumped his window as she straddled him.

"I love bench seats." She cupped his cheeks. "Never buy a truck that doesn't have one."

"Agreed." Too light, too soft, and too hesitantly, he touched her belly.

She could see the tremble of his hands and the way he clenched his fists. She sat back on his thighs, opening her zipper wider. She rose over him, tucked his hand into her pants, into her panties until the rough tips of his fingers found her heat.

His eyes blazed, and his jaw went rigid with the control he sought. But she didn't want his control tonight. She wanted to watch him fly apart,



wanted to see just how far she could push him.

“I’m so ready. So wet.”

“Fuck,” he muttered and dived deeper. He filled her with two fingers and sawed against the swollen tissues of her pussy. Turning his hand, he brought his thumb into play, rolling the tip around her clit until her breath kicked against her chest with each pant. “I want to see.”

God, she wanted that too. She wanted to watch him explore her, but the dark was coming, and this wasn’t the time or the place to let him do that.

She fumbled at his jeans, the zipper catching over the bulge of his cock. “Help me.”

“Busy.” He added a third finger, stretching her wide and filling her up as his relentless thumb finally paused only to pulse under her clit. She punched the roof of the truck, arching up as he finger fucked her.

His name was a scream and a shout with a prayer for good measure.

“Christ, I can feel you squeezing me. God dammit, Kendall.”

She heard his voice, but the weightless blast of her orgasm melted her brain. She gripped the seat and ground onto his hand even as part of her tried to shy away from the overwhelming pleasure.

He reared up, his hand on her back as he tongued her nipple. His shirt was open, his jeans undone, and she could see his cock pressed tight against his belly, but there was nothing she could do but watch his fingers thrust inside her.

She stilled over him, every muscle locked, her breath trapped in a vortex of the most painfully blissful edge of madness. He looked up at her, his mouth moving to her throat, and those soft lips gentled against her jaw. She turned her attention to his eyes and saw the intensity that was always there waiting for her.

And she lost herself in him.

God, she hoped she would survive this. Survive him.

He held her tight as the shudders and the pleasure folded in on her until she was something totally different.

She was his.

In the cab of his truck as full night blanketed a field in the middle of Utah, she drew her first breath, and it was all Shane.

She dropped her forehead on his shoulder and slumped against him. “Give me just a minute, and we’ll take care of you.”

He smoothed his hand up her back until he found her braid, and another

one of her ponytail holders was tossed behind the seat. He drew his fingers out of her and held her against him, his other hand busy unwinding her hair until it tumbled down her back.

She found enough strength to lift her head. "I'm running out of hair ties."

"Good."

"No, not good."

He grunted as she fit a hand between them to mold the heavy line of his cock. His grunt turned to a hiss as she got to the velvety head peeking from his shorts. He stilled her hand.

"What?"

"We're going to drive until I can't drive anymore. Then we're going to find a hotel, and I'm going to spread you out and fuck you until you can't move."

Her empty pussy clenched at nothing, wanting that very much. "Can we have round one in the truck?"

"That was round one."

She brushed her knuckle against the thickness of his shaft, up to the slightly narrower head. "Okay, round two sounds good to me."

"I don't want a taste, Sunshine. I want to pound into you until we're both unconscious. And I don't want that in the cab of my truck."

"I like the truck."

The corner of his mouth tipped up. "Right now I hate my truck."

"Let's find a hotel, then."

"Later. We've got to get some miles under the tires."

She ran her tongue up his neck and nipped at the edge of his jaw where his almost-beard led to his ear. The fleshy lobe was perfect to nibble on, so she did. He shrugged her off, but she simply bit him again and circled his cockhead with her fingers. "Just a taste?"

"Fuck, Sunshine."

She leaned back and smiled. The lights of the dash threw his face into harsh shadows. "You can fuck me anytime you like." He flexed his thigh muscles under her, and his shaft slid against her palm. "See, he wants a piece of me, even if it's only my mouth."

His eyes glittered in the dense darkness, and she watched his jaw work as she shifted back down his thighs to his knees until her ass was high in the air and his scent filled her brain. She swirled her tongue around the head of his cock; the saltiness of his precum made her mouth water.

The flash of a light and the sudden *whack* of metal on glass had him jackknifing into a seated position and her tumbling into the floor mat.

“Son of a—” Shane shouted.

“Are you fornicating on my lawn?” The bright light of a heavy-duty flashlight bounced around the cab of the truck, killing the moment. The offended face of a bearded man came into stark relief.

She dragged her shirt down with a shocked laugh. The man whacked on the window again. “Get moving, or I’m calling the cops.”

Shane hiked up his jeans and held up a hand. “Yes, sir.”

She could hear the hysterical peal of her laughter. She stuffed herself lower in her seat and got her clothes situated but couldn’t see through the tears.

Shane wrenched the wheel, and dust and gravel clouded the air as he backed up. “This is not funny, Kendall!”

“Oh, yes, it is.”

“Just get in your seat and put your fucking seat belt on.”

She knuckled away tears, then held on to her stomach with one hand and the Oh, Jesus handle with the other as the truck careened down the dirt road and fishtailed onto the main road.

“I’m glad you think this is so funny.”

“Come on, Oscar. That was hilarious.”

“We just got shooed away from an old man who probably saw more of me than he ever wanted to, and you’re laughing.”

A guffaw of breathless laughter filled the truck. “Give it a minute, and you will too. Ah, there it is. I see your lips twitching.”

“I’m going to kill you.”

She laughed again and put her arms up. “Whooooeee. That’s an adrenaline rush.”

“At least you got off.”

“That I did, pal.” She swung her feet up on the bench and tucked her toes under his thigh. “Cheer up. That’s a story to tell over a beer next time you see Kain.”

“Who said that was the first time I was chased off by an angry man in a field?”

She kicked him and laughed again. He grabbed her ankle and tucked her foot back under his thigh. The quick flash of his grin in the darkness made her stomach flip. God, he was a pretty man when he let himself smile.

“Tired?”

He shrugged. “I’ll be okay for a few hours. Let’s get to Denver, and we can pull off for the night.”

“Denver? That’s...” She trailed off and grabbed her phone and tapped in the city from their current location. “Six hours?”

“We have time to make up.”

“Are you sure?”

“That will take us to midnight. Then we’ll get up early and get moving again.”

“I need to get home, but you don’t need to kill yourself to get me there.”

“I know.” He smoothed his hand up her calf. “Now talk and keep me awake. Tell me about Winchester Falls.”

So she did. She dredged up any funny story she could remember about herself and Bells. The visitors who would stay at the Heron provided a few hours of conversation, and by the time they were well into Colorado, her voice was rough from the constant talking.

He was an intent listener. His questions were specific, and he didn’t sound bored. They finally lapsed into a comfortable silence with Metallica as their sound track. The man did love his Metallica.

Soon Boulder, Colorado filled the windshield. The backwash of the city glowed like hot coals under the cool blue of the Flatiron Mountains. She sat forward, both hands on the dash as the city grew closer and the mountains faded into the night.

He’d shaved a good half hour off the time that her maps program had professed, and it was midnight, as he’d predicted, when they pulled into a chain hotel. A shower and blissful sleep recharged them enough to power through Nebraska to Chicago and another night gone, with another five-hour stretch in a hotel bed.

Chicago was alive with a mix of morning and holiday traffic. White and gray buildings speared into the sky, and there was a surprising number of waterways through the city.

They stayed on 90 and hugged the topsides of Indiana and Ohio. It amazed her how fast they could fly through a state. Signs for Toledo, Ohio and Lake Erie drew out conversation again. It was late November, and the land was still fairly lush with greenery.

“ARE THE ADIRONDACKS like this?” He was honestly interested. The skyline was so different from Monterey.

“Winchester Falls isn’t nearly this citified. Where I live, on the outskirts, cabins carve out little niches in the trees. They’d rather blend in than stand out. Well, until you get to the resorts, anyway.”

“And the Heron?”

Her gaze slid back out the window. “Definitely more about the blending.”

“But you have a dock and all those acres on the lake.”

“Of course we do. Trails and more than enough boats to keep the travelers happy.”

“Sounds really great.”

“It is. Really great.”

The bright and shiny Kendall voice was on. The one she used to manage people. He really wasn’t a fan of that voice.

She turned back to him and patted his hand.

He searched her face for a moment but saw nothing other than the usual friendly eyes and quirky smile. Maybe he was just imagining how weird she got when he mentioned the Heron.

They took a break to gas up and filled a bag of junk food for his never-ending pit of a— Christ. What was she to him? He’d fallen in love with the woman in far too short a time. None of it made sense.

And yet it felt right.

Even with the end point of Winchester Falls, he didn’t know how to make Kendall line up into his plan. His plan had been blown to hell in the last three weeks.

He climbed into the truck, unable to stop the grin when he saw she had her notebook open again, her head bent over her phone as he looked up information.

What would it be like with her in a controlled atmosphere where there was a schedule and a life building? Would they lose this spark between them when the road wasn’t in front of them and a new town in their windshield?

They were both quiet as he plugged in his GPS and let it lead him to the Heron. The direct route without the picturesque offshoots was a boring

expanse of sleeping land. The mild winter didn't give them snow to look at, but it had been cold enough to kill off all the vegetation.

She swiped through the functions on her phone. Her attention was down on the small gadget instead of on him when her soft voice broke into the silence. "Tell me about your mom."

His heart gave a kick of surprise. "What do you want to know?"

"What was she like?"

"She was sweet and cheerful. Never had a bad word to say to anyone."

"How did she meet Lawrence?"

The ache in his chest spread. How did he explain to her that Larry had come in and simply taken care of his mother? She'd been biddable and deferred to Larry. She'd always been head over heels for Kendall's father.

"She'd been a bookkeeper for one of Larry's clients. I was really young when she'd first met Larry. Maybe five. I was too young to remember much, but I do remember her singing around the apartment. She was happier than I'd ever seen her. I had lots of babysitters when she went out on dates. I didn't get to meet him the first time they went out."

"You were five?"

He nodded. He'd done some of the math himself and realized his mother was having an affair with Larry. "From what I can figure, she saw him for less than a year, and then he was just gone. And my mom was never quite the same. She was so sad, and she cried every night for a good long time."

Kendall swiped a hand under her nose. "He was cheating on my mother with yours," she said quietly.

"I think so."

"I don't remember that far back. I was a toddler."

Shane merged into traffic as they got on a main interchange, and he could finally go faster than the winding roads allowed. "The only thing I can think of is that my mom didn't realize she was the other woman, and when she did, she tried to break it off."

"You lived in New York?"

He shook his head. "When my grandmother was alive, she used to travel for work. And I think one of the places was in New York. I just don't know where."

"I don't know much about my father. Just that he was bicoastal for work. He traveled a lot. Evidently a perfect way to have more than one woman in his life."

The bitter edge to her voice sliced at him. “I don’t know, Kendall. I do know that he wasn’t a part of my life until I was eight. All of a sudden my mother said we were moving into this house in California. And she wasn’t sad anymore. The only thing I remember about the time Larry came into our lives was that my mom went to the hospital a lot.”

Kendall looked up at him sharply. “Hospital? Was she sick?”

“They never talked about it. I was a kid. How was I supposed to know if she was sick? She went to the doctors a lot, but it wasn’t cancer. She always seemed so frail to me, but then again, she was even tinier than you are.”

Her voice quieted. “I was always afraid to ask my mother about Lawrence. She’d get so sad when I talked about him that I just stopped doing it. He never came back after he left that one day. He didn’t even say good-bye to me.”

Shane popped his knuckles. Her voice was toneless. None of that made sense to him. The day he’d moved in with Larry, there had been only a booming laugh and kindness. He’d never felt like a burden. Hell, he’d ended up calling Larry Dad within the first six months.

Had his mother’s sickness really drawn Larry away from his other family? Just how sick had she been? And why the hell didn’t he know about it?

Larry had loved his mother; of that he had no doubt. They’d always been laughing, the two of them in their own little world. Sometimes Shane felt separate from them, but the love had been there. And when his mother died, all Larry’s focus had gone to him.

It still didn’t explain why Larry had cut Kendall out of his life.

“Even after my father left, my mother never stopped loving him. I heard her cry every night, but she smiled every morning for me. Eventually she stopped crying and we went on with our lives. There must have been some money coming in, or he’d left her with some, because she didn’t work until I was about ten years old.”

Shane scraped his palm down his jeans. “We never wanted for money. Some years were better than others, but I couldn’t remember a time when Larry ever complained about finances.”

“He must have stopped giving my mother money in the lean times, because she went to work while I was at school and started taking on boarders at the house. When I was sixteen, I convinced her to turn it into a bed-and-breakfast to earn extra money.”

He tried to picture Kendall with strangers around her all the time. And he found that it wasn't a stretch to imagine. She took people in and made them feel comfortable. She never lacked in kindness and never lost her temper with anyone other than him.

They lapsed into silence, her attention on the landscape and the endless rows of trees in varying colors between gold and red. They pulled into a rest stop just outside the New York state line.

While he refilled their cooler with sodas, ice, and a few sandwiches, she chased a puppy in the parking lot. Of course she'd made friends with a teenager, running the dog around between two lanky boys.

Kendall didn't even think twice about asking. And the good-natured sixteen-year-old boys had been dumbfounded when she'd turned her lethal grin in their direction. They probably would have handed over the dog to her if she'd asked.

Shane was glad the sadness was out of her chestnut-brown eyes. She fell into a heap in the middle of a small patch of grass as the exuberant puppy licked her face and neck. Her laughter rang out in the waning sun.

He nursed a soda and watched her for a few more minutes before he waved to her. She waved back and jogged to him.

"Sorry I got so morose in the truck."

"I'm sorry Larry dropped the ball so bad." He tucked a loose lock of hair behind her ear. "I wish you'd known him the way I did."

"As I said, I had a good childhood. What we didn't have in money, my mom made up in creativity and love."

He cupped her face and dropped a soft kiss on her mouth. Instead of spiraling out into a hungry meeting of lips like they usually did, they kept it leisurely paced and sweet. A stiff wind blew across the flat landscape, and she burrowed into him.

Her warm breath puffed against his neck, and he watched the clouds roll forward, heavy with snow if he didn't miss his guess. "I smell snow."

"Oh, really? The California boy smells snow?"

"Hey now, I ski."

She laughed, and the sparkle was back in her eyes. "Good to know. I can add that to the brochure."

He laughed and shook his head. "I don't have the patience to teach people how to ski. You know that."

"You can learn patience."



“Doubtful.”

She tucked her icy fingers under his shirt, and he hissed. “We’ll see.”

“Let’s get on the road. Winchester Falls waits.”

He opened her door and sighed, handing her his soda. She grinned and climbed up, her mouth already on the lip of the bottle.

The rest of the drive was uneventful, but he still didn’t like the look of the sky. He hoped they could outrun the storm that was brewing.

The lake effect dumped a good six inches of powder on them before they made it into Buffalo.

Kendall worried the power cord to her phone. “Do you think we’ll make it home by Thanksgiving?”

“If we can get away from this snow, we should be fine.”

Kendall studied her phone with a frown. “I’m not sure we’re going to get that lucky.”

He looked up at the clear skies. “Why?”

“We’re heading through Syracuse if we stay on 90. They’re getting fourteen inches, and we’ve already been set back two hours with traffic.”

He sighed. “I’m doing everything I can to get you there.”

“I know. I just have a bad feeling.”

“How far is Winchester Falls from Syracuse?”

“Two and a half hours.”

“We’ve got a ways to go.”

She nodded, her phone clenched in her hand as she curled her arms around her knees. “Maybe we’ll get lucky.”

The tension in the car slowly grew as the thruway clogged to a standstill. Instead of the stony gray, the air went orange.

“What is up with the sky?”

She laughed. “Welcome to New York, Shane Justice. The sky gets iridescent like this when we’re really going to get slammed with snow.”

Wednesday blurred away into gridlock traffic and the increasing potency of snow. He’d been in a few storms at ski lodges over the years, but nothing like the pummeling force of the Northeast. His windshield wipers couldn’t cut the ice-and-snow mix fast enough, and his headlights made the chaos of the flakes even harder to see through.

Cars pulled off to the side of the road, and he was past an exit before he could even make out that one had come up. His shoulders were locked as tight as his grip on the wheel. It was two a.m., and they were still in central

New York.

“We need gas, Kendall.”

She sat forward in her seat. “I think the next rest stop is in fourteen miles. Is that okay, or do we need to get off at the next exit instead?”

He looked down at the needle. “Shorter would be better.”

“The next exit is Rome. About five miles ahead, I think.”

“Rome?”

She smiled faintly. “Not even close to impressive.”

“Well, if they have a gas station and a restroom, I’ll be happy.”

# SIXTEEN

They did indeed have a gas station and restroom. A small diner sat across the street with three cars and lights blazing. Kendall had about all she could stand on the highway. What should have been ten hours had lengthened into sixteen, and they still weren't close to home.

The early nor'easter wasn't surprising. In fact, she'd been expecting them to hit weather far more than they had. But here in her backyard, Mother Nature was giving her a hard time. As if she weren't already a mess about Shane seeing the Heron for the first time.

Maybe a blanket of snow would cover up the dingy landscape and turn it into a winter wonderland.

She barely stopped the snort as they left the truck at the gas station and trudged across the street. The snowdrifts came up to her knees, and the whiteout was complete. There was no way they could drive anymore tonight.

"Maybe we can make it in by the afternoon."

She nodded. "It's okay. I'll just give my mom a call. Who says we can't have Thanksgiving on Black Friday instead? Not like we've got the funds to go shopping, right?"

He frowned; she wrestled open the door against the wind and the quickly piling snow. "I'm kidding." The blast of heat in the diner felt amazing. The rich scent of turkey and gravy and all the fixings cramped her belly. "Oh my God."

Shane took a deep breath as well, his eyes lighting with interest. "Is the diner taking pity on us?"

A redhead came around the register. Her hair was just as wiry as she was. It stood out around her head like a singed dandelion with a reindeer antler

headband pushing it all back. “Yes, we are. Come in out of that snow. We couldn’t get home, so we figured we’d bring the Thanksgiving dinner to anyone that managed to get in here.”

Kendall stomped her feet on the mat inside the door and shook the snow off her hoodie. “Hi.”

“Hello, hello. Welcome to Benny’s. I’m Benny. Sit where you like.”

There were a dozen people scattered around the room in various booths. The only thing they all had in common was the pile of food on their plates and the hungry clink of silverware. Oh, and they all looked whipped.

She collapsed in a booth by the window and put her head down on the table. “Everything hurts.”

Shane sprawled into the seat across from her, his long legs invading her space. His knee bumped hers. “We’ll get back on the road as soo—”

“No, we’ll just blow through another tank of gas idling on the highway. It’s stupid.”

He covered her hand with his. “I’ll get you home.”

She looked up. The man was a total pussycat under all the grump, and this just proved that. “I’ll talk to my mom and let her know we’ll get there when we get there.”

She didn’t want to spend Thanksgiving without her mother, but that didn’t seem to be an option. Again, one more option out of her control. This was not a habit she was looking to make.

Benny slid a plate of rolls and butter on the table and two large glasses of water. “You two want the special?”

“If it tastes as good as it smells, then yes.”

Benny cackled. “You got it, sugarplum.” She turned to Shane. “And you, hot stuff?”

Kendall snickered when he simply raised a brow. “Don’t mind him. The special for us both.”

“Coming up.”

Kendall sipped her water, then broke open a roll. Yeasty goodness made her mouth water. “I could eat our tires I’m so hungry.”

Shane grunted. “I could eat.”

Twelve hours in a snow-covered box was wearing on both of them. Conversation had been at an all-time low. Just directions and road conditions updates between them. Shane was driving remarkably well for never having dealt with a nor’easter. But then again, there wasn’t much that Shane didn’t

do well.

A few minutes later Benny brought back steaming plates full of turkey, stuffing, cranberry sauce, potatoes, and corn with a liberal dose of gravy over the entire thing. Kendall's mouth watered before it landed.

"Eat up, my darlings. I expect empty plates and room for pie."

Kendall grinned. "Yes, ma'am."

They both dug in, and conversation was a low murmur in the room. Benny kept a table full of kids happy with construction paper, crayons, and hand-shaped turkey headbands.

The giggles of the kids and the tired murmurs of families finally dissolved the last of her bunched muscles. When Benny came back with the check, they both left a huge tip and got directions to a hotel.

So they'd make it home a little later than expected. At this point all she cared about was a bed. "There's no point in trying to make it through this snow. If we let them salt and plow, it will be a faster drive."

"Won't that take forever?"

"Not around here. We're used to the snow. It'll be gone by morning."

He crowded in on her, dragging the backs of his knuckles along her midriff. "A bed sounds good to me."

She slid her nails up his forearm, holding him against her middle. "Very good."

They trudged across the street to the truck and had to push four inches of snow off the windshield. Fortunately the hotel was close. It still took ten minutes to skid their way there even with Shane's powerful truck.

"Shower," she mumbled as she hopped out of the truck.

"I'll grab the bags. See what you can get us for a room. Big bed."

She nodded, too tired to tease him about the use of that big bed. Right now she just wanted to wash the grit out of her eyes and collapse for five straight hours. When she walked into the lobby, a perky blonde smiled from the check-in desk.

"Hello. Can I help you?"

"Do you have any rooms with a king-size bed?"

She nodded, and her fingers flew over the keyboard. "Just yourself?"

"No, my..." Hell. What was he? Friend? Lover?

Shane came up behind her, rubbing her back absently. "For two."

"I've got one for you."

"That'd be great," Shane said.

She sagged against him as the woman asked for the particulars. Shane slid his arm around her and placed a credit card on the desk when the front desk woman rattled off a price.

Kendall gave the woman a tired smile, and then they both staggered off to the elevator. Neither of them said anything when the elevator opened. In fact, the silence was so complete she swayed into Shane.

He hooked an arm around her shoulders. "Come on, sleepy. Let's get you into a bed."

"I shouldn't be tired."

"Oh yeah, why's that?"

"You're the one who did all the driving."

"Dark truck and a long day? We're both tired, babe. Let's just get some sleep, and we can do the last leg tomorrow."

She let him lead her to the correct door. Shane dropped their bags as soon as they got inside.

"Shower."

"Go ahead."

Kendall gave him a tired smile from doorway. "Thanks for everything you're doing to get me home." Before he could wave her thanks off like he usually did, she closed the door and turned on the shower.

She spent a full ten minutes under the spray, letting the heat pummel the tight muscles in her shoulders. By the time she was done, the room was a steam bath, and she felt human again. Taking a few extra minutes to blow-dry her hair seemed a little decadent, but she did it anyway. When it was smooth as water down her back, she finally shut off the blow-dryer. She couldn't stand the thought of putting her dirty clothes back on, so she tucked the towel under her arm and opened the door.

The room was dark, save for a sliver of light from the streetlamps. Shane was on the bed, his feet still on the floor as he lay sprawled in the center of the bedspread, sound asleep. The poor thing had to be exhausted.

She reached into her bag and pulled out a T-shirt and slipped it on, draping the towel over the chair. The idea of waking him pained her, but she knew he'd regret it if she let him stay like that. Instead she bent and took off his boots.

Not a flicker of movement. Just the gentle rise and fall of his chest. She tugged his socks off and moved up to his jeans. He had two layers of shirts on, and that would require way too much moving. Instead, she unbuckled his

jeans and peeled them open.

The beam of light slid across his flat belly and highlighted his zipper.

Really? Did she need a beacon to show off exactly what she wanted? It was time for them to be in bed, and he was tired beyond measure. Resolutely she peeled his jeans down to his knees, and still he didn't move.

Feeling better that she'd conquered the lust-brain half of her consciousness, she slowly maneuvered his plaid button-down shirt off. When he moaned lightly, she moved to his side and sat cross-legged until his breathing returned to its slow cadence.

She could barely make out his features in the limited light, but his jawline was finally relaxed in sleep. The feel of his soft beard under her knuckles made her heart turn over. She brushed her thumb along his full bottom lip. The light puff of breath against her skin felt like a caress.

Overtired and still achy, she shouldn't want him. But she did—good God, she wanted him. This could be the last time. Everything could change tomorrow. She pushed his shirt up, smoothing her palm over the silky hairs on his belly that led to his chest. Widening her touch, she felt the firmness of his pectoral muscles and up to the tight bunch of muscles at his shoulder that flowed into his neck.

She straddled his chest and gently pulled his shirt over his chin and face. He gasped under her and automatically raised his arms to help her take off his shirt.

“Sunshine?”

She smiled into the night. “No one else better be undressing you.”

He snorted and sat up. She slid down his torso to his lap and felt him wake up all over. Her hands rested at his neck, letting her fingertips sift through his hair. The rumble of his moan burrowed into her chest and wrapped around her heart.

“You smell like...” He nudged his nose into her hair and behind her ear. “Christ, you smell good. Whatever it is, I want to eat you alive.”

She laughed. “Peppermint.”

“I do love candy canes.” He coiled her hair around his hand and pulled her head back. He used his teeth on the column of her neck. A caress of lips and teeth with a hint of the tip of his tongue.

He scooted back on the bed, dragging her with him. Her shirt sailed over her head and off the edge of the bed, and then his mouth was there. On her. He cupped her small breasts in his hands and took long pulls on each nipple

until they were so distended she was afraid the pleasure would drive her mad.

She reached between them and cupped his sac, then curled around his shaft. “Inside me. Just like this. Nothing but us.”

SHANE PUSHED HIMSELF into her hand. The thought of sliding into her without any protection, without any barriers, was enough to suck the last of the blood out of his brain and put it firmly in his cock.

Just once? Hell, he knew he’d want it all the time.

But he couldn’t say no to her here in the dark.

Insulated with shadow and silence—even the scent of her was different—there was no way he could say no.

He rolled down his boxers and moaned when she took him in hand, leading him into her swollen heat. He dropped onto his back, his chest arching with each inch that she took. She rose over him, her head back in pleasure as she rode him.

He splayed his fingers over her belly; he ground the heel of his hand over her mound. Part of him wanted to reach for the light. To watch them coming together. With each fisting clasp of her body, he wanted to see his cock disappear into her again and again. But there was something to be said for the darkness.

She couldn’t see just how gone he was.

How easily she’d driven him to that edge of lust and tipped him over into love. Loving her wasn’t smart, and it wasn’t well-timed, but it was one of the truest things he’d ever known.

Kendall fell forward, her hair a curtain of moonlight in the near dark. He banded his arms around her back and held her tightly. The tremble of her body and her hitching breath gave him the last bit of permission to finish. Needs denied for so long and the precious perfection of her welcoming body killed what was left of his willpower.

He drove his cock into her. The warm, wet glide of her pussy along with her sharp scent was all he needed. He came inside her. The mix of their scents and the overwhelming exhaustion slapped him in the face, and he collapsed under her.

With just enough presence of mind to make sure Kendall was okay, he rolled them both onto their sides. He buried his nose in her neck and soothed her with a light stroke down her hip.

The next time he truly woke, sunlight spilled into their room, and they’d



created a cocoon of warmth under the blankets. Naked, sated, and still a little drunk on lack of sleep, he dozed again.

Sometime later she slipped away from him to go to the window, drawing the curtains wider. Propping his head on his hand, he yawned and was struck dumb by Kendall in full sunlight.

He rolled out of bed and slid an arm around her. She smiled up at him. “Quite the view.”

“Yes, it is.”

Her smile broadened, and she leaned back against him. “The snow, Shane.”

“That’s impressive too.”

She turned in his arms, and he kissed her. He wanted nothing more than to drag her back into that huge bed and use it properly, but they needed to get on the road. “Why don’t you order up some breakfast, and I’ll take a shower.”

“Good idea.” She stepped away and grabbed a menu.

After showering and managing to hack down his steadily growing beard with his electric trimmer, he opened the door to the scent of bacon and syrup. Following his rumbling stomach, he snagged a pancake off her plate and wrapped it around two pieces of bacon.

“Hey now!”

He grinned around his mini-sandwich. “Smells awesome.”

She nodded to the other plate with a cover on it. “That’s yours.”

“I’ll take that too.”

She caged her mug with her fingers. “You’re not stealing my coffee.”

He looked down at her coffee, if that was what she wanted to call it—it was practically white with cream, and he was pretty sure there would be a layer of sugar at the bottom. “That’s all right.”

“Don’t sneer at me, Oscar.”

He hiked his towel on his hip and sat down. The domesticity felt good and right. He was pretty sure he’d be happy sniping over breakfast with her every morning of his life. The fact that it didn’t scare him into jackrabbiting for the door like it usually did was one more tick in the future-looking-bright column.

She was right; the plows had been out, and the road was wet with salt and melting snow. Already the sun was beaming down and cars were on the road. Maybe they wouldn’t lose the entire Thanksgiving.

In fact, a new plan was forming. With the B and B becoming part of his future, perhaps he could find a space for himself on the property and work on his furniture during the downtimes between helping Kendall with the Heron.

She probably wouldn't need that much help from him since she was so self-sufficient. They wouldn't step on each other's toes, and just maybe a steady future was ahead of them. He was actually looking forward to it.

He packed them up as she finished in the bathroom. She came out in his oversize thermal shirt and a tight pair of jeans. With her hair slicked back in a tail, she looked fresh and ready to go.

"Ready, Sunshine?"

She tucked her hands into her back pockets with a distracted smile. "Yes."

"Did you call your mom?"

"I will in the car."

He nodded, unsure why she was so restless. "Everything good?"

"What?"

"You good?"

"Oh, yes. Of course." She flashed him her fake smile and picked up her knapsack. He followed her out the door with a frown.

The drive was quiet. The snow blanketed everything in a fresh coat of white. Branches sagged under the heavy, wet snow. One thing he'd noticed driving into the Northeast was that the roads all seemed to look the same.

There was no artistry to the thruway, just endless exits and state troopers dotting every third speed trap between the east- and westbound traffic. The closer they got to Grafton State Park, the tighter Kendall curled into herself.

Winchester Falls was on the edges of the state park. Trees and a glass-smooth expanse of water hugged the road. Bare fingers of tree branches reached for the water. It was probably quite lovely when it was in full greenery.

But even with the wintry gray pallor to the tree branches, it had a stark loveliness that California simply didn't. Clouds streaked the sky, leaving a wake of blue sky like an after burn. She'd said it was lovely, but he hadn't been prepared for just how much.

He'd loved the breakers off Monterey for the majority of his life, but he found that the serene stones and trees suited him.

"This way?"

She nodded. "Turn up Heron Way and take a right at the large oak."

“There’s tons of trees.”

“You’ll know it when you see it.”

“All right,” he agreed. He was glad for the wide grip of his truck tires on the gravel road. “No pavement?”

“The gravel is better for drainage in the spring.”

He nodded, and the huge tree came into view. Large was an understatement. The tree had to be as old as the damn lake. It was huge and knotty and needed a good trim. Weathered, gray rough-cut fences lined the property along the lake’s edge. A lot of them needed repairs.

His chest tightened, and muscles bunched in his thighs and shoulders. Almost everything needed repair from what he could see. A faded barn with a warped door was the first thing he saw off the road into the bed-and-breakfast. Huge river rock stones led to the door, but they needed tamping and sanding for stability. The wraparound porch sagged in spots, but the stairs looked new. They seemed to be pressure-treated wood, at least, but they were unstained and didn’t match the rest of the deck.

The door was a cheery red with black-framed windows. Fat pots of mums were strategically placed for color to draw the eye. The split ranch-style house butted up against the water. He could see the edges of Kendall’s precious dock.

A dock that looked as old and tired as the rest of the property.

“This is your favorite place on earth? What the fuck, Kendall?”

KENDALL CURLED THE unbendable ends of her straightened hair around her finger. His gaze darted around the property with cold precision. She saw the place through his eyes, and her eyes pricked with tears.

For years she’d been doing all the repairs on her own. Fixing what she could, making the rest of the property work. She’d put all the money she’d been able to into the dock out back and the deck coming into the house.

She crossed her arms over her stomach. Day in and day out, she’d done everything she could to keep up. Now, after some time away, it seemed so... shabby. She was only one person. And the last few winters had been harsh. It was all she could do to keep the fishing cabins winterized for people who

braved the ice fishing. But the year before had been a mild winter leaving the cabins empty, and she'd dipped into her savings just to keep the taxes paid.

"I've been doing the best I can."

"You made it sound like it was a paradise in the middle of upstate New York."

"It is. It can be." She hated the stutter of unease that trembled through her.

He pulled off the gravel road and climbed out of the truck, slamming the door. She hopped out and hurried around the front after him. He paced along the fence, stopping at the split lower spindle. He crouched in front of it and pinched the rotting wood.

"You actually invite people to come here?"

The slice was deep. "The main house is well maintained, and we have nothing but glowing referrals."

He stood, looming over her. His hazel eyes were chips of cool jade filled with dismissal. "From who?"

"We have a loyal list of people who come back for fishing and snowmobiling."

"Fishing and—" He paced up and down the fence. "This is zoned to be a B and B, not a game and recreational park. I looked up the paperwork. Christ, if anything happened to the men on the lake, are you even covered?"

She threw her shoulders back. "Of course we are."

He finally stopped pacing in front of her. "How could you not tell me it needed this much work?"

In her head she'd known, but she'd been treading water for so long seeing just how run-down it looked after time away left a gaping hole in her chest. But she'd fight for it. The Heron was worth the fight. "It's manageable."

"Manageable?" He turned to her, his eyes hard and remote. "This looks manageable to you?"

"If I had some help. If you could only see how amazing it could be." She looked past the sagging fences to the lake and the reeds of weeping willows. The graceful arc of a heron as it landed on an icy rock and folded in its huge wings. "I don't want to lose this place."

She'd been hanging on by her fingernails for so long. She'd thought maybe, just maybe someone else would see what she saw. Shane, of all people, with his renovation knowledge could make the Heron beautiful.

She faced him. "Can't you see how special this place is?"

His eyes were flat and emotionless.

Fear took hold. Everything she'd been worried about threatened to suck her down. "You can't want to sell it."

"The property is worth more than this entire operation, so you're damn right I want to sell. I will be selling."

"No," she whispered.

"Oh yeah. What are you going to do when you can't make a repair? What happens if someone gets hurt on the dock or the porch that's sagging? Do you just want to go bankrupt to keep this place?"

"Of course not. We're just falling on hard times right now. Things will \_\_\_"

"What? You think they'll turn around? The only thing that would help this place is to sink at least ten thousand dollars into the property. I haven't even seen the main house to know what else it needs."

She shut her eyes against the angry tears that wanted to fall.

She'd been so afraid this would happen. That he'd see the place and not feel the magic in the land, in the woods and the water.

"I wanted you to see the potential of it all."

"Potential? Do you know what kind of money you need to pull off the potential you're looking for?"

She crossed her arms over her chest.

"At least forty thousand to really turn this around to be worthy of a B and B trade magazine."

She dropped her hands to her sides in shock. "I don't want to be in a trade magazine." Her breath backed up into her chest at the arctic frost of his face. "I want families who want to go out on the boat in the summer or to play on the dock and swim. I want people who love the winter and snowmobiling and skiing that's close by. I want people who want to hike and enjoy a place that's a little off the beaten path."

"Are you getting that?"

She used to. But no matter how much hospitality she and her mother showered on people, he was right. She looked away.

"That's what I thought. You lied right to my face."

"I didn't. I just told you what I see."

His face slid into the stony mask she remembered from the first day she'd met him. "Then you're lying to yourself too." He climbed into the truck and left her on the path. Instead of going up to the main house, he made a U-turn

and headed back down Heron Way to the main road.

She tipped her head back, felt the hot tracks of her tears as they burned down her temples and into her hair. The fresh scent of the water calmed her. The sun crept along the mountain line. A pink sky settled against the water.

It would be beautiful tomorrow. And he was gone.

She wiped her face and followed the road up to the house. Her mother stood on the porch, her red wool cape around her shoulders. She came down the stairs and met her at the end of the driveway.

“I thought I heard a truck. Why are you alone?”

“I—”

“Oh, Kendall...what happened?” Her mother gathered her under the cape, and her mother’s warmth seeped into her. Cinnamon wrapped in vanilla curled around her. The scent so familiar her tears returned. She put her cheek on her mother’s shoulder and hugged her tight.

She couldn’t remember the last time she’d let her mom hang on to her. Lily was shorter than her and softer with rich dark curls she kept in a chin-length style tucked behind her ears. The only thing Kendall had inherited from her mother was her brown eyes.

Currently a lovely bloodshot thanks to her own stupidity.

“I don’t know if I can survive losing the Heron, Mom.”

Lily rubbed her back. “Where is that man? Shane? Is that his name? I think I need to have a talk with him.”

Kendall laughed for the first time since that morning. Mama bear was out in all her Italian glory. She sniffed and drew back. “He just took off. I don’t know what’s going to happen now. He could be in town finding the Realtor for all I know.”

“All right, let’s not get sarcastic or hysterical here.”

Considering that was usually her mother’s reaction, she bit her lip. She had to pull it together and make a plan with Shane. She couldn’t lose her place. She had to make him see all the best parts of it.

But what about them? The look on his face had shredded her. Beyond the anger and beyond the surprise, she’d seen the hurt and the flash of betrayal. She’d just wanted him to see it with her eyes, not with any misconceptions.

Instead all he’d seen was a lie.

With his love of building, she’d hoped he would see the amazing under the worn. But she’d been wrong. God, so wrong.

She steered her mother back up the drive to the stairs. “Were you able to

get Sully to fix the hot water heater?”

Her mother sighed. At least Kendall would get a small stay of execution on the discussion of Shane. Soon enough he'd have to come back, and they'd have to face each other.

He could take the money from the job and run. She'd been so hoping he'd want to put money into the Heron and in them. Again she'd been so wrong it hurt.

“He got it to work again, but it barely covers a shower.”

“Shane—” She cut herself off. She didn't know if Shane would fix it now. Kendall cleared her throat. “As soon as I figure out money, I'll get it fixed.” She might be able to go to the scratch-and-dent sales at the warehouse and find something.

“We have those two brothers from Georgia coming in to stay at the cabin on the lake. They heard that we'd gotten early snow and want to come out for a weekend.”

“That's great. Anyone else?”

Lily sighed. “I'm afraid not, sweetie.”

Kendall nodded. She'd have to tap Bells for a temp position to help bring some money in. She had secretarial skills that came in handy around this time of year.

“I need a shower.”

“I held off on Thanksgiving dinner. I figured it would be just as good to do it on Saturday and have Bells and her family come out.”

“That sounds heavenly.”

“Why don't you go upstairs and take a quick shower—you'll freeze if you don't—and take a nap. I'll watch for this Shane person to return.”

“I want you to come get me when he gets back. I don't want you to meet him alone.”

“Why? Is he dangerous?”

Even at his most growly, there was nothing about Oscar that had been dangerous. No. Not Oscar. Shane. She didn't have the right to use her nickname for him. Not now. “No. That's not it. I just don't know how he's going to react and how you're going to react around him.”

“I'll be perfectly civilized.”

“Right.”

“Kendall Marie Proctor!”

“Just please, do this for me. Okay?”

Her mother gave an exaggerated sigh. “All right.”

Kendall climbed the stairs to her room at the back of the house. She’d refurbished all the bedrooms to rental rooms, tirelessly sanding the floors and repainting. Repurposing furniture from garage sales and using every DIY project she could manage on her own. Or anything she could drag Bells into doing with her.

Her bedroom was a converted pantry from the original structure of the house. It was just big enough for a twin bed and shelves she’d created to hold everything from a small stereo to her cable console. A modest flat screen TV filled the wall at the end of her bed.

It was simply a nook for her to collapse in at the end of the day.

She climbed into the shower and let the hot water run until it flowed cold. Her typical apple shampoo and conditioner made her feel normal again. She looked out the window, but his truck still gone.

Armed with her fleece pj’s and woolen socks, she headed back downstairs to talk to her mother. A nap was probably a smart idea, but she couldn’t hide in sleep right now. No, she had a lot to explain.

Lily was curled into her chair with her current knitting project on her lap and the fluff-ball cat that seemed to own the house. Kendall leaned in. “Hello, Murdoch.”

He lifted his head for a long scratch under his chin before curling back into her mom’s lap.

“Do you want anything to eat?”

Kendall shook her head. “Not hungry.”

“You’re always hungry.”

Kendall managed a half smile. “Not at the moment.”

Lily sighed. “You really got yourself messed up over this man. You swore you’d never be like me, but here you are.”

Kendall’s spine snapped straight. “I’m not—”

“Larry and I fell hard and fast. Within two weeks we were moved into this house with every room spoken for. We had so many plans for more children,” she said absently.

“You wanted more kids?”

“Of course. We wanted at least three, but then...” Her mom trailed off. “Well, then we didn’t.”

Was it a *we* or just a *he*? She didn’t have the heart to dredge up that question. Not when she was pretty sure Lawrence had not only left them but



cheated on her mother. Did Lily even know that?

A sudden bang at the front door kicked adrenaline through her system. She checked the peep window. Shane's imposing form filled the doorway. She shook back her hair and opened the door. Water dripped from the brim of his baseball cap, and his eyes glittered darkly.

Normally his height made her feel safe, but right now he just felt too overwhelming and too angry. She stepped back. "Where have you been?"

"I don't answer to you."

His cool voice was filled with the old Shane, and she hated it. Remote and angry, the man from their road trip was long gone.

He stepped inside and looked around. His quick assessment made her shoulder blades itch. Instead of the derision she'd been expecting, he seemed calm and accepting.

"Lily Proctor, this is Shane Justice. He'll be staying with us for the foreseeable future."

Shane held out his hand. "I'm sorry we had to meet under these circumstances."

Her mother tipped her head back. "Are you sure you're not Larry's boy?"

Kendall flushed. He damn well better not be.

"No, ma'am. My father died before I was born. Larry raised me, for all intents and purposes."

Lily narrowed her gaze. "Oh, really?"

Shane's face gentled. "Yes, ma'am."

Kendall's gaze wavered for a moment before she blinked away the wash of tears. He didn't have to be nice to her mother, but he was. She crossed the room to the small wine fridge she'd stashed behind a small bar she'd restrained. She poured herself a glass and took a slug before turning back around, her innkeeper's smile in place. She'd get him settled and make the best of things.

"Can I find you a room for the night?"

"That'd be great."

Kendall glanced at her mother. "Is the Sage Room made up?"

Her mother nodded.

She returned her attention to Shane. "Did you bring your stuff in?"

"I'll bring it in later."

"Okay," she said stiffly. She could feel him behind her as she started up the steps. Instead of waiting for him, she darted up to the next floor and down

the hallway. He was finally in her space, in her things, and he was acting like they were strangers again. She could feel the headache brewing.

She opened the door and quickly surveyed the room. Cream sheets, deep sage comforter and walls, with a buttery pine bed reminiscent of their time at the church. Slatted headboard, side table, and a simple dresser kept the room uncluttered. The room smelled of lavender.

This part was her mother's doing. She loved keeping the rooms clean and romantic. Kendall backed into the door, her skin on high alert when he filled the space. He swept by her; his distinctive amber scent was stronger and so distracting she wanted to crawl into his arms and apologize.

But she didn't.

She didn't have anything to apologize for.

Maybe she'd talked up the place more than was warranted, but she honestly saw it that way. Time away had taken some of the polish off, but it was her place, and she was proud of it.

"We have breakfast at seven, lunch at one, and dinner at six. You're welcome to come downstairs for a meal with us."

"Thank you."

She tried not to react. But the throaty thanks shot everything all to hell. She stopped at the door, not looking back at him. Before she could do something dumb, she followed the hidden hallway to her corner of the house and jammed her fist into her mouth.

Crawling under the covers, she pressed her cheek to her cool sateen sheets and let the tears fall into her pillow.

# SEVENTEEN

Dawn drove Shane from his bed. The mix of lavender and vanilla in the room should have been too fussy and female, but he'd slept deeply and dreamlessly.

Kendall had said the inside of the B and B was finished and well preserved, and she'd been right. He wandered through each room before going downstairs to find the coffeepot. Instead of lingering for breakfast, he escaped to the property and found his supplies in the barn.

He'd backed his truck up beside the faded structure and immediately tackled the tangle of orders as well as the packaging from the moving company. For hours he got lost in the organization of the barn, in carving a space for himself within the dumping grounds of the catchall barn filled with extra furniture and wood.

He itched to work, but he needed a clean spot to do that. He built shelving units for his tools and the various discarded appliances that had been in the kitchen at one time or another.

Lily dropped him off a carafe of coffee and plate of sandwiches without a word. He could feel her curious gaze, but she managed not to ask questions.

He wasn't sure if it was out of loyalty for the silence between him and Kendall or because she wasn't sure what to make of him yet. Probably a mix of both.

By ten that night, not even his flood work lights could keep him awake. After a painfully quick shower, he vowed to fix the water heater the next morning. Again he fell into a dreamless sleep and woke at dawn to work on the barn before heading into town for a water heater.

Kendall brought him two breakfast sandwiches and a carafe of black

coffee. She watched for a few minutes before heading behind the barn to the dock. Part of him wanted to follow her, to see the spot she talked about so much, and the other part of him couldn't stand any more disappointments when it came to her.

So he stayed away.

And he worked until he didn't have to think. Until he was able to stop wanting Kendall for a little while. He added a new smart water heater. It would increase efficiency in the house and bring down her utility bill.

Their utility bill.

He put one foot in front of the other and made a list of projects to do to increase the value of the property. Kendall left every morning at seven and returned sometimes as late as seven in the evening.

They passed each other in the hall, outside the bathroom, and occasionally in the kitchen. But they kept separate lives. Lily fed him and left him lists for when he went into town. He finalized the orders he'd created with the koa wood and began renovations on the barn. He framed out a room for himself over the workshop.

Living in the B and B and so close to Kendall messed with his brain. He hoped that if he made a completely separate spot, then he could begin to work her out of his system. Maybe the love deal had been just the hazy side of lust.

Remarkably he was able to sleep at night. He had a feeling it was because he worked until he hit a wall and had no choice but to blink out and recharge. If he hit that wall, then he didn't dream about her. He didn't wake up reaching for her.

If he rolled out of bed and got right to work, he didn't even have to see her before she left in the morning. And if he didn't see her, he didn't wonder why she was working away from the house. And he didn't care that she didn't come to see him either.

As November bled into December, he got the barn converted into a true workshop. He'd built a bunk over the office and could finally get out from under the Heron's roof and into a space of his own.

Shane headed up the side stairs to his room. It was two in the afternoon, and Lily would be watching her television shows. She was the ultimate morning person, scrubbing the house to an inch of its life so she could enjoy her soaps and talk shows in the later part of the day.

It was amazing how quickly he'd moved into a schedule without actually speaking to her. He didn't know what the hell to say, and Lily seemed to

know he needed his space. It worked for them.

He loaded up his duffel bag with his clothes and toiletries, and just as he slung it over his shoulder, Kendall filled the doorway with a stack of towels and fresh sheets.

“Oh. Sorry, I didn’t know you were in the house.”

“I was just leaving.”

She glanced at his bag, her huge dark eyes slowly surveying the room. “You’re really leaving.” There was no question, just a resigned statement.

“Just moving into the barn. I also updated the Web site with new pictures of the front of the house. I hope that means we’ll get a few requests. I want to get out of your hair.”

“You’re not in my hair.”

He shrugged. “Out of Lily’s.”

“She likes having someone to take care of.”

Shane lifted a brow. “She has you.”

“You let her mother you.”

“I do not.”

An almost Kendall smile tipped up the corner of her wide mouth. “You do. Hey, if someone else is doing the honey-do list, then I’m all for it.”

“Speaking of which, you haven’t been around much.”

“I temp during the slow season to make some extra money.”

He frowned. She shouldn’t have to do extra jobs. He jammed his hand into his pocket so he didn’t do something stupid like grab her and make her realize that. “But not today?”

“No, it’s decorating day. First we have to clean all the rooms.”

“Your mother keeps every room sparkling.”

“Agreed, but Christmas is her deal, so I have to do what I’m told.” She held up deep-green-and-white towels. “Christmas towels. But I guess it doesn’t matter now.”

He stood in front of her and flicked a blonde curl over her shoulder. He was playing with fire, but she was there in front of him, and he couldn’t stop himself. Not when her apple scent rolled through his room—his former room—and reminded him of just what he’d been missing for the last few weeks.

She closed her eyes. “Don’t.”

“Don’t what?” He stroked his thumb under her chin and along her jawline until he felt her pulse flutter wildly.

“Don’t make me want you again.”

“You stopped?”

She swallowed, and he could feel the muscles of her throat work. He lowered his mouth to her temple. Her orchard flavor mixed with the fresh linens in her arms. It made him think of Sunday-morning sunshine when he caught her hanging the laundry.

He stepped back, even as his cock screamed at him to move forward instead. To lay claim to her mouth, to stretch her out on his bed and lift her arms above her head and watch her break apart in the diffused winter sun.

He wanted it way too much. And he couldn't invite that back into his life. Not when he was working so hard to separate himself.

KENDALL WATCHED HIM walk away. Her chest ached with the need to call him back. Already the room was empty without him. The little toiletries that dotted his dresser, the clothes hanging in the closet, his extra pair of work boots—all of them were gone.

Just how long before he'd be gone too?

Resolutely she put the towels in the bathroom and stripped his bed. The lingering wisp of cedar chips ripped into her. She sat on the bed and pulled his pillow forward and buried her face in his scent.

No. Not again. She stood and shook out the pillowcase until the feather pillow landed in the chair with a thud. When the bed was stripped, she snapped out fresh sheets.

The last three weeks had been a lesson in self-control. She decided she pretty much sucked at it. The nights were the worst. Even working twelve hours a day wasn't enough to banish him.

She appreciated the new water heater, but she was still taking cold showers out of necessity. She woke with his name on her lips, his phantom hands on her body, and an orgasm teasing the edges of her sanity.

Even a hot shower and taking care of herself didn't do the job.

She was going to go mad if she didn't figure out a way to make him see that she hadn't lied to him on purpose. She finished making the bed and tossed the dirty sheets in the laundry chute. Before she could talk herself out of it, she hit the stairs at a dead run.

The cold December air slapped her in the face. She stormed across the driveway to the barn. Shane's lathe was on, and a pile of sawdust sprinkled over his boots. A spindle took shape as he worked his chisel up and down the length.

That wasn't helping.

She waited at the door for him to turn it off, and he tossed his glasses on the workbench. She crossed the room before she could talk herself out of it, then hooked her arms around his neck. She laid her lips on his. At first there was no response.

Shane stood there as still as one of the carvings he had on his shelf.

Then his fingers fisted into the back of her shirt, and he dragged her against him. She gave a sighing moan as the hard length of him pressed into her belly. He lifted her and dropped her on a metal workbench on the far side of the room.

His mouth was relentless on her neck and collarbone. He peeled up the bottom of her shirt, his teeth capturing her nipple on the reveal of her plum-colored bra.

He moaned around the stiff tip and flipped her cups up with the sweater until both were hanging around her neck. He went from one breast to the other, taking care to suck both of her nipples into aching points.

He pulled her to the edge of the table and stripped her of her jeans. His green eyes were wild and his jaw hard as granite. She kicked off one pant leg. He pushed aside the elastic of her panties, and then he was finally there—inside her.

The metal table rocked with the force of his thrusts. She cried out and took each one like a punishment. Her swollen heat clasped around him and held him tight as he ground against her pelvis.

Her nails bit into his shoulder, and the smoky scent of sawdust drifted up with the musky scent of them together. She whispered his name, her knees flexing at his hips as she took every thrust.

She came so hard her teeth rattled. And when she opened her eyes, Shane's fierce and focused face burned itself in her memory. He lifted her knee higher and slid just that much deeper into her, and then she heard the guttural groan as he filled her.

Unable to stay upright, she dropped her forehead onto his shoulder.

"Shane."

He backed up, and she locked her legs around his hips. "No. Don't go."

“Kendall, I have to.”

Sunshine. She missed the soft, gravelly way he'd say *Sunshine* like it was an endearment. “I'm sorry.” Her voice broke. “I'm sorry I didn't trust you to want to be here without it being a perfect bed-and-breakfast. I just didn't want to lose you.”

“Or the Heron,” he said quietly.

“No. I don't want to lose my home either.”

He slid his hands along her knees and pulled her away from his hips. Feeling exposed, she jumped down and jerked her jeans back on. Turning away from him, she fixed her bra and sweater.

From the outside she didn't look any different. Inside, she knew she was changed yet again. The disappointment in his voice scooped out the pleasure and left it with the sawdust on the ground.

“I don't know what to say to make you understand why I did what I did.”

“I was all the way in. And now I just don't know.” He tipped his head back. “Now all I see are the things that need to be done. And all the return we'll never get.”

She clenched her fists. Return on the business or them? “Don't you have any faith?”

“I thought I did.”

She crossed her arms over her chest and backed out of the barn. How was she supposed to have enough faith for both of them when she was teetering on the edge alone?

She wanted to believe that she and Shane made sense, that they could pull the Heron out of the mire with faith alone, but what if he was right? What if it was smarter to sell and start over somewhere else?

Maybe she should let someone else shoulder the burden and find a job where she could put her managing skills to work without the responsibility of ownership.

She climbed the side stairs and heard her mother singing in the kitchen. She bypassed that route and headed for her bedroom. She quickly cleaned up, her insides still reeling from the sex and their confessions.

Before she could change her mind, she called Bells, and they agreed to meet in town. She backed her Outback down the drive and out to Heron Way. She needed someone else's point of view.

Kendall bustled into the pizza place, elbowed her way to the counter, and ordered a pie before she claimed a booth against the window. Bells waved to



her and wove her way through the Friday-night crowd.

“How’d you get a booth?”

“There might have been snarling involved.”

Bells flipped her thick red hair over her shoulder and quickly braided the end to keep it under control. She waved two fingers in the air at the waitress, and two Stellas landed on the table.

It was good to be a regular.

“Okay, spill it, sister. You have scruff burn on your neck, and you look miserable. Orgasms are supposed to end with sighs, not cries.”

Kendall shook her head. “Knowing someone from second grade sucks sometimes.”

Bells grinned and took a sip from her beer. “I’m jealous. Do you know how long it’s been since I’ve even had a whiff of whisker burn?”

“Three months.”

She roared out a laugh, and a few people looked at them. Bells just shrugged and waved. “I wouldn’t count that. Maybe a mild case of accidental orgasms. And only if I moved my hips just right.”

“You are so wrong.”

Bells smirked. “I don’t wanna be right.” She slid her hands across the table and covered Kendall’s. “Enough with the witty banter. What’s going on, *chica*?”

“I’m in love with Shane.”

“Well, duh. I got that much.”

“And he doesn’t love me back.”

“Are you sure? Because I was getting the gigundo I’m-so-messed-up vibes from him.”

“Just because he’s messed up doesn’t mean it’s over me. It might be the situation. It might be because he wants to start over in another town without me weighing him down.” She thought of Shane after they’d come together so furiously. Maybe it was just attraction, and he wanted to cut and run now that he saw what a future with her entailed. She couldn’t blame him.

“And it might be that you’re both too afraid to say the L word.”

“I... Well, maybe.”

Bells tucked her chin on her hand. “Honey, there’s a reason I’m still single too. It’s hard to say those words. It’s supposed to be hard to say them. If they were easy, they wouldn’t mean anything.”

“Did I actually call you here to be the voice of reason?”

“Yep.”

“I must be stupid.”

Bells lifted her glass. “I’ll go with very, very smart.”

Kendall let her head drop onto her folded arms. “You know that self-fulfilling-prophecy thing? Yeah. That’s me.”

“Oh, my drama queen.”

Kendall flashed her a middle finger.

“Look, sweetie. You’ve been getting away scot-free with the male drama crap. You were bound to fall hard for someone sometime.”

“But him?”

“Of course it was going to be him. He’s a perfect match for you.”

She lifted her head. “You don’t even know him.”

“I know him through your eyes. I knew the first time you talked about him that he was going to be important to you in some way. It’s just how you work, Ken.”

“He and his mom are the reason Lawrence left me and Mom.”

“And how old was he when that happened?”

Kendall shrugged. “Eight.”

Bells rolled her eyes. “That’s not a valid reason for turning down the love of your life. You need to just say it.”

“And if he laughs in my face?”

The pizza—cheese and mushrooms well done—came to the table. They dug in without breaking stride. “Then you call me, and I’ll come beat his ass.”

“I knew there was a reason I kept you around.”

Bells lifted her piece of pizza over her head and slurped the excess cheese off. “Damn right.”

An evening with Bells, pizza, and beer was pretty close to perfect. She still didn’t have any better answers, but her head didn’t feel like it was going to explode anymore. By the time she returned to the Heron, she was a little more even.

She got out of her car and turned to look at the glowing light from the barn. Shane stood in the doorway, his shirt gone, his forearm over his head against the jamb. When she took a step forward, he backed away and closed the door.

She swallowed against the hurt and climbed the stairs.

“I don’t think we have nearly enough lights.”

“No comments from the peanut gallery.”

Kendall grinned at her mother as she wrapped another string of lights around the newel post and through the spindles. They’d finally finished with the cleaning that afternoon, and now it was all about decorating. Starting with the porch.

The phone rang, and her mother pulled the cordless from her apron. “The Heron, this is Lily. How may I help you?”

Her mother’s chatter faded into the background as she told whoever was on the phone about rates and the highlights of the bed-and-breakfast. Kendall wrestled with another string of lights, plugging it into the end she’d tucked under the railing, and moved her way down the porch.

She looked out over the front of the property. Snow had been a constant in the forecast for the last few nights, and the fresh powder sprinkled a bit of fairy dust on the terrain. The new fences that Shane had put up were stained a deep walnut and popped against the picturesque blues and cool whites that blanketed the lake. The huge oak was sturdy and majestic.

When had he trimmed the branches?

“You need how many nights?”

Kendall snapped back into the moment.

“Absolutely. We’ve got a few rooms available. Mmm-hmm.” Her mother made happy little noises as she laughed with the caller.

Relief unknotted the ball that had been sitting in her gut for so long she hadn’t even realized they were there. At this point, she’d welcome the fish smell in her kitchen. They needed income to keep the B and B running. They might own the house outright, but they still had to pay taxes and utilities.

Her mother chatted for a few more minutes and disappeared inside to bang out the details of the visit. Kendall made her way around the back of the house.

She could hear Shane using a saw. Soft plumes of steam billowed into the crisp air from the exhaust vent he’d set up. She squatted to line the lower rail and shake out her tired wrists. A twinge of soreness between her thighs reminded her of the furious lovemaking—no, not lovemaking. It had been

sex. Pure, tension-breaking sex. No emotion, just the endgame of an orgasm for the both of them.

An empty orgasm for her, and yet she'd initiated things between them, not him. Of course he'd take her up on it. A willing woman and they knew each other's bodies well. Had she really thought that was going to be the answer to getting him to talk?

"Kendall, you won't believe it."

She stood with only the slightest wince. "What, Mom?"

"That was an entire family. Their plans fell through with another B and B, and they saw our new Web site. I logged on to check to see what they were talking about. Why didn't you tell me we had a new Web site?"

Kendall snapped her brows together. "Shane mentioned he'd added some new pictures, but I haven't gotten around to checking." Evidently Shane had been very busy. The quick flare of hope made her smile. If he'd updated the Web site, maybe he wasn't truly hell-bent on selling. "Wait, go back to the entire-family part."

"Oh, right." Lily laughed and tucked her pencil behind her ear. "They need four rooms for the week of Christmas."

"Four?"

Her mother nodded. "I know. I can't believe it. Three couples and two teenage girls."

Relief and determination straightened her shoulders. Then she'd make sure it was the best damn Christmas. Her gaze drifted to the barn; then she focused back to the task at hand.

At least this she could fix. "Well, then let's make sure we wow them. Why don't you go get the extra lights from the barn?"

Her mother took the pencil from behind her ear and made a note on the small notebook she kept in her pocket. "I think you should go get them. I need to make up a menu."

The storm door shut in her face, her mother already buried in planning. Kendall sagged. Maybe she could work with what she had. She gazed down at the two bundles at her feet and knew they wouldn't make it around the other side of the wraparound porch.

"You can do this, Kendall. He's just a man." She curled her fingers into her palms and made her way down the side steps. The crunch of snow under her boots sounded loud in the dense silence of the meadow behind the house.

She made her way up the small hill to the barn. The back door was open,

and the shriek of a skill saw greeted her. Shane had a navy thermal shirt on, the cuffs pushed back at his elbow. His back muscles bunched and flowed as he patiently worked the blade through a long board. A pile of similar cuts was stacked neatly against the wall.

For the first time she got a look at what he'd truly done with the barn. He'd completely converted it into a work space. Steel shelves lined the back wall with bins organized by season, some labeled by her, some in what had to be his handwriting. Instead of rummaging into the Christmas corner like she usually did, all she had to do was go over and pull the Xmas decorations bin down.

A sturdy wooden ladder led to the small loft that had been their catchall storage. A soft glow from a lamp illuminated the queen-size mattress on a low frame, her old college dorm fridge, and a table.

He didn't need to stay outside in the barn. She had perfectly good rooms for him inside the house. Although it was surprisingly warm and cozy in a rustic way. Under the loft there were stacks of chairs, the skeleton of an eight-foot table, as well as a cart full of stains and sandpaper blocks.

Shane dominated the space in the middle, working through strip upon strip of the unusual Hawaiian wood.

Of course that meant she had to walk by him. She took a steadying breath and lifted her chin. This was just as much her space as it was his. She made a beeline for the wall of shelves and stood on her tiptoes. She managed to only jimmy the decorations bin out a few inches.

Dammit, she was too short.

She looked for a ladder, spotting it by the door. The scrape of the bin coming off the shelf made her whirl around.

Shane stood behind her, holding it. "Where do you want it?"

She grabbed for the handles. "I can carry it."

He looked down at her, his eyes more green than hazel today. "Where do you want it?"

Unwilling to argue, she shrugged. "The porch."

He left without a word, and she sneered at his back. She followed him outside and across the yard to the stairs. "Thanks."

"No problem." Instead of going back to the barn, he walked the length of the porch, his arms crossed over his chest. "Looks good."

Was he actually making conversation? "Um, thanks. We're getting ready for some guests."

“Oh yeah?”

“I think we have you to thank. Evidently the updated the Web site worked.”

He jammed his hands into his pockets. “When I went on the computer in the den, it was already signed into your design page. I just took a few pictures of the improvements and the lake after the snowstorm. It’s pretty as a postcard when there’s a foot of snow on the ground.”

She stiffened. She’d thought the same thing, but hearing him say it the same way rankled. The Heron might not be perfect, but it had a lot of charm. She swallowed back a snotty response. “Well, whatever you did netted us a four-room booking.”

“Nice. Do you need anything done before they come?”

She rubbed the heel of her hand against her thigh. “I need to go into town and get a Christmas tree. It’d be easier to throw it in the back of your truck.”

“Let me just clean up, and we’ll go.”

The easy acquiescence surprised her. “Great. Thanks.”

“I need to get a few things anyway.”

The quick flash of disappointment pissed her off. She pasted on a bright smile. “I’ll see if Mom needs anything.”

“Lily always needs something from town.”

She gave a quick laugh. “Ain’t that the truth.” Kendall crouched, forgetting just how sore she still was. She sucked back a hiss of pain as she flipped the top off the bin.

He frowned down at her. “You all right?”

“Fine. Just been doing a lot of crawling around today.”

He reached into the bin and unearthed a half dozen cardboard pieces wrapped in lights. “Why don’t we go get the tree, and I’ll help you with the lights.”

“You don’t need to do that. You look like you’re in the middle of a project.”

“It can wait. The Heron is my first priority.”

“All right.” She stood and put a hand on the rail. “I’m too sore to say no.”

He moved in closer. “Are you sore from working on the porch or from what we did yesterday?” His gaze was steady on her face. “Did I hurt you?”

“No, Shane.” She looked away from his too-intense stare. “You didn’t hurt me.” *Not physically.*

He tipped up her chin so she’d meet his gaze. “Don’t lie to me.”

She jerked out of his hold and backed up. “Don’t flatter yourself.”

He caught her wrist, drawing her back into his personal space. He traced a thumb along a lock of hair that had slipped from her French braid. “I was wrong to do that yesterday.”

She looked out over the water. She didn’t want to know he’d regretted touching her.

“Kendall.”

*Sunshine.*

Not Sunshine. The sharp longing stabbed her in the chest. God, she missed him. Missed his touch, missed his gruff voice and dry humor. Making sure all the things she craved didn’t show on her face, she put on her easy smile. “It’s fine, Shane. Yesterday was just two people scratching an itch.” She shrugged carelessly. “Just fucking, right?”

A muscle in his jaw rippled, and he dropped her hand. “As long as we have that straight. I’ll go get my keys.”

She rubbed weary eyes and went inside for her purse. “Mom,” she called out. “We’re heading into town. Got a grocery list?”

Lily came around the corner, a sheet in her hand. “Just a few things. We’ll need to do a big order for the guests later in the week.” She stopped in front of Kendall. “Are you all right?”

“Yes.” She took the list.

“Don’t take that tone with me, young lady.”

Kendall clamped her jaw tight and went to the sink. She stuffed the list in her purse, then opened the cupboard and shook out a few ibuprofens. She filled a glass of water from the tap and swallowed it down in greedy gulps, hoping she could get rid of the anger with her thirst.

She stared out the window. “I’m sorry, Mom. I’m just tired.”

“If by tired you mean lovesick, then yes.”

“Mom, please.”

“Have you tried to talk to him?”

“Can we not do this now? I’ve got to go.”

“Go on, then.”

Kendall fled, meeting Shane at the truck. She got in without a word and studied the landscape. She noticed more than just the front fence had been fixed. A rough-hewn bench had been added next to the water. “Did you use the lumber from the old fences to make that bench?”

“Yes. Some of it was still good to use.”

“I appreciate it.”

“It’s practical to repurpose the wood. The trails are a nice walk and good for snowmobiles. I figured it was a good spot to sit and look out at the water.”

Was he doing it to make the Heron more beautiful for guests or to make it more appealing to a buyer? Hadn’t he said that the land was worth more than the operating of the B and B?

Maybe he was actually starting to see what she did. She turned to him. “You’re starting to think like an innkeeper.”

“Until we put this place on the market, my name’s on the business too. So is my reputation.”

She looked back out the window. “Of course.” And she needed to remember that.



# EIGHTEEN

Shane put the truck into park. A good crowd of people was shuffling through the little corner lot of staked trees. He followed Kendall into the back of the lot.

“What size are we getting?”

“Eight foot minimum.”

“Eight?”

She glanced over her shoulder. “We put it in the main living space.”

Seemed like a damn big tree for the space, but it was her call. She wove between the trees as if she had an idea in mind but wasn’t finding just what she wanted.

“Heya, Ken.”

An easy and bright smile transformed her face and sucker punched him. “Hi, Brandon.”

Christ. She used to smile at him like that. He jammed his hands into the pockets of his bomber jacket.

“I’ve got a few of those blue spruces you like so much. I held a big one over here.”

He bet the guy did. Shane trudged through the muddy snow after her.

She hooked her arm through Brandon’s. “Oh, that’s perfect.”

Brandon patted her hand. “I thought you might like it.”

Shane stood with his feet apart, his thighs quivering with the full-body clench. He didn’t have any right to get pissed, but he didn’t like anyone else touching her.

“I’m sorry; evidently I left my manners in the truck. Brandon, this is Shane. Shane, Brandon.”

Shane held out his hand, and their handshake was firm. Brandon sized him up; his friendly blue eyes held an edge. Had Brandon and Kendall been an item?

Why the fuck did he care?

He stuffed his hand back into his pocket. She chattered away, asked the guy about his dog, his mother, his sister, and his goddamned nieces and nephews. Names flew out of her mouth.

Small town-ese and the easy familiarity of knowing someone most of her life left him on the sidelines.

He'd lived in Monterey for twenty-two years, and he didn't know two of his neighbors. He wouldn't be surprised to find out that Kendall knew the entire town of Winchester Falls.

Five minutes later the spruce was on the bed of his truck. She stopped at the edges of the displays. "Do you have any wreaths left?"

Brandon nodded. "Mom put a few together yesterday, and my sister made a few with those fat bows on the bottom and left the rest naked for people to trim themselves."

Shane fisted his hands in his pockets and followed her to a small tent. She pored over the wreaths like she did the tree and finally selected one with a huge gold-and-silver bow.

Kendall counted out bills and handed them over. "Tell your sister she outdid herself."

Brandon smiled. "I will."

"Merry Christmas if I don't get to see you."

Brandon looked over her head at Shane, then quickly back at Kendall. "My sister's having a Christmas Eve party if you're interested."

"I've got a few families coming in at the B and B. I'm sorry I'll miss it."

"Me too."

Unable to watch the man make cow eyes at her any longer, Shane came up next to her. "We're losing daylight, Sunshine."

Kendall fumbled the wreath, and Shane caught it. She peered up at him with wide, dark eyes, then blinked and turned back to Brandon. "I've got to get back. Thanks for keeping that beautiful tree for me."

"Always."

Kendall smiled. "I'll see you soon." She turned to follow Shane, her eyebrows knit together.

She didn't say a word as he loaded the wreath in beside the tree and

slammed the tailgate closed. Just kept frowning.

“What?”

“You called me— Never mind.”

He frowned down at her. “Called you what?”

She folded her arms over her chest. “Nothing.”

He stepped closer until they were toe to toe. “Called you what?”

“Obviously you didn’t mean to since you don’t remember.”

Confused, he took his hands out of his pockets. “Remember what?”

“It’s not important.”

“It is if you’re reacting like this.”

“Sunshine,” she said on an agitated breath. “You called me Sunshine, and you haven’t called me that since we got back.”

Had he? He didn’t remember doing it.

“Not babe, not Sunshine, not even a hey-you—just Kendall.”

He stuffed his hands back into his pockets. “That’s your name.”

She made a disgusted grunt and rounded the truck to the passenger side.

He followed her and slapped his hand against the door before she could open it. Frustrated by his jealousy, by the feelings she stirred in him, by the distance between them because of the Heron, he crowded in on her. She flattened herself against the panel, her chest rising and her eyes dilated.

“Christ, Sunshine, you make me fucking nuts.”

Then he slammed his mouth over hers. She drew a deep breath in through her nose, and he took advantage, opening her wide for a deep and driving kiss. She clung to him, her breasts smashed to his chest, making enough room to get his arm around her back and lift her onto her toes.

She was addictive, and he’d been jonesing for her. Even if he’d had her the day before, it wasn’t enough. He turned his lips away, pressing his cheek to hers as they both dragged in deep breaths.

He set her on her feet and backed away from her. Her taste lingered on his tongue, infused his blood, and infected him. He wasn’t sure he wanted a cure. He still wasn’t convinced the Heron would be fiscally feasible to keep. It was hard to reconcile his need for her and his disappointment.

Kendall wasn’t the type to deceive, but she wasn’t going to want to let go of the B and B either. Being angry with her was exhausting and frustrating. Double time on the frustration, both with their situation and how much he missed her touch.

“We need to get to the market.”

She pressed her lips together as if savoring the kiss. “Right.”

He bit back a groan and opened her door. She stepped up and inside; he slammed the door after her and turned. At least six people were openly staring at them. “Christ,” he muttered and headed to his side of the truck.

He’d kissed the hell out of her in the open at one in the damn afternoon on a Sunday. Everyone and their mother was in town for something.

He got in beside her and put the truck in gear. Their trip to the market was uneventful, though there was definitely more staring. Kendall didn’t seem to notice or at least didn’t seem to care.

She seemed to know everyone, introducing him to so many people his brain was buzzing with names and faces. By the time he got them back to the house, he was ready to shut himself in the shop and blast his music.

Instead he hauled in the tree and placed it in the tree stand. Another twenty minutes of adjustment and he’d finally earned himself a beer.

Lily surveyed the room with a satisfied nod. “You outdid yourself, Kendall.”

“I know. Isn’t it beautiful? Brandon held it for me.”

“Oh, did he now?”

“Enough, Mom.”

Shane sipped his beer, then let it dangle from his fingers. “I’d like to hear this.”

“No, he would not.”

Now that Lily had an attentive audience, her cherubic face lit up, and her dark eyes danced. “Brandon’s always been sweet on my Kendall.”

“Sweet on me? Mom, we don’t live in the Deep South.”

“What else would you call it? The boy moons over you.”

“Yeah, he does,” Shane muttered.

Kendall rolled her eyes, then turned and fisted her hand on each hip. “That’s why you called me Sunshine at the tree lot.”

Shane took a lazy sip of his beer. “You put a lot of importance on a nickname, babe.”

Her cheeks flushed, and she looked to the left of him at her mother, then spun back to the tree. “We’ll let the tree soak up some water and the branches fall. We can trim the tree tonight, Mom.”

“Do you want to come over and help us, Shane?”

Shane looked down at Lily. “I’ve got some work to do in the barn.”

“That’s too bad. We watch bad movies and have a lot of fun.”

He drained his bottle. The urge to say yes surprised him, but he didn't want to get in the middle of any traditions they had. Besides, they probably watched schmaltzy movies.

He hadn't had a family Christmas tree since he was a boy. Larry had people come in and do the tree at the house. It was classic and beautiful, but it was more of a necessity for the showcase house than any love Larry had for the holiday. He cleared his throat. "We've got to go finish the porch."

"Right." Kendall tugged on an oversize flannel shirt that hung around her hips and a pair of stretchy gloves before slipping out the door.

Following her outside, he came to a stop to assess the porch in the late-day sun. He'd been steadily going through the money from his job with Doyle. Lumber wasn't cheap, but he was able to buy most of it in bulk. Doing the labor himself helped keep the cost down.

Her idea to stain the porch was a good one. Especially after he made adjustments to a few of the warped boards. They could stain it in the spring—

Hell. How did he know he'd be there in the spring? They might sell by then.

He scrubbed his hand through his hair. It was getting longer now, the buzz cut grown out over his ears and sticking up in the front by the end of the day. He dug a knit cap out of his back pocket and pulled it on.

She looked up at him, her dark eyes shining. "Aww, is California boy not fond of the cold?"

He glanced down at her gloves pointedly.

"What? You know how cold my hands get."

He tightened his jaw. Yes, he remembered how many times she'd stuck her cold hands and cold feet against his skin for warmth. Especially her hands. She loved to tuck them under his shirt.

"Come on. Show me what you want me to do," Shane said.

"I get to give you direction? It's a Christmas miracle."

"Watch yourself."

She bent into the bin and took out three packs of bound lights. "Or you'll what?"

"Don't tempt me, Kendall."

She smirked up at him and tossed him two cardboard flats with lights strung around them. "Promises, promises. You can go wrap these along the rail on the other side of the porch. Just plug it in the end of the lights at the front. They all link together."

“What are you going to do?”

“I’m going to the back, and I’ll meet you in the middle.”

“Race?”

“So competitive.” She grinned. “Deal.”

He had the upper hand in special knowledge, but it didn’t mean anything on her agility. She had damn tiny fingers and spindles for arms. Before he could get to the halfway mark, she was lapping him.

“Don’t forget the bottom rail.”

“Son of a bitch.”

Her laugh was infectious, and he found himself tangling around her to get the bottom rail done.

“Unfair!” She dissolved into giggles as he wound the cardboard around her hips and pulled it under a post, effectively trapping her into the lights.

“Now that’s my kind of decorating.”

She looked down at her waist and thighs, then back up at him. “Don’t you usually like to tie up my wrists?”

He stopped and groaned. “That’s playing dirty, Sunshine.”

She held out her hands, and without a word he wound the lights around her gloved wrists. The train of lights pooled at their feet, flooding the floor with a rainbow of colors.

He pulled her linked hands up and ducked until they were around his neck. Her eyes were hooded with awareness. He nuzzled his nose against hers, keeping his mouth just out of reach. Breathing her in, then breathing out into her mouth, he kept them both on the edge. Not quite touching, not quite apart. He brushed the bow of her top lip with his lower lip. The flick of her tongue urged him to stop the teasing, but he wanted to draw out the pleasure.

He couldn’t let it be more than a kiss, but he was starved for her touch. He had to savor this.

KENDALL ROSE ONTO her toes and tried to get him to kiss her. Really kiss her like he’d done at the truck when they’d gotten the tree, but Shane was determined to tease her out of her mind.

The day had been full of flirtation, mixed messages, and that undeniable

fairy dust that blew between them when skin-on-skin contact happened. She wanted to swallow all of it whole and move the emptiness out of the pit of her stomach.

Finally he traced the seam of her mouth with his tongue and gently, thoroughly, tasted her. The lingering tang of his beer and the underlying flavor of pure Shane burned her tongue. He sipped from her, bit her lower lip, and infused every part of his taste into her mouth.

She sagged against him. If she hadn't had the lights to keep her hands together, she would have slid into a boneless heap of pleasure at his feet. He held on, humming into her mouth as she cupped the back of his head and lifted the cap off.

His hair was longer now, and the silky strands fluttered between her fingers. She stroked her tongue along his, flicking the roof of his mouth and ending on a scrape of teeth over his lower lip.

The kiss gentled until his forehead pressed to hers. She couldn't move her hips thanks to the tangle of lights. So when he ducked under her bound arms and stepped away, she had no choice but to stay where she was.

“Want to help a girl out?”

Shane shook his head and paced to the end of the deck and back. “Give me a second.”

She slowly blinked the haze of his kiss away. They were just gearing up for more, right? She used her teeth to unwind her wrists until she could slip free. The hard ridge of his cock under the Carhartt pants he was wearing told her he wanted her just as much. She frowned as he took a long circuit around the entire porch and came back.

When he was before her, the hard-on was still blatant, but the wildness was missing from his eyes. He'd stepped back as if he couldn't bear to touch her.

“Are you testing me or something?”

“What?” Shane stopped pacing and stood in front of her.

“We've done a helluva lot more than kissing, Shane. Why are you walking off your hard-on?”

“Because you're going to go inside and trim the tree with your mom, and I'm going to go work on my koa wood table. And we're not going to mess everything up with sex again.”

Gobsmacked, she managed to squeak, “Never?”

He picked up his hat off the deck. “At least for now.”

“And why do you get to make this rule?”

“I get near you, and I can’t think.”

Thinking was highly overrated. The attraction between them was just part of the love she already felt for him. She’d been in the safe kind of love before. It was warm and reassuring and lovely. But it paled in comparison to what she felt with Shane.

“I don’t want to go back to how we were this past month.”

He shook his head. “Neither do I.”

“But you don’t want to have sex with me either?” It killed her to phrase it that way. She wanted to make love with him. Wanted to shout it out and shock him. But somehow she knew that was a bad idea. Spouting out words of love after such a short time would make him turn tail and run.

“I want to boost you up against the siding and sink into you until your brain melts.”

She swallowed. “Good plan.”

“But I won’t disrespect your mother or you like that. Not right now when it’s not just sex for the fun of it.”

“It could be.”

“You don’t believe that any more than I do.”

Her heart tripped and then fluttered madly. “What are you saying?”

“It’s not just sex, Kendall. It hasn’t ever been just sex from the very first day.”

“You’re right.” She closed her eyes against his serious expression. Did he have to look so ominous? Loving her shouldn’t be so grave and sad. It was supposed to be hopeful and amazing.

Why didn’t anything work like it was supposed to between them?

She met his gaze again. “It’s going to be crazy with Mom and I getting ready for the Simmons family anyway.”

“It’s supposed to be warm for the next few days, so I’m going to work on the dock.”

She frowned. “It’s too cold to stain it.”

“I have another idea.”

“Care to share?”

He shrugged. “It’s a surprise.” He leaned down and unplugged the lights, letting her free.

She stepped out of her nest of Christmas lights. “Go ahead. I’ll finish this up.”



“Are you sure?”

She nodded. “Mom made chili, so stop by for a bowl later.”

With the promise of food he gave her a rare smile. “For her chili, I’ll definitely be back.”

Kendall returned the smile. She watched him head down the stairs and back to the warm light of the barn. She slumped into a cross-legged position and set to unknotting the lights.

The next few days were a whirlwind of cleaning, decorating, and readying the house for company. Word of mouth could make or break a B and B, and Kendall wanted to make a good impression.

Poinsettias lined the stairs, and the festive lights glowed against the night. She hung the wreath she’d bought on the door; a few strategic holly berries added just the right touch and countered the fat, sparkly bow.

Brody snored on the deck as she shoveled off the last of the drifting snow. The wind had kicked up after the few days of sun and warmth and brutally reminded them that it was the end of December.

Shane had indeed worked on the dock at the back of the house. He’d built a simple pergola in the middle of the deck. He’d hung thick canvas on two sides for people who wanted to sit out and look at the water but didn’t want to freeze their butts off.

But instead of loungers, he’d built a sturdy bench swing that created a stark and lovely touch at the center of her favorite space. He’d also repaired the snowmobile that had been stored in the shed since last season.

He was tireless. No matter how many tasks her mother found to put on her list, Shane got them done without a complaint. He worked on his furniture late into the night, and Kendall and Shane talked while he sanded or varnished.

He even let her help. Under supervision, of course.

But as promised she didn’t get more than a kiss good night. Sometimes the kiss was an electrical storm leaving her lit up for hours, and sometimes it was sweet and sigh-worthy.

She was frustrated and touched at the same time. She understood they

were getting to know each other, but she had no idea where he got the fortitude to send her off to bed alone every night. Kendall was ready to climb out of her skin.

The Simmons family was coming in the morning, and her mother was making a huge meal for Christmas. The family was staying from Christmas Eve through the New Year.

Good money and with the extra meals, they were definitely going to be making a tidy profit on the visit. Everything was about as perfect as she could make it. So why did she feel so edgy?

The purr of a belt sander lured her into Shane's sanctum. He had a thick leather apron on to combat the dust, but it didn't protect the arms of his shirt. He was covered in a fine powder of pine. He'd gotten a few orders for Adirondack chairs, and she couldn't wait to sit in one once he was finished.

He looked up with a slow smile. "Hey, Sunshine."

Her insides felt like a ray of sunshine when he said it like that. Low, intimate, and playful. A side to Shane she was seeing more and more. "I heard the sander. Figured I'd check in on you."

"Actually, speaking of sander, I found something at the back corner of the shed when I got the snowmobile."

"Dust? A mouse? Maybe even a ghost?"

His lips twitched. "No. Something more interesting."

"Well, lay it on me. I was kind of hoping for a ghost. At least we'd make sure to get in a travel guide with one of those."

He shook his head. "An old mahogany headboard."

"That's better than a ghost?"

"You know how much mahogany costs?"

"I'll give you that one. Probably expensive, huh?"

"Just a bit."

Kendall hopped up onto his metal desk, swinging her legs. "What are you going to do with it?"

"Haven't figured it out yet. Just wanted to make sure it wasn't a family heirloom or anything before I took it apart and fixed it."

"Go forth and be carpentry."

He rolled his eyes. "Do you want to ask your mom?"

"No, it was from an old bed when we moved into the house."

"Wow, older than I thought."

"Is that a carpenter hard-on I see in your eyes, Shane?"

He stood up and brushed off the dust and shavings before hanging the heavy apron on the hook by the door. “Not a carpenter hard-on.”

“Oh?”

He angled in between her knees and brushed the tips of his fingers along her spine. “Nope.”

Enjoying the playful side of him, she leaned in and nipped his lower lip. Instead of the usual teasing torment, Shane caught her mouth in a sinfully full-on kiss. He ate at her lips, dissolving her brain as he opened her wide and took what he wanted.

They were both breathing heavy by the time he took a step back. She curled her fingers into the edge of the desk and moaned. “Can’t you break your rule?”

He shook his head and took another step, then turned toward the open door, and she could see him drinking in the cool night. She let her chin drop to her chest before she hopped down and crossed the room to slide her arms around him. She pressed her cheek against his hard, muscular back.

He brought her hand up and kissed her palm. “What time are the Simmons coming?”

“Crack of dark.”

He laughed. “So that means you’re actually going to go to bed now?”

She brushed the tip of her nose into the dip of his spine. She was exhausted enough to be able to do just that. But she didn’t want to lose any time with Shane.

“I’ve got hours of work yet, so it’s probably a good thing you’re tired.”

“Don’t you sleep?”

He laughed. “I really don’t need much. Four hours and I’m good.”

“I knew you were superhuman.”

He tugged her under his arm and around in front of him. He dropped a chaste kiss on her lips and turned her toward the night and popped her on the butt. Incredulous, she skipped forward on the momentum. “Good night, babe.”

She trudged across the snow and up the stairs. When she turned back, he stood in the door, but this time he waved before backing away to the golden light spilling around him.

With the dawn came two cars full of the Simmons clan. Her mother hadn’t stopped fussing over towels and linens. She even plumped pillows on the sofa at the sound of gravel popping under tires.

Kendall met them at the door. An older, salt-and-pepper-haired gentleman skipped up the steps, his hand outstretched. “You must be Kendall. I recognize you from your picture on the Web site.”

“Yes, I’m Kendall. Welcome to the Heron.” She stood aside. “This is my mother, Lily.”

“I’m Mark, and this is my wife, Jennifer.” He turned and pointed out the rest of the visitors who were piling onto deck. She hoped to God she’d keep the names straight before the end of the day.

Laurie and Todd, Susan and Scott, and their two teen girls, Micah and Abby, all spoke over each other. Happy laughter and the excited chatter of females oohing about the landscape and lake filled the air.

The teens were unimpressed until she showed them the back. The huge bench swing propelled them both into action.

“Be careful on the water. It’s freezing,” Susan called out.

Kendall smiled. “Don’t worry. The swing’s very sturdy.”

“Should it be so close to the end of the dock?”

Kendall led Susan down the dock. “See, not as close as it seems.”

“Oh, wow.”

Kendall folded her arms. “Beautiful, isn’t it? This is my favorite view.”

“I can see why.” Susan’s face was flushed with cold, and her smooth complexion spoke of days indoors.

Unlike Kendall’s chapped cheeks that wouldn’t stay moisturized this time of year even if she slicked her face with Vaseline.

Susan turned bright blue eyes in her direction. “I can’t wait to see our room. This whole place is so cozy and inviting.”

Kendall smiled and saw even more improvements thanks to Shane’s hand with the landscape. Shoveled walkways, boards replaced, and a few heavy blankets were folded on the chairs scattered around the swing. A bright cobalt-blue-stained Adirondack chair sat in her favorite spot on the deck.

She swallowed down a lump in her throat and showed Susan and her sister-in-law Jennifer the paths along the back of the house that hugged the lake.

Half an hour later she had all the couples divvied up on the second floor and the teens a few doors down. She remembered what it was like to be fifteen and on the cusp of independence.

She found her mother in the kitchen pulling two coffee cakes out of the oven with one already cooling on the table. “Smells amazing, Mom.”

“I want you to take half of that one to Shane. I saw all he did outside early this morning even before we were up. He might be antisocial, but he likes my coffee cake.”

Kendall laughed. Shane certainly had disappeared the minute the cars had come up the drive. She’d thought he was sleeping, but the plowed drive said otherwise. She wrapped half of the cake in tinfoil and kissed her mom on the cheek. “The Simmonses are getting situated, and I know that Todd and Mark were already looking for coffee.”

Lily nodded to the large coffee dispenser and a row of mugs. “All ready for them.”

“You are a wonder, Lily Proctor.”

“I know.”

Kendall shook her head and escaped through the back door, crossing the lawn to Shane’s domain. The whir of a drill and the scent of the strong brew he called coffee met her at the door. He was crouched beside the table, clamping a vise across the span of rich wood. With a deft hand he smoothed thin slats of the koa wood along the middle of the table, giving it a distinct stripe.

“It’s gorgeous.”

He looked up, then quickly away. “Thanks.”

The man was really bad at taking a compliment when it came to his art. She held up the foil package. “Mom sent this.”

He quirked a brow. “Coffee cake?”

“You’ve got her wrapped, Oscar.”

He took the pastry. “I had to put up a heavy bag out back.” He patted his belly. “Your mother’s going to give me a spare tire.”

She doubted it. The man was nothing but sinew and muscle under the layers he always wore. She walked around the table and slid her finger over the glass-smooth finish of the table. “I saw the Adirondack chair you left out there.”

He shrugged. “You kept stroking the one I made for a client. I figured you wanted one.”

“Did it hurt your heart to stain it blue?”

“A little.” He leaned against the table and crossed his arms over his powerful chest. His arms seemed larger, if that was at all possible. From all the labor he’d been doing on the Heron? Or maybe that heavy bag?

She curled her fingers under the fuzzy mittens she wore. “Well, I love it.”

You didn't have to do that, though. I know what a good price you can get for them."

"It makes the dock look good."

"I'll be sure to think that when I sit with a cup of coffee later."

He stood up straight and walked to her. He swiped the pad of his thumb along her lower lip. "Merry Christmas, Kendall."

"I...I didn't get you anything."

"I don't need anything."

"Will you be coming over for dinner tonight?"

"I'm not big for crowds. Looks like you've got your hands full at the house."

Disappointed but not surprised, she looked up at him. "Mom's doing the whole turkey deal. I'll put a plate aside for you."

He lifted the end of her braid and stroked the tail around his finger. "Appreciate it."

She swallowed. He smelled like snow and sawdust, and she wanted to curl right into his chest. But she had a ton of things to do, and now wasn't the time to look for a cuddle. "I better get back."

He set her braid against her jacket. "See ya, Sunshine."

Kendall turned and forced one foot in front of the other. Under two layers and a jacket, her nipples were so tight they were painful. The man was driving her nuts.

She threw herself into the Christmas Eve preparation but never did get back to her chair that day or that night. The Simmons family were laid-back and fun. The house was filled with conversation and the wreckage of a huge meal.

Micah and Abby kept wandering outside. Considering how many times they checked out the barn, she figured they'd caught sight of Shane. No matter how heavy his beard got, you couldn't take away the slicing arch of his cheekbones and the flash of amazing eyes.

The man was walking sin, and if she were fifteen, she'd be swooning just like the girls. Hell, she was a moment away from a good sigh herself. Especially when she'd brought the plate over to him only to hear him pounding the holy hell out of his homemade bag.

She'd peeked around the back and glimpsed a sweat-soaked back and fist-sized dents in the old canvas army bag. Already too keyed up, she'd left before he'd seen her.

As tired as everyone was from their drive, they stayed up well past two a.m. talking and laughing by the fire. She didn't have anything else in her but to check out for a few hours.

Christmas Day was filled with a quieter group. The girls went exploring on the trails, the sun shining and not a cloud in the sky. She caught a rather randy Jennifer and Mark in the hallway, both of them sneaking back into their room while everyone else was outside.

At least someone was getting laid.

She and her mother managed a quiet hour when the family went out to drive around the neighborhood. They exchanged small gifts and ate leftovers before putting in a quick cleanup.

By the time the family got back, they were filled with laughter and excitement. Lake George was close and always put on a good Christmas display. They'd also bought lift tickets for skiing close by.

Both her mother and Kendall were so busy with the family and another unscheduled visit that every room save one at the B and B was filled through the end of the month.

She didn't know what magic Shane had put into the Web site, but every time she remembered to look at it, she was too tired to open her laptop.

New Year's Eve came before she was ready for it, and the entire group had decided to throw an impromptu party. Her mother scrambled to cook, and Kendall enlisted Bells to help decorate.

Thirty minutes later Kendall opened the door to find Bells on the porch with two dress bags. "An excuse to wear a party dress in Winchester Falls? I'm there, sister."

Kendall frowned. "I was just going to wear jeans."

Bells pushed past her. "I'm definitely going to take away your right to call yourself a girl if you don't make at least an effort to glam up tonight. You've been working like a dog for weeks now."

Kendall flipped her braid over her shoulder and closed the door. "I'm just happy we have customers."

"Me too, babe. But that doesn't mean you can't take a little time and gussy up. Especially when you have that hot piece of action in the barn that needs to grow a clue."

"I knew I shouldn't have called you."

"No, you definitely should have called me. I'm your best defense. Besides, I wield a makeup brush better than anyone at the Macy's counter."

And you have some serious circles that I need to correct.”

That was true. Only Bells could get away with saying it, but it didn't make it any less true. On both counts. “Okay, fairy godmother. I will leave myself in your capable hands.”

Bells spun about, her deep auburn corkscrew curls dancing around her shoulders. Her makeup was already done, and her huge blue eyes were even more pronounced thanks to her deft touch with smoky shadow. “Wait, I didn't have to talk you into it? Okay, it's worse than I thought.”

Kendall turned her toward the stairs. “I'm just tired, and if you have tricks in that huge trunk of makeup you call a to-go bag, then I'm all for slapping on an artificial happy face.”

“All right, don't get pushy. Throw yourself in the shower and use the loofah until you're pink. I brought a sexy lotion to go with your sexy dress.”

“I like my lotion.”

“The girl-next-door thing works three hundred sixty-four days out of the year. Tonight? I'm going with vamp and the scent to match. The boy will be groveling by the time I'm done with him.”

Kendall nibbled on her lower lip. Any help in getting Shane out of the let's-play-it-safe mode was welcome. She wanted the hot, hard length of him between her thighs tonight. Or that relentlessly patient tongue—she wasn't picky which one she got at the moment.

“Don't blow up my bedroom.”

“Oh, honey. There's no doubt that your room will be trashed. It's a freaking closet.”

She sighed and grabbed one of the fluffy towels from the linen closet and allowed herself a ten-minute shower. And because it was a good idea to use the loofah, she listened to her friend and exfoliated until her skin buzzed.

Kendall wrapped her hair up in a towel and brought her hair dryer with her. Bells was on a rampage. Might as well just let her take care of everything. When she was in steamroller mode, there was no stopping her.

Bells had pulled her bed out into the middle of the tiny room and left leg space to walk around. Two garment bags hung from the door, and her best friend's makeup bag had exploded across Kendall's bed.

“Here.” Bells handed her a thin tube of lotion.

“That's it?”

“It's very special, very expensive lotion.”

“Then you should wear it.”



“Oh, I am. A different scent, of course, but I am.” She held her wrist up to Kendall’s nose.

The rush of dark and exotic flowers and a hint of jasmine wafted over her. “Oh, wow, how come you get the delicious one?”

“Smell yours.”

Kendall popped the cap and rubbed a little on her pulse point. Orange blossoms and spice clung to her, leaving a light pearly sheen to her skin. “No wonder it’s pricey.”

“Worth it for a special occasion. Now sit down and let me make you a girl.”

“I am a girl. Just a busy one who doesn’t care about this stuff.”

“New Year’s Eve is the night to get in the mood. Besides, I have to keep my talents fresh.”

Kendall knew her friend was just trying to make her feel better, so she sat down and let Bells fuss.

“Now tell me what’s been going on.”

“Lots of hostess stuff.”

“I don’t care about the Heron crap, Ken. I want to know about the hunky carpenter dude. Why didn’t you tell me this guy was beautiful? I had to find out when I walked up the drive.”

“He actually came out of his workshop?”

“Yeah, he was shoveling or something. I saw two girls giggling from the window.”

Kendall laughed. “We’ve got a couple of teenagers who are totally crushing on Shane. He’s so uncomfortable.”

“Not used to being objectified? Close your eyes.”

Kendall did as directed. “He’s not a fan of big crowds. Especially when there’s a surplus of females. He’s gone out on the trails with a couple of the husbands, but other than that, he likes to stay in the background.”

“Is he shy?”

“No, more like antisocial. His nickname is Oscar for a reason.”

“And you’re in love with him?”

“Afraid so.”

“I know I said he’s your match, and it’s obvious he is—somehow. But he doesn’t sound like your type.”

“I know. He really isn’t. But I love that he’s so gruff. It’s even better when I manage to get him to laugh or smile.”

“If you say so.”

The conversation dropped as Bells hit her hair with the dryer and followed up with the curling iron. She swept the mass of curls over her shoulder, leaving one side sleek.

A fat brush distributing powder over her cheeks was the last step.

“Okay, now I don’t want you to say anything. Just put the dress on.”

“Oh, God. What did you bring?”

Bells looked down at her more than ample chest. “Well, not one of mine, obviously.”

Kendall snorted.

“Now don’t get all uppity. I got a ridiculous deal on it. Not many people in Winchester Falls are a size puny like you are.”

Bells was a bit on the lush side, but she embraced her body. She liked being a bombshell and used every inch of her God-given curves to make men beg. And they usually did.

Kendall opened the first bag and found a slinky teal number.

“That one’s mine.”

Thank God. She was sure that would just fall around her like a tent. Kendall went to the next bag and unzipped. “You’ve got to be kidding.”

# NINETEEN

Shane smoothed his hand down the buttons of his white dress shirt. The house was teeming with people, some guests and some friends from town. He recognized people from his trips into the lumber store, market, and diner.

Lily had nagged him and threatened to drag his butt over to the house if he didn't make an appearance. Because it was good business, for both Avery Furniture and the Heron, he agreed to at least show up for a few minutes.

He forced himself not to roll his eyes when the two girls started giggling and watching his every move from the porch. For Christ's sake, he was way too old for them. He slipped in the open back door and grazed at the assorted appetizers table.

He snagged a beer from one of the tubs under the table and snicked the top off for a long sip only to choke.

Kendall came around the corner, a wineglass in her hand and miles of pale flesh on display. One shoulder was completely bare. Some sort of shimmery dress draped across her chest and arms. It was like liquid silver over smoke. The dangerous part was the skirt that molded her hips and stopped a good five inches above her goddamn knees.

Her legs were bare, and strappy black mile-high heels tightened her calves. She'd done something to her face. Her dark eyes looked like aged bourbon, and her lips were slick with gloss.

She was so fucking beautiful she made his brain slow to a stop. She held out her hands to someone and leaned up to give him a kiss.

That Brandon guy.

Brandon's hand landed on her lower back, and Shane snapped the beer down on the table, wading into the half dozen people between them. Brandon

left his hand on her, and Shane bit back a growl.

Before he could make it to her, a commotion at the front of the house brought him up short. Kendall's friend was holding open the door, her head tipped back and her hands on her hips.

"Well, son of a bitch," Shane said.

A handful of people turned to Shane as he changed course and went to the door. "What the hell are you doing here?"

Kain ducked inside the door, his mile-wide shoulders clad in a custom-made pearl gray suit. Kain didn't have a choice; whether he was wealthy or not, his body was far too large for off-the-rack suits.

Kendall gave a happy laugh and zipped by Shane to throw her hands up and around Kain's shoulders.

"Hey there, `ânela."

Bells stared at them both. "You know this guy?"

Kendall hopped down and dragged Bells over. "Belinda Grayson, meet Kainoa N'ai."

"Kain," his friend said, his deep baritone cutting through the chatter of the room. People started whispering among themselves.

Bells held out her hand and shook his best friend's hand quickly before tucking it behind her back. Kain frowned and dipped his hand into his pocket.

Shane slapped Kain on the shoulder. "I didn't know you were coming."

"It was a last-minute decision."

Bells looked from Kain to Shane and back. "Do they grow them all this good-looking in California?"

Kain grinned down at Bells. "They do in Hawaii anyway."

"I have got to get out of Winchester Falls more."

Kain's gaze slid over her bare shoulders. "Say the word, and I'll fuel up the jet."

Bells sidled over to Kendall, her smile a little wicked and a little uncertain at the same time. "I'll remember that."

"All right, Kain. Enough showing off for my best friend."

"Who's showing off?"

"Let's get you a beer." Shane steered Kain over to the table full of food. He looked over his shoulder at Kendall again, but she was deep in conversation with Bells.

"Nice digs," Kain said mildly.

"We're getting there." Done with small talk, he handed his friend a beer.

“What the hell are you doing here?”

“Good to see you too, brother. Merry Christmas. Happy New Year.”

“Yeah, yeah.”

Kain chuckled, taking a drink. “Kendall told me to come out for the holiday, so here I am.”

“Why didn’t you call me? I would have met you at the airport or something.”

“I wasn’t sure I could get away. I had to make a few appearances at some parties in the city. Then I took the chopper up here.”

“Oh yeah, just took the chopper. You’re such show-off.”

Kain belted back his beer and reached for another. “I needed some time away from the home office.”

“Well, I’m glad to see you.”

“So how’s everything going with Kendall and the business?”

Shane shrugged. “There’s a lot of repairs that need to be done. I’m still trying to decide if the place is worth working on or if we should sell. A developer would love all this acreage.”

Kain nodded. “I know of at least three companies looking to acquire land near the Adirondacks.”

“Yeah?”

“Companies are buying up land cheap and putting together resorts and spas in nice remote spots like this.”

“I’m not looking to sell it on the cheap. I’d like to know what the land is worth at the very least.”

“I’ll set it up.”

Kain stood beside him and looked over the crowd of people. Kendall’s laugh drew their attention. Shane’s shoulders instantly tensed as two men drew Kendall and her friend into the small group of people dancing.

“Are you sure you want to sell at all, Shane? It looks like you have a good life out here.”

He’d been so focused on getting the repairs done to make the Heron profitable, but the last week with Kendall had been more about living in the present than chasing a future. And anything he’d envisioned included the Heron lately.

“I was actually hoping to come here and see that you were miserable so I could convince you to sell and come back to California.” Kain nudged him. “You look surly, but I think that’s more for the hot dress she’s wearing and

the dude who's trying to dance with her."

Kendall was swaying her hips in time to the music, and Brandon was consistently offbeat. She raised her arms, and her skirt lifted another fraction of an inch.

"Don't kill him. I don't want to spend New Year's in jail."

"A well-placed rock tied around his waist, and I could lose him in the middle of the lake. It's supposed to be cold tomorrow night. I'm sure that last bit will freeze over."

Kain laughed and slapped him on the back. "As I said, you look happy."

He had a steady bit of cash coming in from his furniture, but instead of putting it back into the business, he kept buying lumber for repairs on the Heron. He always had enough for the next project under Avery, but he wasn't getting ahead.

Did he really want to keep hoping they'd become solvent?

Kendall clapped and laughed, her head tipping back in pure enjoyment.

For her, he was pretty sure he'd be willing to take that chance.

"Well, go get her."

Without a backward glance, Shane plowed through the crowd. The entire room parted, but he had a feeling it had more to do with Kain bringing up the rear than his determined face.

He stood before Kendall, his chest heaving and the dozen people shifting to make room for him.

Kendall reached up and played with the open button of his shirt. "I thought you didn't dance."

The next song was slower. Dashboard Confessional's haunting acoustic harmonies and the whispery voice of the lead singer salted the room. He hooked his arm around her waist, dragging her into him. "I don't."

"I'm not ready to leave the dance floor."

"I didn't say we were leaving."

She settled her hands against his shoulders and slid her knee between his as they swayed. "You were very rude to Brandon."

"He'll get over it."

She peered around him. "Should I worry about Kain?"

"Should I worry about Bells?"

"Yes."

Shane let out a quick bark of laughter. "Nice."

"Her signature song is 'Barracuda.' Does that say anything?"

“You’re lying.”

“Maybe.”

He skimmed his palm along the barely-there fabric at her back. From across the room it was dangerous enough, but up close, he saw just how transparent it was. There was some sort of slip thing beneath it, but a man had to be paying attention to see it.

“I was tempted to tie a boulder to Brandon and toss him in the lake.”

“What?” She laughed up at him. “Why?”

“Because he was looking at you like you were the most appetizing thing in the entire room.”

“And that’s bad?”

“Hell no. You’re the most beautiful woman in the room. Period.”

Her eyes widened. “Oh.”

Pretty words didn’t come easy to him, but he wanted to find them for her. Loving her was one of the easiest and hardest things he’d ever done.

“Hey, you guys,” Bells yelled from the corner of the room. She was standing on a chair, her hand on Kain’s shoulder. Kain was grinning up at her. “It’s countdown time!”

“Uh-oh.”

Shane looked down at her. “What?”

“I hope Kain’s ready for Bells. I have a feeling she’s going to plant one on him.”

“Yeah?” He grinned. It would serve Kain right if Bells shook him up. Kain was far too used to getting whatever he wanted. “I think he can handle it. Besides, I’m only interested in planting one on you.”

“Is that right?”

Chants of twenty, nineteen, eighteen blurred in his mind as he lowered his mouth to hers. He couldn’t wait until the final countdown to one. Her usual apple flavor was missing. In its place was the heady scent of flowers that matched her petal-soft lips. He’d meant to keep the kiss easy and gentle, but when her arms wound around his neck and she slipped her fingers through his hair, he lost himself in her.

She tasted of sweet wine and Kendall. He bent her back with the force of the kiss, and he didn’t give a good goddamn about the whooping crowd. He lifted her off her feet, slanting his mouth along hers.

The room erupted into laughter, the crank of cheap New Year’s toys, and paper trumpets. He set her down, and she backed her way through the people,

only eyes for him. She led him upstairs.

There were people on the stairs taking advantage of the shadows. He and Kendall wove around them and up to the second floor. She took a right and then a left down a skinny hallway that led to a tiny room.

He frowned. "Is this your room?" It was a closet. Not an exaggeration. The room couldn't be formally named a bedroom.

"I gave up my bedroom for B and B space. I only crash here. It's going to be a bit of a tight fit, but we're used to tight fits, aren't we, Oscar?"

Instead of focusing on what her room lacked, he zeroed in on the long, skinny mattress. She scooted back on the bed. Her shoulder glittered in the dim light of her bedside lamp. The large keyhole cutout between her breasts showed curves unencumbered by a bra.

He nosed the material aside, sliding his knee between her legs as he pressed her into the bed. Groaning against her tight little nipple, he twirled his tongue around the tip.

Her nails scraped along his scalp as she shifted under him until the zipper of his dress pants met with her panties. He tugged the stretchy material of her skirt up, anxious to touch her. For the last week he'd contented himself with kisses, determined to see if there was more than just sex between them.

At this point he wasn't sure if the passion fed the love or the love fed the passion. All he knew was that he was tired of questioning it.

She reached between them and unhooked a tiny clasp, and the dress fell open enough for him to get full access to her breast. He brushed his chin along the fullest part of her breast, staring up at her as he blew on her nipple.

Kendall bowed up under him. He used the movement to slip under her panties and tease his knuckles along her swollen center.

"God, Sunshine."

She dragged his mouth up to hers, cupping his face in both her hands with just the slightest space between their mouths. "I love you, Oscar. I needed to say it. I know it's still so complicated, and we're not sure what's going to happen, but I needed you to know that it's not just about the Heron anymore."

Humbled and at a loss for words, he opened his mouth, but she closed her lips over his.

He held on to her. The words were still lodged in his chest, but knowing he wasn't the only one hopelessly tangled increased his aggressive nature. He pushed the stretchy dress up her body and over her head, leaving her with just



shoes and panties on in the middle of her postage stamp-sized bed.

He gathered her hands together; anchoring her wrists between his long fingers, he drew them up and over her head. With his other hand he tucked a knuckle under the hood of her pussy.

Eyes locked with hers, he stroked her relentlessly as he held her down. She was restless under his touch; gasps and moans were lost against the skin of her arm as she turned her face to muffle the sounds of her pleasure.

He scraped his teeth over the fullness of her breasts that were plumped up in that position. With one finger, then another, he opened her wider.

His name was a whimper, a whisper, a plea as he brought her to the edge, then backed off. His own pleasure was behind glass, throbbing just on the other side—waiting to erupt.

He leaned up. The buttons of his dress shirt dragged against her skin as he transferred his mouth to hers and pumped his fingers inside her. She screamed into his mouth. Her fingers shook under his grip. He could feel the maddening thrum of her heart against his chest and under his palm at her wrist.

Jerking his buckle open, he released the strap of his belt and unzipped. She rolled her hips, seeking him. He had to get inside her, needed to feel her close around him and let the world make sense again.

He needed to show her how much she meant to him, the only way he knew how.

Cheek to cheek, he panted against her ear as he finally slid into her. Where he belonged. The tumblers shot together to unlock his grieving heart and give it the chance to love again.

“Mine. Always,” he whispered in her ear.

He let her hands go, and she surrounded him—a full-body clasp that felt more like home than anything he’d ever experienced.

And he trusted her to be everything he needed as he found his release inside her body.

Kendall glided her calf along the inside of his thigh. He was still wearing his dress pants, shirt, and shoes. She, however, was naked, save her heels. And

she felt glorious.

For the first time the clawing worry about the Heron faded into the background. She was lying beside the man she loved. The same man she'd actually told, and he hadn't run like his ass was on fire.

No, he'd loved her until her eyes were crossed. He'd whispered that she was his, and he was stretched out underneath her, as relaxed as any sated man should be.

Everything was perfect for one moment.

And she had a whole new year ahead of her to see just what kind of amazing future they might have together.

She inched up until she could bury her face against his neck. She could taste the salt of his skin; the soft bristles of his beard teased her lips. His cedar-chip scent was even more pronounced.

"I have to go back downstairs, you know."

He grunted.

She smiled into his neck. "Everyone is going to know I went upstairs to get laid."

"Good, then maybe that Brandon kid will stop fucking flirting with you."

She propped herself up on her elbow. "Why does it bother you? I don't want anyone except you. Isn't that enough?"

Shane slid his hand down her back and cupped her ass. "I'll try to curb my murderous thoughts."

"You trust me, right?"

He brushed the side of his thumb along a lock of hair that escaped her pins. "You have too much integrity to cheat."

The little ripple of warmth that always came when he got jealous glowed hotter. "Then why do you get upset?"

"Because I'm a guy, and I know what kind of thoughts they're having. And I don't like it."

She shook her head. It didn't make sense to her, but as long as he didn't do something stupid, there wasn't much she could do about it. She shimmied her way down the bed and picked up her dress. "I'm just going to freshen up."

In the bathroom she repaired her makeup and gave up on trying to control her hair. Instead, she left it down her back. Shane liked it down, and right now she was feeling good enough to give him whatever he wanted.

She returned to her room, and he was looking over her DVD collection.

“So that *Supernatural* crack was true.”

“Yep, I love the boys. You’re a little like Bobby, except your beard is hotter.”

He frowned down at her. “I’m not that grouchy.”

“If you say so.”

He lifted her dress onto her shoulder only to have it drop down her arm again. “It’s made to slip off the shoulder.”

He dropped a kiss on the exposed skin. “Come on, then, before Lily comes up here and bangs on the door.” He shook his head.

“What?”

“I feel like when I was seventeen and snuck my girlfriend past my dad to stay overnight.”

Delighted, she went on her tiptoes and kissed his scowling mouth. “I think I like that you’re feeling a little guilty.”

He hooked his arm around her neck and led her out into the hallway. The party was still going full swing downstairs. As soon as she got to the bottom of the landing, Bells dragged her around the corner and out onto the porch.

Shane waved at her and wandered off. Probably to find Kain.

“What the heck, Bells?”

“You leave me down here with that...that...that man while you go upstairs for a booty call?”

Startled at the wide-eyed panic in her friend’s eyes, she clutched her hands. “What happened?”

“He kissed me. That’s what happened.”

“Well, it is New Year’s. Lots of kissing happens. Even between strangers.”

“I intended on kissing him. That’s not the problem. I was on the chair and was going to plant a good kiss on him. You know, my second-date kiss?”

Kendall swallowed a laugh. Her friend was obviously gearing up for a story. “Impressive. The second-date kiss doesn’t come out all that often these days.”

“I know. But he’s friggin’ gorgeous, and I thought, hey, why not? I should bring out my A-game.”

“So you think he’s attractive.”

“Did you fall on your head upstairs?” She lowered her voice to a whisper. “Did he fuck you into the headboard one too many times?”

Kendall felt the blush flame her face. “No.”

“No, he didn’t fuck you into the headboard?”

“Oh, he did. Kind of. He likes to hold me down, so I don’t tend to do too much in the way of head banging.”

Bells’s blue eyes widened. “He likes to what?”

Kendall smirked. “You were telling a story?”

“You can’t distract me with good sex stories right now. My brain is pudding.”

“Sounds like you have a good kiss story. So why are you so mad at him?”

“I was getting to it.”

She didn’t mean to laugh at her friend, but Bells was a little melodramatic sometimes. “Please, go on.”

“Anyway, there I was ready to do damage, and he lifts me right off the chair and kisses me. Not just any kiss. The perfect kiss. The kind with just the right amount of tongue and lips and heat. A kiss to friggin’ end all kisses.”

“Sounds like my kind of kiss.”

“No, that’s not the kind of kiss I want from a man who just puts me down like it didn’t matter one bit. Like he kisses every woman like that.”

Kendall winced. “I’m sorry, Bells.”

Her best friend sagged against the door leading to the porch. “I’ve kissed a lot of guys. Some have been almost there. Some I’ve even thought knew how to kiss perfectly. But Kain leaves them all in the dust.”

“So what are you going to do about it?”

“Ignore him.”

“Belinda Grayson.”

“Hey, he’s going to get on his fancy jet and head back to California. I don’t need bicoastal grief in my life.”

Kendall hugged her. “I’m sorry you had to find the killer kiss in someone who’s not amazing enough to figure out it was magic.”

Bells shrugged and pulled back. “The only thing that sucks is I can’t kiss anyone for a long time. They’re all going to pale in comparison until I put it out of my mind.”

Bells was a serial dater. She didn’t often let it go beyond a few steamy kisses, and she was a fountain of information about dating, but she was rarely without male companionship.

“I feel like I should say I’m sorry again. He’s a friend of mine.”

“I won’t hold it against you. Especially if you give me details on the part about Shane holding you down.”

“What more do you need?”

“I’m usually too much of a control freak to let a guy hold me down. I don’t know if that turns me on or if I’d freak out and deck the guy.”

“I went with turned on. Triple time.”

Bells groaned. “You are a bad woman. Very bad, and I’m very proud of you. But I gotta get out of here and shower off all the humanity that manhandled me at New Year’s.”

“Happy New Year, Bells.”

“Ditto, Ken.”

After walking Bells to the door, she searched out her mother. Lily was in a small circle of friends, so she just stopped in and kissed her cheek and wished the group a Happy New Year.

She showed people out and collected keys from a few who were well beyond the sober status. Luckily everyone found a ride home with friends and neighbors.

When the final guest was tucked upstairs and Lily had gone to find her bed, she changed into jeans and a sweater before she headed to the workshop.

Expecting to find the guys sitting around one of Shane’s tables, she was surprised to see the room was empty. She heard dull thuds and followed the sounds to the back of the barn. Shane held the heavy canvas bag as Kain pummeled it with vicious, bare-knuckled jabs.

Kain’s shirt was off, and sweat beaded on his skin, sparkling under the bright three-quarter moon. His chest was smooth, and a tribal tattoo covered one pec. She couldn’t catch the details in the dark, but it was large, black, and detailed.

“Everything okay here?”

Shane turned around, holding the bag with his back. “Kain’s had a rough week. Figured bloodying his knuckles would help a little bit.”

“Is it working?”

Kain increased his blows. “If you see Shane without a bruise or fat lip by morning, it worked.”

“Is frustration part of this equation?” she asked sweetly.

Shane stumbled forward at the one-two combo. “Do you still have an open room at the main house?”

“That’s what I came over to tell you. Kain can stay in the Navy Room when he goes down for the count.”

“Thanks, babe.”

She frowned at Kain one last time and waved. Tired didn't even cover it. She was ready to pull her blankets up to her chin and blink out.

The next morning was pure chaos. The Simmons family was heading out, as were the older couple who had shown up midweek. Kain was gone before she'd gotten up. His room was barely disturbed, but there was a depression in the pillow to let her know he'd at least attempted sleep.

Not to mention an envelope with far too much money in it inside her drop box at the main desk. Triple her nightly stay rate along with a note telling her if she was going to be stubborn about the money, to send the rest to charity.

She wasn't quite as prideful as Shane and happily added it to the receipts. The next few weeks would be light. People were recovering from the holidays and didn't have the extra money to stay at a B and B.

It was well after two by the time all the cars finally left. She and her mother sagged to the kitchen table.

"Were there bribes on that Web site? How on earth did we get so many people in here at the last minute?"

"That's a very good question." Kendall stood and pulled out her laptop. She'd brought it down from her room days ago to check the site, but their guests kept her so busy she hadn't been able to actually open the stupid thing.

"What's the story with Kain and Bells?"

Kendall slid a glance at her mother. "Evidently he kissed the stuffing out of her, and instead of enjoying the moment, Bells got pissed off."

"I would have enjoyed it."

"Mom!"

"I'm not dead, Kendall. He's hot."

"Were you hanging out with Micah and Abby?"

Her mother chuckled. "Those girls reminded me of you and Bells when you were younger."

"We didn't have that kind of eye candy."

"No, but you both would chatter about rock stars and actors with the same exuberance. Besides, you don't need to do the big sighs. You have your very own man now."

Kendall shifted restlessly in her chair and focused on the computer booting up. “I don’t know what you mean.”

“I’ve noticed this thing going on between you and Shane. So has everyone else. And if I hadn’t known about it before, that kiss on New Year’s set the entire town on fire.”

“Oh, for God’s sakes. Don’t people have other things to talk about?”

“Not really.”

“It’s complicated.”

“I’m sure some of it isn’t.”

Kendall’s eyes widened. “Are you serious with this?”

Lily shrugged. “I’m here to talk if you need to.”

Relieved that her mother didn’t seem to have anything else to add, she brought up the site. The entire top of the site was transformed into a winter landscape that would do a Hallmark card proud. The angle of the picture invited a visitor into the Web site, and the gallery showed all the new things Shane had added as well as updated photos that were a helluva lot more high quality than she’d been able to take with her camera.

The rest of the information lay untouched, but the few changes were perfect. He really had come in and taken over in tiny ways. Not enough for her or her mother to take notice, but on the whole he’d done nothing but improve the Heron.

He’d also added links to travel sites that now had them listed on their registries. That must have been how the Simmonses had found them.

“Can I check my e-mail?”

Kendall nodded at her mother’s request and stood. “I’m going to go find Shane.”

“Okay. I’m going to run a couple loads of laundry and relax. We’ve got time before we have to pull all the rooms apart.”

Kendall went out the back door and across the lawn before she noticed his truck was gone. Instead of returning inside, she brewed a mug of coffee from his Keurig, touched to see her flavored coffees in his stack of K-Cups, and brought it out to sit on the Adirondack chair.

She curled into an oversize blanket from the small chest he’d built next to the pergola. The lake was too large to fully ice over, but this part of the inlet was good for fishing. Petey, ever the opportunist, swooped in and perched at the end of the dock. His blue and silvery feathers ruffled a few times before he folded his massive wings against his back.

She wasn't sure how long she was out there when she heard booted footfalls.

Shane crouched next to her. "Nice to see you actually sitting for a change." He leaned in, and it felt natural to lose herself in his sweet kiss. "At least the flavored crap you like tastes good this way."

Chuckling, she held out her empty mug. "It would taste even better with a refill."

"Only because I want a cup too."

She looked over her shoulder at his truly excellent backside, then cuddled back into her blanket. He returned a few minutes later and scooped her out of the chair. "Hey! I was all comfy."

He sat back down with her on his lap, and she situated herself, noticing the chair was indeed a little bigger than the average Adirondack chair. Not quite big enough for two, but he must have had this in mind when building it.

The warm glow she'd been riding since last night grew.

He set her mug in her hands, and both of them sat quietly. She didn't realize she'd been looking for this all her life.



# TWENTY

Kendall dragged the two winterized loungers in next to the swing and her favorite chair to tarp against the wind coming off the lake. The forecast called for a hammer of a nor'easter, and she didn't want them damaged in the icy mix that was headed their way.

She heard the *pop* of tires over gravel and snapped her last bungee cord around the chairs, securing them to the pergola. The truck wasn't one she recognized. Shane was out of town delivering the huge koa dining set he'd finally finished and wouldn't be back until morning.

"Hello?"

"Hi." Kendall jogged to the end of the dock. "Can I help you?"

The man held out his hand. Kind brown eyes smiled down at her. "I'm Andrew Clark. A Shane Justice asked me to come out and survey the land for an appraisal."

The shock of his statement had her hand falling limply from his grasp. The wind picked up, slapping a gust along her back. "Of course. I didn't know you were coming."

"I actually wasn't due to come until next week, but I was in the area and hoped to get it out of the way if that was okay with you."

"Sure." It felt like she was talking through half-frozen molasses. "Let me grab my jacket." She walked woodenly to the main house. She and Shane had been getting along so well. The last week had been a dream—loving Shane through the night, both of them working on individual projects during the day.

She'd even updated one of the bathrooms thanks to Kain's generous tip. There had been no more talk of selling the Heron.

“Kendall?” Her mother rushed forward. “What’s wrong?”

“I...I can’t talk about it. I have to go outside and take the appraiser around the property.”

“Appraiser? What for?”

“Evidently Shane’s still interested in selling.”

Lily shook her head firmly. “No. He’s worked too hard on everything to just sell it. *We’ve* worked too hard to sell it now.”

The numbness coated her chest and flowed out until all she could think about was how cold she was. “I was wrong.” How could she have been so clueless? She’d thought they were working toward building a life at the Heron.

She’d told him she loved him.

But he hadn’t said it back, had he? He’d taken her in that rough, possessive way that had been a part of Shane since they met. But he’d never said the words.

Kendall took her Carhartt jacket off the peg and pulled on her snow boots, gloves, and hat without thinking about matching. Just getting warm. She forced on a smile and met Mr. Clark at the end of the driveway.

“Are you appraising the house as well?”

“No, just the land for now. Mr. Justice wanted to see what the land was worth.”

*“The property is worth more than this entire operation, so you’re damn right I want to sell. I will be selling.”*

The memory of Shane’s words slapped at her.

“Right. Well, let’s go see the property line.”

“I have the town plans, but I need to make sure there are no issues. I’ll take some soil and water samples for a few tests and walk the property line.”

She nodded.

“You don’t need to come along if you have things to do.”

“No, that’s fine. I’d like to go with you.” She needed to walk the paths and see for herself just what the Heron was worth. Since obviously that was the only thing Shane really cared about.

She’d know every detail.

Later that night, with her hands around her third cup of tea, she stared out at the icicles forming off the eaves. The ice storm had come in with a vengeance, encrusting the steps, the drive, the dock—everything—in a hard shell of ice.

There was nothing to do but sit and wait for it to stop.

Mr. Clark had told her he would get back to them in a few days with the information.

A few days to know what her heart was worth.

“Honey, come sit down.”

“I think I’m just going to go up and try to get some sleep.”

“You don’t know what Shane’s thinking. Wait until tomorrow to think the worst of things.”

Wait until tomorrow? Her brain hadn’t stopped whirling since the appraiser had shown up. “We have options. Maybe if we sell this place, we can move out to Utah. It really was the most beautiful place I’d ever seen besides Winchester Falls.”

“Kendall…”

She turned to her mother and set her mug down. “We could start over. Find a new place. Hell, the prices outside New York are amazingly different. We could probably buy a bigger place for half the money in Utah.”

Lily stood and pulled Kendall into her arms. Kendall just stood there with her arms at her sides. She didn’t want her mother’s comfort. What she needed to do was figure out a plan. Kendall slipped away from her mother and picked up her cell.

“I have a friend in Utah. I should call her. See if the offer still stands to come out there and live.”

“Kendall, you’re not making any sense. Our friends are here. Why would we leave? Why don’t you just call Shane and ask him?”

“I’ll talk to him when he comes ho—when he gets back tomorrow.”

“There are a million reasons to do an appraisal. You can’t make assumptions.”

*“The property is worth more than this entire operation, so you’re damn right I want to sell. I will be selling.”*

Kendall stopped, meeting her mother’s gaze. “Because he said it. I just didn’t choose to believe him.”

“Are you sure?”

How many times had that same line screamed in her head today?

*“The property is worth more than this entire operation, so you’re damn right I want to sell. I will be selling.”*

“I can’t be here. I don’t know how you stayed here after Lawrence left. How could you stand to be in the same places, see the same spots after loving him?” She slapped her hands over her mouth and saw the stricken look on her mother’s face. “I’m sorry, Mom. I’m so sorry. I didn’t mean to say that.”

Lily blinked back a sheen of tears and sank onto the couch. “Because I loved your father more than he loved me. I didn’t have those kinds of memories. I made a home for Larry and tried to make this house perfect so he wouldn’t leave. I held on to him so tightly that I drove him away.”

Kendall pushed away her own pain and locked it into a box. She was good at stuffing her emotions in boxes when she needed to. She sat next to her mother and curled an arm around her shoulders.

“You never ask about Lawrence, so I just never talk about him.” Lily’s voice broke.

“Anytime I asked when I was little, you would cry. I hated to see you cry.” She pressed her cheek to her mother’s. The familiar scent of lavender and vanilla closed around her.

“Knowing a man doesn’t love you back is the worst feeling in the world.”

Her mother’s whispered statement left Kendall raw. She had to agree. Funny how the next generation of Justice would shred the heart of yet another Proctor. Evidently the men were kryptonite to Proctor women.

“I knew he was seeing someone. I felt him pulling away from me when you were really little. He stayed for you, you know. I got five years with Larry because you were the light of his life.”

Kendall’s eyes burned. “Then why did he leave me without a backward glance? Why did he leave us?”

“He fell in love with Shane’s mother. I didn’t know her name, but from what I pieced together, it had to be her. I broke them up, you know? For two years he tried to stay here, and I naively thought having his baby would be enough of a hold. I even tried to have another one, but he was careful. I told him that if he left, he’d have to leave you too. I don’t even recognize the woman I was then. I’d have done anything to get him to stay.”

“Oh, Mom.” Kendall looked down as the first drops of tears splashed against her hand. Lily had loved her father so much. Maybe too much.

“I’m sorry I took him away from you too. Part of our problem had always been how prideful Larry and I both were. Even when I wanted to let you back

into his life. When I got over my own stupidity and contacted him, it was too late.”

“He didn’t want me?” Kendall’s chest ached. How much was one fragile organ supposed to take in one day?

“No, honey. He did, but his wife got sick. He had to worry about her, and time just slid by. We both agreed that it was best to leave well enough alone.”

He’d actually wanted her? Kendall stood. All this time she’d thought her father had simply walked away. “You made the decision for me? Don’t you think I should have been in on that kind of discussion?”

“You didn’t want to talk about him. I thought I was doing the right thing.”

Kendall pushed her hair back. She searched for anger, for regret, but she couldn’t find either. Her mother had made a good life for her. A few conversations she and Shane had on the road trip finally made sense. Her father still had chosen Shane’s mother over his own daughter. But if Lily was telling the truth, she hadn’t given Lawrence much choice in the matter.

She tried to reconcile the desperate and unreasonable woman her mother described and the mother she’d known all her life. Lily was bright and warm and sweet to everyone she met, but she rarely interacted with men. Kendall dashed away tears. “I understand. I wish you had found someone else instead of pining for Lawrence.”

“I loved him. I didn’t want anyone else.”

She folded her arms over her aching stomach. She could understand not wanting to love again. Who would ever want to feel this way?

How could she be so wrong about Shane?

She was tired of asking the same questions to her broken heart and muddled brain.

“Why don’t we watch a movie, huh? Something with lots of violence and not a love story in sight.”

Her mother looked up at her. “You look exhausted, honey. Why don’t you go up to bed?”

“Because I’ll stare at the ceiling all night. At least if I watch bad guys blow up stuff, then I’m not thinking about... Well, I’m just not thinking.”

Lily sighed. “How about *The Expendables*?”

“Perfect.”

SHANE CRAWLED HIS way up the winding road, his teeth jarring with each dip in the gravel. Ice coated every surface as far as the eye could see. The sun glared up off the molten snow encasement, giving him a headache. He'd left Connecticut early that morning, but the only reason he'd made it was because of the brand-new chains on his tires.

A good tip from his customer. Parts of California had snow, but nothing like the Northeast.

He frowned at Kendall's missing Outback. He knew she was a skilled driver in these conditions, but no one should be on the road. The town had been buttoned down tight with only the plows and salt trucks hacking out a path in the deep freeze.

He gathered the paperwork he'd picked up on his way out of town: loan applications and interest rate information from three different banks, a New York license as a preemptive strike to establish residency, and a list of ideas for renovations.

Everything he'd need to talk to Kendall about refinancing and expanding the Heron.

Sitting with her on the dock, looking out over the water with its flawless stillness had been a defining moment. Having her settle against him had allowed him to finally quiet his mind against all the questions he'd had about running the Heron with her.

Making love with her in her tiny bedroom and seeing the love there just waiting for him had been the start of it. He knew that now, but that moment on the water on New Year's Day had cemented everything.

She was what he needed. It had always been Kendall. From the will reading to the endless stretch of miles leading him here, one thing had been a constant. Kendall and her optimistic smile, her warmth, and the unending passion between them—all of it was everything he'd ever wanted.

And now he had the Heron that he could share with her and grow with her.

Hell, he was going to marry her. If it took two days or two years, he'd convince her that forever was the only option.

He climbed the steps, letting himself inside. Boxes for ornaments sat

around the tree in the living room. He followed the clatter of dishes into the kitchen. Lily sat at the table wrapping Christmas dishes.

“Hi, Lily. Where’s Kendall?”

Lily didn’t say a word, just wrapped the next dish, placing it in the box at her feet.

He stood in front of her. “Lily.”

She looked up at him, her dark eyes flat and angry. “She’s gone to Bells’s place.”

“Oh. In this?” Puzzled, he felt the short hairs of his nape rise in alarm.

“She needed to get away from here for a little while.”

“Why?”

“Because she needed to think. She has plans to make too. You’re not the only one who has to think about the future.”

At a loss, Shane rubbed the back of his head. “I know that.”

“Really? Do you? I almost hope you’re just oblivious, because if you hurt my daughter on purpose with that stunt yesterday, then I might be the one tying a rock around *your* chest and throwing you into the lake.”

“Wait, what?”

“Your Mr. Clark came by yesterday.”

“My Mr. Clark?”

“The appraiser?”

The alarm bells got louder. “Fuck.” At her glare, he winced. “Sorry, Lily. He wasn’t supposed to be here until next week. I was supposed to have time to talk to her about that.”

“About what? Would it hurt less if you actually manned up and told her you were still serious about selling the Heron out from under us? Maybe.”

Surprised at her venom, he lifted the papers in his hand. “No. I’m not selling.”

Lily stood up. “Then why on earth would you have an appraiser out? What are those, real estate papers?”

“Loan papers. I was going to talk to Kendall about refinancing this place and putting on an addition.” He looked down at his future mother-in-law with her curling coffee-colored hair and Kendall’s dark eyes. “I wanted to talk to her about a place separate from the B and B for us. I want her to have a real bedroom, not a closet.”

“Oh.” Her eyes welled up. “I told her to wait, to try not to jump to conclusions.” Lily stepped forward and wrapped her arms around his waist.

“I knew you wouldn’t break her heart.”

Shane kissed the top of her head. The pretty floral scent that was always a part of Lily calmed a few of his jangling nerves. “I love her.”

“I know you do. Anyone can see it. Well, anyone but Kendall.”

“I’m not really good at saying it.”

“You’re really good at showing it. The rest will catch up. I hate that Kendall has such a tiny place to sleep, but she wanted to use all the bedrooms for rental space.”

“I understand. That’s why I want to build off the barn. Make a separate space for her. Maybe an in-law apartment for you.”

Lily dabbed at her eyes but finally shook her head. “I have a perfect room at the back of the house that I love. But a separate space for you two and maybe room for grandbabies? I’d be all over that.”

The breath in his lungs stalled. A little sunshine-haired girl that looked like Kendall? What a terrifying and amazing thought. “Let’s worry about babies after I convince her I’m not going anywhere.”

“Well, go get her.” Lily went back to the table and ripped a piece of the white craft paper and scribbled on it. “That’s Bells’s address.”

He leaned down and planted a kiss on Lily’s cheek. “Thanks.”

“Be careful out there!”

He waved back at her and rushed through the door only to slip his way into the railing. Taking a steadying breath, he threw out another scoop of rock salt from the fat planter Kendall hid the bucket in.

He peeled down the driveway, fishtailing once before the chains on his tires gripped the icy road. The bend sparkled with fresh ice. Suddenly he spotted her green Outback inching up Heron Way.

Not taking any chances, Shane yanked on his wheel and blocked off the road. He got out and went around, leaned on his truck door, his arms crossed.

She held up her hand against the glare of the sun on snow and slowed to a stop. She opened her door. “Did you get into an accident? Or are you just insane?”

“I was coming after you.”

She skidded over to him, her chin raised; a ridiculous purple knit hat sat slightly crooked on her head. “Why? So you can actually tell me to my face that you want to sell the Heron? I would have appreciated knowing before the appraiser came and made me look like a jerk. I thought—”

“I love you, Kendall.”



“What?”

With his plan shot to hell, all he could focus on was making sure she knew just how wrong she was. “I love you. I don’t want to sell the Heron.”

“You...” Her huge brown eyes were filled with confusion. “How?”

He opened the passenger side door and gathered the papers he’d thrown back into the truck. He slid over to her, pushing the loan documents at her. A few papers fell to the ground.

She bent to retrieve one, but he pulled her back up. “I was going to surprise you tonight. Mr. Clark wasn’t supposed to be here until next week, and we were both going to talk to him. I don’t want to sell. I want to build.”

She looked down at the stack of papers. Then back up at him, then again at the brochures. She quietly leafed through them. “You don’t want to sell.” She stopped, a fan of pamphlets clutched against her chest. “Wait. Did you say you loved me?”

He took the pile and shoved it back in the truck. “I love you, Kendall. I think I’ve loved you since the first time you boosted yourself out of the window of my truck to look at the damn mountains.”

She fisted her hands at her sides, then skidded into him full tilt, slamming him into the truck. The door clomped shut, and then it was her mouth on his chin, her mittened hands tugging at his coat until he lowered to find her mouth with his.

He slid his hand into her hair, flipping off her hat until her curls twined around his fingers and wrist. Until she was in his arms and not going anywhere. Until he could breathe in her apple scent and he knew she was his.

She slugged him in the gut. “You’ve loved me since California, and you’re only telling me now?”

He tipped his head back and laughed. “I just figured it out two days ago.”

“On the dock?”

He cupped her cheek. “On the dock. I think we should get married on that dock.”

“You want to get—”

He silenced her with a kiss. When she melted into him, he finally let the last of his doubts go. Under the bright light of a winter sun, surrounded by ice and snow, he held on to his own bit of sunshine.



# EPILOGUE

*One Year Later*

“Mom, I don’t have time to go find the wreath. I’ve got to make three beds and still have to go to the store for you before Shane gets back.”

“It’s Valentine’s Day, Kendall Marie. I want that lovebirds wreath up for the Wilsons. It’s their honeymoon.”

“Fine.”

“Don’t sass me.”

Kendall swallowed a snarl. Her mother was making over the whole house into a frigging retreat for this couple. Why the hell should they care about a damn wreath?

She stalked across the porch and down the stairs. Thanks to a few warm days, a lot of the snow had disappeared, leaving a muddy trail between the B and B and the barn.

Stomping her feet at the threshold—heaven forbid she bring mud into Shane’s domain—she reached for the switch. Shane didn’t usually shut off the lights.

In the middle of the workshop was a huge mahogany four-poster bed. It had to be Shane’s handiwork. The headboard was exquisite. Slatted in the simple Shaker style she loved, it was embellished with a simple carved notch under the flowing lines. The footboard matched it with a more detailed design on the front panel that looked vaguely familiar.

She slid her hand along one of the four posts built into heavy bases giving the bed a grounded look. It was solid and masculine with the most subtle of feminine curves.

It was pure Shane design.

The king-size mattress was a lake of pale gold. She smoothed her hands over the expensive sateen sheets pulled back in invitation. A red-and-gold brocade duvet was folded down at the foot of the bed.

He must have been taking pictures for his Web site.

“Like it?”

She turned at Shane’s voice. He came up beside her, swiping his hand down her braid. “It’s gorgeous. I never saw you working on this one. When did you finish it up?”

“Last night.”

“I don’t think it will be on your Web site long. It’s too gorgeous not to get snapped up.”

“It’s not for sale.”

She frowned. “Was it a commissioned piece?” Everything inside her wanted to slide into it and drag him in with her.

“Nope. I thought we should have something nice for the new house.”

“For the...”

“I know we’ve had some setbacks in getting the plans for our house settled, but I think you might want to look a little closer at the pillows.”

“The pillows?” She turned back to the bed and noticed there was a tube along the pillows. She’d thought it was a bolster, a decorative pillow. She rounded the bed and took the tube. “No.”

He smiled, leaning his hip on the bed. “Open it up.”

Kendall pried the lid off the end of the tube. Her heart stopped. A roll of paper inside with a perfectly amazing blue tint stared back at her. She shook it out on the bed and unrolled it. “We’re good to go?”

“Finally got the loan to finalize yesterday. Kain overnighted the plans—” He grunted as she vaulted into his arms.

“We get to start on the house?”

He laughed. “We get to start on the house.”

“Holy crap.” She wrapped her arms and legs around him. “This is the best Valentine’s Day present ever!”

“And first anniversary present. I think it’s paper, right? For the gift?”

Tears pricked as she buried her head in his neck. She peppered his neck with kisses, then his jawline and pushed back the hair he’d let grow out. “God, I love you.”

“I love you too, Kendall Justice. I’d hoped to have you in the new house

by our first anniversary, but at least I could do this.”

“Our anniversary isn’t until the twenty-eighth.”

He snorted. “Kain’s crew is good, but they’re not that good.”

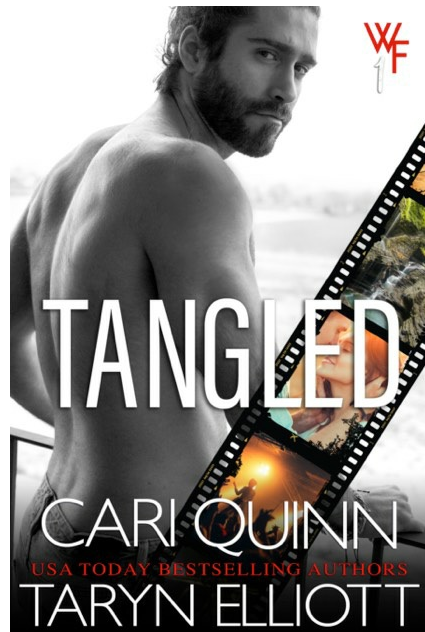
She shook her head. “I mean as an anniversary gift.”

“Oh, well, that’s the blueprints. I couldn’t wait. Besides, it’s only your first gift. The bed is for Valentine’s Day.”

“I wholeheartedly approve.” She kissed him softly, drawing out the humming passion that was never far away. “So how are you supposed to top the bed next year?”

He scraped his teeth down her throat and tumbled her onto the sheets. “I’ll think of something.”

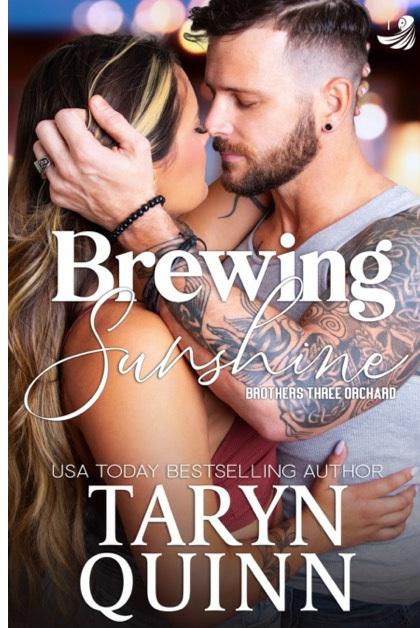
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**awesome, we'd love a review on your favorite book site.**

*Now...turn the page for a special sneak peek of TANGLED now!*

***And don't stop flipping! We have another sneak ahead!***

# TANGLED

Fifteen years ago, if someone had told him that a city boy from Los Angeles was going to fall hopelessly in love with a small town in upstate New York, he would have eaten his American Music Award. Logan King stepped down out of his truck a wall of heat enveloped him. Grass crunched under his flip-flops.

The entire drive up from Manhattan he'd heard warning upon warning for campers to avoid open flames for the upcoming holiday weekend. And the way Main Street was looking, he'd have to agree.

The sidewalks were postcard perfect, but in the distance, the rolling hillside was crispy with too many weeks of endless heat. The air was usually thick with the scent of water from the nearby falls. Not today. It was like walking into a damn oven.

He crossed the road to the park where feather soft green grass teased his ankles. Manicured and watered as if the editors at Small Town Living Magazine were watching, the town square was perfection. Mayor Darcy wouldn't have it any other way.

The film crew at *Music Life* probably ate it up. One hundred bucks said there would be snide comment within the first segment about his adopted hometown of Winchester Falls.

His manager was on his ass to get in front of the cameras again. Heaven forbid he lose his status in the upper echelon of the paparazzi's most wanted lists. Or more importantly, that his shots went for anything less than top dollar.

Twitter trending lists, billboards, concert venue banners, and the dreaded magazine covers were his bread and butter. Being a millionaire a hundred



times over and the lead singer of All the King's Men put him in the spotlight far more than he'd like.

***Would you like to read more?***

**[One Click TANGLED Here.](#)**

Maybe you would rather see what's happening with Kain—Shane's bestie. He just happens to be in another one of our books! Yeah, we love him a lot—we can't help it. LOL!

Turn the page for a sneak peek of **[BREWING SUNSHINE.](#)**

# BREWING SUNSHINE

## KIRA - COSMIC JOKE

July in the orchard was more buzz than hum.

The bees bouncing from apple to apple looking for a spare blossom, the whir of machines cutting back the strawberry plants that had finished producing, and the chipper working overtime on the branches that had fallen in the last storm. But my favorite was the earthy scent of apples almost ready for their season.

The advancing whomp of horse hooves rushing through the acres of trees told me my best friend, Beckett Manning, was nearby. Ever since he'd traded a tractor for his horse, he'd been a menace. At least the tractor had to stay on the main path.

I ducked into the copse of Honeycrisp trees. I wasn't quite ready to face people just yet. I brushed my fingers over the glossy dark leaves and picked off a few dead ones automatically. I supposed it was pretty basic of me, but they really were my favorite apple.

After twelve years it was a miracle that any apple would be palatable, but they were the ones I looked forward to every year. I ducked under a branch of one of the dwarf trees that were interspersed with the larger, older ones to find just the right one.

There she was along the back of the quadrant. The early sunlight left dappled golden light on the gnarled roots that popped up out of the ground no matter what we did to prevent it. Flaky bark gathered and continued to grow around the grooves I'd made my first summer.

I traced my finger over the jagged KW and year that I'd made with my pocket knife. I dipped my hand into my work pants to find the same scarred red Swiss Army and added this year with a dash.

This would be the first harvest where I wasn't part of the chaos. I'd been a part of the orchard since I turned seventeen. Working up from seasonal picker for extra cash to lead manager of hiring.

I couldn't say I'd miss juggling seasonal staffing with the full timers. I'd spent the last three months training my replacement, and Patty was born for the work—far more than I had ever been.

When harvest was upon us, there was a collective hum of rotating seasonal workers underfoot. People came for day labor for extra cash—most of them were guys taking a gap year before starting college or others bumming around in search of jobs that didn't require much more than a strong back. We kept some, but most moved on. Sometimes they came back to us year after year, happy to work outside in the twilight of summer.

I couldn't blame them. Central New York was pretty perfect during that time of year. It was how I'd been lured in.

That and a foolish heart that had believed it beat for the eldest Manning son. Beckett had always walked the line of wild and responsible. His motorcycle, denim and leather uniform, and unruly curls were like catnip for half of Turnbull High. The fact that he could straddle the line between jock and badboy certainly helped net him any girl he could ever want.

Luckily I'd come to my senses before he could add me to the roster of his broken hearts club. But instead of Beck, or his equally delicious brothers, I'd fallen for the sprawling orchard that had expanded every year. And that was the love that had always endured.

Hooves thundered behind me and I knew my time was up.

"I knew I'd find you out here."

I turned, raising my hand against the sun rapidly rising overhead. I unhooked my sunglasses from my shirt and slipped them on before I grinned up at him. His ever present Yankees cap was threaded through his leather belt on his hip, his hand draped over the pommel, and his knees gently controlling his gray gelding, Storm.

"Being predictable is annoying."

Beck tipped back his black cowboy hat. "I prefer to call it comfortable."

"No woman wants to be called comfortable."

"Aww, c'mon, Key, you know it's not like that." He absently rubbed Storm's side as he sidestepped at the roar of a plane overhead.

I was well aware it wasn't like that. No man in this entire orchard saw me as a woman. I was Kira, the sturdy friend to all. Kira, the dependable. Kira,

the hard worker. Kira, the one who would do any dirty job without a complaint.

“It’s fine.”

He leaned back in his saddle. “I may not know much, but I do know when a woman says it’s fine, it’s anything but.”

I waved him off. “I’m just nervy about saying goodbye to the orchard.”

“You’re not saying goodbye, you’re just moving into the taproom. You’re wasted out here in the trees, I keep telling you that.”

“It’s where you are, buddy.”

“Yes, it’s where I belong. You have always been meant for more. I wouldn’t trust anyone else to get the Brothers Three Taproom off the ground.”

I rubbed my hand along the thigh of my work pants, my palm itchy and about to turn into a faucet from nerves. “You had plenty of more qualified people inquire about the job.”

“But there’s only one Kira Webb. For years, you’ve been organizing me until I’m ready to saw your tongue off. Who got me to upgrade the cold storage?”

“We need the ability to have longer storage times for the hard cider production.”

“Who badgered me to expand distribution?”

“Justin.”

He grunted. “My brother only got the idea after you put the bug in his ear about those new pasteurizer machines.”

“We could manufacture faster than we can sell in the store. You were leaving money on the table.”

“You mean after I spent it first, as usual.”

I opened my mouth to remind him that we tripled our revenue in two years, but he was already getting impatient to move. I could see it in his body language and general antsiness that was starting to mirror in Storm’s demeanor.

I stepped forward to run my palm down the horse’s velvety nose. “Your master just likes to argue with me, even though he knows I hate it.” He nibbled at my fingers then swung his big head over to my shirt pocket. “You know I have something for you.” I unearthed the baby carrots that were supposed to be my snack, but inevitably became his.

“No, I just know you need to innovate and improve. The taproom is what

needs your attention. You've outgrown the orchard and you know it."

I huffed out a breath. "I—"

"If you tell me one more time that you aren't qualified, I'm going to kick your ass myself."

I growled. "You know I haven't been able to go back to school."

"You don't need school, dammit. You have more experience than any kid coming out with a master's degree, for fuck's sake. You're ready to move onto something more challenging, Key."

I clenched my hands at my sides. "I know."

"Then stop trying to find reasons to say no and just say yes. You know you're going to, or you wouldn't be out here saying goodbye to your damn tree."

"I have a proposal written up."

"Good. Show it to Laverne if you have to, but just get in there and make it work. I hired a new cider master last week and he wants nothing to do with the running of the taproom."

"You what? Without talking to me?"

Beck grinned at me. "See, you're already invested."

"Well, if you looked at my proposal, I'd show you the people I'd researched to come in to work with us."

"And I'm sure there's a nineteen page dissertation on each candidate."

"Five," I muttered. I liked to be prepared for any eventuality. "Two of them came highly recommended. Stanford Lang won best hard cider of New England last year."

Beck tipped down his hat. "And that jackass wanted triple my budget as his first year salary. I did my homework too."

"I could have talked him down." I had a plan to do just that as well as incentivize with a small percentage of profits if he exceeded my projected earnings. Which would be hard to do, so I wouldn't have to pay him extra until year three at minimum.

"I have no doubt, but I think he's a douchebag."

"We don't have to like him for him to make a good cider."

"No, we don't. But I'd rather respect the man who comes in, and Stanford Lang is an opportunist. He'd leave us high and dry within a season, I'd bet my six-digit pasteurizer on it."

I folded my arms. "I still would have liked to be in on the decision. If I'm to run the taproom, I have to be able to work with this guy. He needs to know

I'm the one making decisions, and you doing the hiring undermines my authority."

He sighed. "All right, I can see where you're coming from there. But I know he's the one, Key. He's brilliant and has the nose."

"You and the stupid nose."

"It's not stupid. You either have it or you don't. And he does. Even if he's a little...unorthodox."

"Dammit, Beck."

*Unorthodox* was code for hell, I just knew it. Beckett had a habit of picking the underdog. I knew it because I had definitely been one of his favorites to champion.

"Give it three months and if he doesn't work out, we can revisit your hire list, all right?"

I sighed. "Fine."

This time he didn't try to argue. He just lifted the reins. "You'll like Ronan."

"What the hell kind of name is Ronan?"

"What the hell kind of name is Kira? I still like you."

I flipped him off.

He laughed and turned to give me a fine view of Storm's ass. Before he let the horse break into a trot, he yelled back at me. "Say goodbye to the old you, Key! I know you're ready."

I walked back to my tree and brushed my thumb over the year I'd just carved into the bark. What if I wasn't ready? What if this was all a cosmic joke and Beckett was wrong?

A smaller voice nagged at me. *What if he's right?*

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# ABOUT TARYN QUINN

USA Today bestselling author, **TARYN QUINN**, is the sexy and funny alter ego of bestselling authors Taryn Elliott & Cari Quinn. We've been writing together for years, but we have decided to pull the trigger on a combo name just for fun.

And so...Taryn Quinn was born!

Do you like ultra sexy small town romance full of shenanigans? Quirky office romances full of steam? Okay, look...we pretty much just love writing steamy stories. If you're all about that, we're your girls!

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