

THE FIRST IMPRESSIONS SERIES

# THE HANG UP



USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

TAWNA FENSKE

# ABOUT THE HANG UP

**He's got the outdoor prowess of a puma and the social grace of...well, also a puma.**

**One dressed in a suit and set to lead a multi-national firm.**

But it's worth it for Jason to rescue his sister and her sweet five-year-old son.

A little boy fresh off a medical crisis that scared them all senseless.

Enter Miriam Ashley, a city girl and branding expert who doesn't date outdoorsy dudes.

She lost her dad in a climbing accident, so no way will she fall for a guy who hurls himself off mountains for fun.

Which makes Miriam the perfect PR pro for Jason.

If she can transform this rugged outdoorsman into a polished boss,

Jason can save Urban Trax from financial ruin.

Problem is, each attempt to make Jason fit for the boardroom lands him breathless in the bedroom with Miriam.

And somewhere between etiquette lessons and a sexy canoe date, they start falling in love.

It's a risky gamble, with hundreds of jobs hinging on how well Jason fills his CEO shoes.

But the shoes on his mind are the spike-heeled stilettos  
Miriam kicks off by his bed.

Will Jason's quest to save everyone else cost him the  
woman of his dreams?

Or can this classy PR magician wave her magic wand at  
Jason's heart?

***One-click this sexy romantic comedy about a rough-around-the-edges outdoorsman working to become the boss who saves the day, and the city girl who hopes to save him.***

# THE HANG UP

FIRST IMPRESSIONS

BOOK TWO



TAWNA FENSKE

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

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IMPRESSIONS SERIES

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*For the FoPo Ho ladies. I love you, beyotches.*

## CHAPTER 1



Miriam Ashley glanced at her Cartier wristwatch as she hurried out to the mailbox in front of her house. The heel on her Jimmy Choo stiletto caught on the edge of the sidewalk, but Miriam barely wobbled.

*Bitch, please.* She'd been maneuvering in heels since she was old enough to go to the mall without a grown-up. Even though Saturdays didn't require her to report for duty as co-owner of First Impressions Branding and PR, Miriam was still rockin' the uniform.

She was *always* rockin' the uniform.

Her watch read one fifteen, which gave her just enough time to grab the mail, fix herself a smoothie, then watch three TiVo-ed episodes of *Project Runway* before meeting up with her best friend for cocktails. Which of course meant work in a roundabout way, since her best friend was also her business partner. If she hurried, maybe she'd even have time to—

“Pardon me.”

Miriam glanced up to see a homeless man standing in front of her. At least, she assumed he was homeless. He was filthy from head to toe, covered in mud like he'd been sleeping beneath an overpass. Poor guy.

“Yes?” She shoved one hand in her jacket pocket to fish for spare change, but didn't find any, so she slipped her keys between the knuckles of her other hand like she'd been taught in a women's self-defense class.

Miriam was *always* prepared.

But the guy didn't seem to be lunging for her wallet or her tits. In fact, he looked downright cheerful. His smile made cracks in the filth covering his face, and his eyes—startlingly bright blue—almost seemed to be laughing. He sure as hell didn't look like a serial killer, but she was hardly the best judge. It wasn't like serial killers routinely appeared on her doorstep seeking help with a marketing plan.

“I was wondering if you could help me,” the man said. His voice was deep and smooth, like dark chocolate, and she felt her stomach ball up in a funny, fizzy little knot.

“Of course, I'm happy to help,” she said. “There's a shelter a little less than a mile from here. I know they have a shower truck that drives around to some of the different parks, and they serve three meals a day, but I'm guessing you just missed lunch since it's after one.”

“Actually—”

“Wait!” she said, desperate to be helpful. “I just remembered I have some leftover sushi from dinner last night. If you want to hang on, I can go inside and grab it for you.”

“That's very kind, but—”

“Sorry, what am I thinking?” She smacked her forehead with her palm, which hurt a lot more than it should have since she'd forgotten the damn keys between her fingers. “You'd probably prefer something a little more substantial, like a sandwich or a protein shake or—”

“Ma'am.”

That stopped her. “Ma'am?” She frowned. “Do I look that old?”

“What?” The guy laughed and shook his head, and Miriam was struck by how sexy that damn laugh was.

*Quit ogling the homeless guy. And he was still talking!*

*Pay attention.*

“...just trying to be polite,” he said, rubbing a hand over a jaw thick with mud-covered stubble. “I'm new to the area, so I guess I don't have the local professional lingo down yet, but

‘ma’am’ seemed more respectful than ‘hey you’ or ‘baby’ or ‘beautiful,’ even though you are. Beautiful, I mean. Stunning, really.”

“Oh.” She felt herself starting to blush, and she briefly wondered if he was just saying that to butter her up so he could beat her senseless and steal her wallet. Then she realized that was a lousy thing to think. She’d done a pro bono marketing campaign for a homeless shelter last year, so she knew the majority of homeless people weren’t criminals or degenerates. They were just regular people who’d had a stroke of bad luck.

“I’m sorry,” she told him. “That must be really hard, finding yourself homeless in a new area without friends or family around to help.”

“Homeless?” He quirked an eyebrow at her, which made more cracks in the mud on his face. “I’m not homeless. I just bought a place down the street. Two blocks away—it’s the blue duplex with the white shutters.”

He pointed toward a shady, tree-lined section of the neighborhood, and she recalled seeing the glossy “sold” sticker tacked up on the real estate sign a few weeks ago. She looked back at the man. Okay, upon closer inspection, she could see he wore expensive running shoes and trendy, designer athletic apparel, even if it was covered in mud. What the hell?

“I just did the Tough Mudder,” he said, answering her unasked question. “You know, the big race with all the mud pits and obstacles?”

“Right,” Miriam said, and recognition dawned as the guy turned around to show her the dirt-covered number pinned to his back. At least, that’s what she assumed he was showing her, though her eyes strayed down to one of the most impressive asses she’d ever seen.

Even if it was covered in mud.

The guy turned back around before she thought to avert her gaze. The result was an awkward five-second pause where

she found herself staring at his crotch.

Also very impressive.

She gave herself a mental slap and met his eyes again. “So what are you doing walking around looking like a giant malt ball? Don’t they have showers or something at the finish line?”

He grinned, flashing a set of perfectly white teeth that contrasted with the mud. “Just hoses. Hoses with really cold water. I figured since I only lived a couple miles from the race course, I could just run there as my warm-up and run home as my cooldown, and then I could grab a warm shower at home.”

“Right,” Miriam said, trying to wrap her brain around the idea of willingly running four miles on top of whatever the hell they ran in the actual race. People really did this *on purpose*?

“The thing is,” the guy continued, “I lost my key somewhere in the racecourse, and now I can’t get back in my house to shower off in time to make it to a doctor’s appointment.”

Sympathy fluttered through her belly, or maybe that was anxiety. *Probably anxiety*. The mention of doctors and hospitals and anything medically related tended to send her spiraling down a path of panicked memories and despondent terror, and she found herself gripping her keys a little tighter.

“You have to get to the doctor?” she asked.

“The appointment’s at two. Please, I just need to borrow your phone to call a locksmith. Then I’ll be out of your hair, I swear.”

She glanced at him, then back at her house. Her phone was back on the entry table, but right beside that was her guest bathroom with a shower the guy could use without stepping more than five feet inside her place. Ordinarily she’d think twice about inviting a strange man into her home, but there was something about *this* man that made her consider it. She could always stand there with a butcher knife, ready to stick it in him if he tried anything funny.

She hesitated, then looked back at the guy.

“I’m Jason, by the way,” he said, smiling wider. “Jason Sanders. I’d shake your hand, but I don’t want to get mud on you.”

“Miriam.” She added *polite* and *considerate* to his list of attributes. His eyes were kind, and he seemed sweet and well-spoken.

*That’s probably what every serial killer’s victim thinks just before he strangles her with her own belt.*

But she wasn’t wearing a belt, and she did have a soft spot for friendly, burly, blue-eyed, stubble-jawed guys in need.

“Come on,” she said and turned toward her walkway. “Follow me.”

“Follow you where?”

“My house. You can’t stand out here being dirty.”

He quirked one eyebrow, which caused the mud to crack on his forehead. “You’d rather I be dirty in your house?”

*Hell yeah*, her libido telegraphed, but she shook her head.

“No, I mean I have a shower in the guest bath that’s right by the front door. You can call a locksmith and then clean up while you wait for him.”

“That’s very kind of you.” He seemed to hesitate. “Aren’t you worried I’m some sort of deranged killer?”

“You don’t seem to have any weapons, though I guess I haven’t frisked you.”

“By all means...” He held up his arms, and the sight of those well-toned biceps sent a fresh shiver of pleasure through her, but she held it together as she turned toward her house.

“I’ll take your word for it.”

“Thank you.” He put his arms down and smiled broadly. “You’re too kind.”

“Not really. The sight of all that mud under your fingernails is making my skin crawl. I’m doing this for purely

selfish reasons.”

“I’ll take it,” he said behind her as she started up the path to her front door.

She could have sworn she heard him laugh as he followed her up the walkway.

\* \* \*

JASON FINISHED DRYING off with the fluffy green towel the woman had given him, then inspected it to make sure he hadn’t smeared it with any residual mud. He’d been careful not to leave dirt streaks in her shower, too, conscious of the pristine white tile and the expensive-looking array of bath products lined up on the built-in shelves.

Whoever this woman was, she must own stock in a beauty supply store.

*Miriam*, he reminded himself, rolling the name around in his brain like a cinnamon Life Saver on his tongue. She’d said her name was Miriam, and though she’d seemed nervous enough to offer up a fake name, he didn’t think that was the case. She looked like a Miriam, all flashing green eyes and glossy dark curls that he bet would feel exquisitely soft twisted around his fingers. She was built like a 1950s pinup girl, lush curves and full lips that practically begged to be kissed hard.

*Stop thinking like that.*

He glanced at the clock on the wall. It was one thirty already, and he’d be pushing it to make it to the hospital on time. His five-year-old nephew, Henry, had his third appointment with the new pediatric oncologist. As of last Friday, Henry was officially in partial remission, but they weren’t out of the dark yet.

Jason’s sister, Ellie, would be with him, of course. Henry was her son, after all, but Jason wanted to be there, too. *Needed to be there.* The whole reason he’d moved them all to the city in the first place was so Henry would have access to the best medical facilities and doctors. So Ellie or Jason could

be with the boy at all times instead of trusting Henry's well-being to babysitters and day care providers. These early stages of remission were a crucial time for the whole family, and Jason's new job made it possible for one of them to be with Henry around the clock.

Jason finished drying himself with the green towel, then folded it neatly on the edge of the counter. Wait, no. That didn't seem right. Maybe he should hang it up? Or hand it right to Miriam so she could put it in the laundry?

*Good idea, dumbass. Hand a gorgeous stranger the towel you just used to dry your balls.*

He was still contemplating the folded towel when the door burst open behind him. He spun around to see—a cat?

“Fuzzy, no! Oh my God, come back here!”

Before Jason could grab the towel or even cover his crotch with a free hand, Miriam appeared in the doorway. She looked frazzled and frantic, and he froze at the sight of her.

Miriam froze, too. Her cheeks went bright red, and as Jason watched her gaze drop lower, he remembered why he'd been reaching for the towel.

“Hi there.” He grabbed the towel off the counter. He should probably move a little faster, but the heated look in her eye as she stood there with her gaze fixed on his crotch left him in no particular hurry. He'd never been especially modest, but he'd also never been so blatantly ogled by a gorgeous woman.

“Thanks for the shower,” he said.

“Wha—” She seemed to shake herself out of some kind of trance as he spread the towel open, wrapped it around his waist, and tucked the edge in against his hip.

She licked her lips and drew her gaze from his crotch to his face. “I'm so sorry!”

He quirked an eyebrow at her. “I'm not sure how to feel about a woman who stares at my junk for that long and says ‘I'm sorry.’”



Her cheeks went a shade darker, but she laughed and raked her fingers through those glossy curls. “I’m sorry for walking in on you, not for what’s behind that towel. There’s not a damn thing to be sorry for behind that towel.” She cleared her throat. “Not that I was looking. Not that I noticed whether it was really impressive or not or—” She shook her head and glanced away. “I should probably stop talking now.”

Seeing her flushed and flustered and beautiful in the doorway gave him at least a dozen ideas of things he’d like to do besides talking, but he settled for nodding as he finger-combed his wet hair. “I’ll take that as a compliment.”

“My cat,” she said suddenly, and her gaze scanned the bathroom. “I can’t believe he did that.”

The fluffy white feline was perched on the toilet lid, looking bored as he swiped a paw behind one ear. Miriam scrambled forward to grab him, and the warm, silky sleeve of her blouse brushed Jason’s bare arm as she moved past. He stepped aside and noticed how carefully she seemed to be keeping her eyes averted now.

Damn shame.

“Bad kitty,” she scolded as she scooped up the fluffy white ball. “Bad, bad, kitty.”

The cat looked almost smug as Miriam cradled him against her breasts, and it was the first time in Jason’s life he’d felt jealous of a cat. Miriam moved past him again, her gaze fixed on her wayward pet.

“Sorry about that.” She pivoted in the doorway to look him in the eye. “He has a bad habit of pushing doors open if they’re not latched all the way.”

“In that case, I apologize for not latching it,” he said. “My mistake.”

“Not your fault. It’s an older house, so a lot of the doors don’t close properly.” Her gaze flickered over his chest and lingered for a few seconds before returning to his face. “Good Lord, you’re in great shape.”

He laughed. “Thanks. And thank you for the change of clothes.” He nodded at the stack of blue hospital scrubs she’d handed him earlier, and Miriam looked at the pile. Some of the smolder seemed to vanish from her eyes as she stared at the heap of blue fabric for a moment.

“No problem,” she said at last, her voice softer than it had been just seconds before. “They’re my dad’s. *Were* my dad’s. He’s a doctor. Was a doctor.” Miriam shook her head and adjusted her hold on the cat. “He passed away last year, but hopefully those will fit. He was about your size.”

The wistful tone in her voice made Jason want to reach for her, but he opted to reach for the scrubs instead. “I’m sorry,” he said. He couldn’t think of anything else to say, but that seemed like enough.

“Thank you.” Miriam nodded. “I’ll let you get dressed now. Shout if you need anything.”

Balancing the cat on one hip, she pulled the door closed behind her. Jason dropped the towel, pulled the scrubs on, and glanced at the clock again. He wished he could stay here all day getting to know his gorgeous new neighbor with the killer curves and the Peeping-Tom cat and the fuck-me eyes that made him want to call her back to demonstrate just how unoffended he’d been by her apparent interest in his anatomy.

Truth be told, it turned him on.

Which she’d probably noticed, considering how long her gaze had been fixed there. Well, no matter.

He had more pressing things to think about right now than polished brunettes with lingering stares. Like the fact that he was running late for Henry’s appointment.

Or the fact that he was starting a brand-new job on Monday. Holy hell, he still couldn’t believe it. Jason Sanders, CEO of the second-largest sporting goods retailer in America.

Not that he was a complete neophyte when it came to running a recreation-focused business. The executive team at Urban Trax had seemed impressed with his experience operating his own outdoor adventure tour company for the past

decade, and Jason certainly had the know-how to lead a large corporation like Urban Trax.

He'd just never held a job that required footwear besides hiking boots.

Jason pulled on the scrub top, relieved to discover it fit well. Miriam had sized him up perfectly. He grabbed the plastic bag that held his muddy clothes and shoes, then pulled open the bathroom door and walked into the living room.

Miriam was seated on the sofa, stroking a hand over her cat's back while she flipped through a fashion magazine. She looked up as he walked in, and he felt a wave of heat rush through his body.

"The locksmith just called," she said. "He's five minutes out, so he should get to your place right about the time you do."

"Perfect," he said. "Thanks again for the shower. And the clothes. I'll wash them and run them by later this week."

"No need. Keep them. Consider them a housewarming gift or something."

"That's a switch from a tray of cookies."

She laughed. "I'm not much of a cookie baker, so you're better off with the scrubs."

It was on the tip of his tongue to use that as an entrée, to ask her if she'd be willing to show him some of her favorite restaurants, maybe let him take her to dinner sometime.

*You don't have time for that,* he reminded himself. *You've got enough on your plate taking care of Henry and Ellie. Don't get distracted.*

Right. He cleared his throat. "Thanks again. Seriously, you really saved my butt here."

"Don't mention it. Happy to help. I hate being dirty."

He bit his tongue again, pretty sure someone as prim and proper as Miriam would not appreciate a risqué retort. Then again, he'd seen how she'd looked at his junk.

“I’d better get going,” he said as he turned toward the door. “It was great meeting you.”

“You, too,” she agreed. “Good luck with everything.”

“Thanks. I appreciate it.”

“Maybe I’ll see you around the neighborhood.”

“Maybe so,” he agreed, pretty sure he’d never see her again.

Pity, that.

\* \* \*

MIRIAM SMOOTHED her hands down the front of her pencil skirt on Monday morning as she strode into the break room at First Impressions. Her best friend and co-owner, Holly, was already standing beside the coffeemaker with a dreamy look on her face.

“Let me guess,” Miriam said as she nudged her pal aside to get to the coffee. “That hot new husband of yours either gave you back-to-back orgasms or a sausage breakfast sandwich.”

“Both,” Holly admitted, then grinned wider as she scooted aside with a bright yellow coffee mug in on one hand.

“Either way, I guess you got the sausage.” Miriam grabbed a bright red coffee mug and began to fill it. “You ready for this meeting?”

“As ready as I’ll ever be. I loved those new concepts you worked up for the Sunstone account, by the way.”

“Thanks.” Miriam took a sip of coffee and leaned back against the counter beside Holly. “Yuck. Is this decaf?”

“Sorry. We were out of regular. I’ll grab more after work.”

“Nah, it’s date night for you and Hottie McNerdy. I’ll get it.” She blew on her coffee and took another sip as she glanced down the hall toward the boardroom. “I still can’t believe we have to restart this whole rebrand process just because Urban Trax got a new CEO.”

“Considering the old CEO got fired for embezzling, you can’t really blame them. Would you want to be tied to that baggage?”

“A valid point. Still, those were some damn fine logos I drafted.”

Holly shrugged and picked up the sugar bowl. “You’ll come up with something better. I have faith in you.” She stirred a teaspoon of sugar in her coffee, and Miriam wished for the millionth time that she had her best friend’s metabolism. Where Holly was sleek and svelte like a racehorse, Miriam had been built with a bursting abundance of curves. She wasn’t overweight, exactly. Just very very—

“Va-va-voom,” Holly said, startling Miriam from her reverie.

“What?”

“That blouse you’re wearing. It’s very va-va-voom.” Miriam laughed. “Thanks. It’s Emilio Pucci.”

“I have no idea what that means, but I want to touch it.”

“By all means. Touch away.”

Holly giggled and stroked a sleeve. “Very nice. Speaking of which, any signs of your naked neighbor?”

“Not since he slunk away with his clothes in a garbage bag,” she said. “I consider it my good deed for the weekend.”

“Only in your world does ogling a man’s junk count as a good deed.”

“Just call me Mother Teresa.” Miriam brightened as she took a sip of her coffee. “Hey, maybe I’ll send Phuzeei down the street to push open his front door so I can get another glimpse at the goods.”

“You’ve got that cat well-trained,” Holly said.

“He knows what Mama likes.” Miriam nodded toward the clock. They still had two minutes to go, but besides a love of good wine and great marketing, she and Holly also shared a

love of punctuality. “Shall we get in there and start the presentation?”

“Yeah. The whole Urban Trax executive team is already in the boardroom. Lucy got them in there early with muffins and coffee.”

“I guess it’s showtime, then.” Miriam set down her coffee and straightened her skirt. Then she reached up and tucked a stray lock back into Holly’s chignon. “Love the new highlights. Did Frederick do them?”

“He did. Thanks for the recommendation.” Holly beamed, her cheeks practically glowing.

Miriam dropped her hand from her best friend’s hair and clapped it to her own mouth. “No shit?”

Holly blinked. “What?”

“Decaf coffee? A dog-that-humped-the-sofa glow?” Miriam shook her head, laughing. “You’re knocked up!”

“Shh!” Holly glanced around, then smiled and leaned closer. “I’m not sure yet,” she whispered. “I haven’t taken a pregnancy test, but I’m five days late and we *have* kinda been trying—”

“Congratulations!” Miriam wrapped Holly in a big bear hug, careful not to wrinkle either of their outfits. *Priorities*. “I know you always wanted the whole package—the hot husband, the killer career, the pack of little monsters.” Miriam drew back and her best friend beamed.

“It’s not confirmed, so don’t say anything,” Holly said. “I can’t believe you guessed.”

“You’re easy to read,” Miriam said. “Mum’s the word, I promise.” Miriam grinned and picked up her mug again. A tiny prick of envy needled her in the gut, which was stupid. She’d always been on the fence about the whole kid thing herself. To be honest, the thought of young children kinda terrified her.

But mostly, she was thrilled for her best friend. “Come on,” she said. “Let’s get in there and show those Urban Trax

bastards what we're capable of."

"God help them."

Miriam turned and strode toward the boardroom. She felt confident and in control, which was pretty much par for the course when it came to work. She was hardly an expert in outdoor equipment, but she damn sure knew branding, and she knew what Urban Trax needed as a company—fresh energy, a little edge, a punch of passion.

Her brain was already churning out ad slicks and marketing copy, her imagination simmering with ideas for the TV campaign. Something understated and edgy with a touch of sex appeal and a heaping dose of outdoorsy authenticity. Think lumbersexual meets beer commercial.

Yes, that was it. A campaign ringing with the unspoken suggestion that Urban Trax products would make you play harder, live better, and walk around with a hard-on three inches bigger than the average guy.

As Miriam pushed open the door to the boardroom, her brain was echoing with the yet-to-be-created radio ads. She took two steps into the room—

And froze.

There, at the head of the table, sat someone who practically oozed sex appeal, outdoorsy authenticity, and lumbersexual edginess.

And since she'd seen him naked in her bathroom two days ago, there was no question about those extra inches.

"Jason Sanders," she croaked, and she stepped into the boardroom.

## CHAPTER 2



Jason stared dumbly at the hot brunette whose shower he'd defiled with his muddy body. He might have felt bad about the dumb staring if she weren't doing the same thing to him.

And if his brain weren't seared with the memory of her staring at his crotch with undisguised hunger.

"Um, Miriam?"

He watched her jump at the sound of a voice behind her, and he seized the chance to shake off his own trance. Regaining her composure, Miriam turned and looked over her shoulder at whoever was trying to get through the door. A slender woman with her dark hair in a tightly wound topknot gave Miriam a gentle nudge that propelled her into the room.

Jason offered them both a smile, then stood to greet them. "Hi, there," he said and reached across the table to shake the new woman's hand. Then he extended his hand to Miriam, probably lingering longer than necessary with her palm pressed against his. Touching her felt good and warm and soft and necessary, and he hated breaking contact with her.

"I'm Jason Sanders, the new CEO for Urban Trax," he said, though she'd already spoken his name aloud. Still, it was clear the job title was news to her, and maybe she wanted to pretend she'd just read his name on the meeting agenda. Under the circumstances, he'd understand if she wanted to play it cool. "It's a pleasure to meet you," he added.



Miriam stared at him like he'd just announced plans to go hang gliding off the building's roof. Come to think of it, that wasn't a bad idea. The winds around here were perfect, and he hadn't seen any power lines and if he could just get his rigging up there for—

“Miriam,” she blurted. “Miriam Ashley. I'm one of the owners of First Impressions.”

The sleek brunette with the topknot gave her an odd look, then turned back to Jason. “And I'm Holly Colvin, the other owner. We've been working with the rest of your executive team for several months, but it's a pleasure to finally meet you.”

“The pleasure's all mine,” Jason said, then kicked himself for sounding vaguely creepy. He still held Miriam's hand, which probably wasn't the best way to demonstrate to any of them that he was a polished, professional leader.

He let go and sat back down, then realized he was the only person sitting. The rest of the executives were still standing politely, waiting like proper gentlemen until the ladies had seated themselves. He started to stand again, right as the executive team sat back down, which resulted in something that looked like an accidental game of musical chairs.

A couple of members of the executive team glanced over at him, and he wondered if he was supposed to be leading this meeting or just participating. This wasn't like a snowshoe tour where he knew exactly what he was supposed to be doing, taking charge of the scheduling and the gear and the opportunity to herd everyone out into the wilderness.

Something told him this would be a different scene. That “something” might be the fact that he was the only person at the table who wasn't toting a laptop or a notepad or a tablet of some sort. Strike one. How the hell was he supposed to know he was expected to come here and take notes?

He glanced up to see Miriam regarding him with a funny look. She let her gaze drop to the center of the table, and for an instant he hoped she was signaling a desire to meet him underneath for a mid-meeting tryst.

Then he realized she was directing his attention to a basket filled with notepads stamped with the First Impressions logo and a pile of pens beside it. Jason gave her a silent nod of thanks, then grabbed a pen and a notebook with a red cover. He flipped it open, not entirely sure what to write in it.

“Why don’t we start with a little get-to-know-you session?” Holly suggested, smiling at everyone around the table. “Jason, since you’re the newest member of the team, we’d love to hear about how you ended up joining Urban Trax.”

“Absolutely.” He smoothed the lapels of the blazer his sister had insisted he wear. It felt stiff and much too hot, but now that he’d seen how everyone else was outfitted, he was glad he’d worn it. Beside him, the director of marketing gave him an encouraging nod.

“Right, so, for the past ten years, I’ve operated a tour company called Adrenaline Rush,” Jason said. “We offer everything from bungee jumping to whitewater kayaking to more sedate tours like snowshoeing and zip-lining.”

“Mr. Sanders started the company himself,” the marketing director boasted, and Jason made a mental note to give the guy a raise. Pete? Pete Marshall, that was it. He was still talking, so Jason shut up and let Pete sing his praises. “Mr. Sanders took his company from being a small start-up with three employees to a franchise with more than six hundred employees and twelve branches in eight Western states.”

“It’s a big part of why the company hired him,” added Rex Rutherford, the accounting director at the other end of the table. “As we’ve shared before, the Urban Trax stock has been in a bit of a free fall over the last two years. Our hope is that Mr. Sanders can help breathe new life into the company.”

The COO—Darrin Johnson, was it?—gave a curt nod. “We’re confident he can do it.”

“Damn straight,” Jason said, before it occurred to him he probably shouldn’t kick off his very first meeting with a curse word. No one seemed offended, but they were staring at him like he might be some sort of strange bird that had flown into

the room and they weren't certain whether he planned to perch happily on a branch or shit all over the table.

Also, he probably shouldn't be thinking words like "shit" in a board meeting.

He looked back at Miriam, hoping maybe she could rescue him from himself. She offered a smile that left him wondering what it might feel like to run his hands up her naked body, and he tried to remember what the hell he'd been talking about.

"So, Mr. Sanders," she began, but Jason cut her off. "Any chance you folks could just call me Jason?" he asked. "You say 'Mr. Sanders' and I'm looking around the room for my dad, thinking he's going to bust my ass for losing a tent stake or crashing the snowmobile or something. Please, just call me Jason." He smiled around the table to let everyone know he wasn't really pissed.

Everyone looked a little confused.

Well, everyone except Miriam, who smiled back and began rolling a pen between her palms in a way that made him wonder what else she could do with those hands.

"Jason." She held his gaze with hers as she rolled the pen back and forth with agonizing slowness. "Have you had a chance to look over some of the concepts First Impressions was developing with the Urban Trax executive team prior to your arrival?"

"I did," he said, nodding a little as he held her gaze. "And?"

Jason cleared his throat and wondered if he should speak his mind or play it cool on his first day.

*They hired you for your mind, dumbass. Might as well give it to them.*

"To be honest," he said, "they kind of sucked."

Miriam stared at him. "I beg your pardon?"

"Not the work itself," he said, and kicked himself a little for being a dickhead right out of the gate. For God's sake, he could have done this with a bit more polish.

But it needed to be said, and he might as well be the one to say it.

“Look, it’s clear First Impressions does phenomenal work,” he said. “I’m not questioning anyone’s talent or skills or anything like that.”

“What are you questioning?” Miriam’s tone was surprisingly even, and she didn’t look pissed, which he took as a good sign. Still, there was a glint of something in her eyes. Pride in her work, which he could definitely relate to.

“I’m sure all the work you guys have done up to this point is exactly the direction the Urban Trax executive team asked you to go,” he said. “And I’m certain any other outdoor goods retailer would be thrilled with it. Hell, Urban Trax has probably been thrilled with it, I imagine.”

“They were,” Miriam agreed, still eyeing him warily.

“As well they should be.” Jason cleared his throat. “But it just seems a little too—I don’t know—*snooty*. The executive team can correct me if I’m wrong here, but I think part of the reason I’ve been hired here is to stir shit up a little.”

The marketing director winced a little, but he nodded. “We prefer the phrase ‘deviate from the status quo.’”

“Yeah, that.” Jason rubbed a hand over his chin, remembering that he’d forgotten to shave that morning. Or the morning before that. Or the morning before *that*.

“So let me get this straight,” Miriam said. “Instead of the polished, sleek, ‘don’t you wish you had a million-dollar backpack’ sort of campaign Urban Trax has launched in the past, you’re looking for something a bit dirtier.”

“Dirtier,” Jason repeated, and his mind veered a little at that. “Yes, I suppose you could say that.”

Miriam nodded, her gaze fixed on his. “I agree.”

Jason blinked. “You do?”

“Yes.” She set the pen down and rested her palms on the table. “As a matter of fact, the executive team may recall we

proposed something along those lines after our first meeting with them back in October.”

From his peripheral vision, Jason could see the execs shifting a little in their seats, but Jason kept his gaze on Miriam.

“Do you still have that proposal?” he asked.

“We do,” Miriam replied. “Back at the start of this contract, I even mocked up several new logos and some ad concepts I could pull up fairly easily.”

There was an uncomfortable murmur around the room, and Jason glanced over at his executive team. The accounting director sat scowling and fidgeting, and Jason wondered if the little weasel had some sort of bug up his butt.

The man cleared his throat and looked at Holly. “This meeting is confidential, correct?”

“That’s right, Rex,” she said, not batting an eyelash. “All our meetings are confidential. Is there something you wanted to share?”

Rex pushed his laptop shut and regarded them with a stern expression. “Look, let’s not beat around the bush here. Urban Trax has been bleeding money for the last three quarters, and our stock took a major hit after the whole embezzling scandal.”

“I’m sorry to hear that,” Holly said.

Miriam folded her hands on the table and looked a little like she might want to hit someone.

Jason could relate.

Rex kept talking. “The board of directors is poised to eliminate two hundred jobs within the next quarter unless we can turn things around. Perhaps now isn’t the time to be screwing around with experimental rebranding.”

Jason opened his mouth to tell the guy to pull his head out of his ass, but Miriam spoke first. “With all due respect, sir, that’s precisely the time to do a major rebrand. The company

needs fresh blood, fresh ideas, a fresh approach to business. A signal to your consumers that you're ready to play ball."

She looked at Jason, who had to admit Miriam's way of telling the guy to pull his head out of his ass was probably more effective than his would have been.

Beside her, Holly spoke. "It's what we've been urging Urban Trax to consider," she said. "A thorough rebrand, as opposed to slightly new spins on old ideas."

"Now *that* sounds like a plan." Jason tamped down his anger over hearing this goddamn layoff idea for the first time in a marketing meeting instead of in a private briefing in his own office. Rex Rutherford was either clueless or a total prick. Probably both, which could be a dangerous combination.

Jason picked up his pen to jot the first words in his new notebook.

*Figure out how to beat corporate assholes at their own game.*

Not the most professional note in the world, but a good thing to have on his to-do list as a new CEO.

He flipped the notebook closed and turned back to Miriam and laid his hands flat on the table. "You still have the original concepts you worked up for Urban Trax? The ones that represent a dirtier, edgier approach you're talking about?"

"Absolutely."

"Well then, let's see what you've got."

Miriam licked her lips. "I'd be happy to show you."

\* \* \*

IT WAS WELL after five o'clock, but Miriam and Holly sat hunched at their laptops in the conference room, debriefing over a dish of gummy penises left behind by a client specializing in adult-themed treats.

Holly frowned at her screen as she nibbled the tip of a green gummy dick. “If we shift the Sunstone Lemonade account to Curtis and put Erica in charge of hiring the voice talent for those Visit Portland radio spots—”

“And maybe we could fast-track things on hiring that new account rep,” Miriam mused. She scrolled through her too-full calendar. She really needed to budget time for things like peeing and sleeping. “Also, we should probably put Sierra or Brandon on the production team for the Rosewood Pianos account.” She grabbed a strawberry-flavored gummy dick, popped it in her mouth, and chewed as she moved her cursor over the page.

“Right.” Holly glanced up from her laptop. “If we do all that and shuffle the Anderson marketing plan to next month, we might be able to devote the time they need to this new direction on the Urban Trax project.”

“You mean the new *old* direction? The one we should have gone with in the first place?”

“At least they’re considering taking our advice this time,” Holly said.

“Yeah, thanks to Jason.” Saying his name sent a shiver of pleasure through her body, but she ordered herself to stay focused on work. She started to reach for another gummy dick, but folded her hands on the table instead. “I still can’t believe Urban Trax is in that much financial trouble.”

“It makes sense, though, doesn’t it?” Holly said. “I mean with the embezzling thing and with the way they were already in a downslide before they came to us.”

“Yeah, but to have to lay off that many people?”

Holly shrugged and grabbed another piece of candy. “I don’t think they remembered to brief the new CEO before today’s meeting. Did you see the look on his face when Rex Rutherford mentioned the layoff?”

“Yeah,” Miriam mused, remembering Jason Sanders’s stunned expression. “It wasn’t much different from how he looked when my cat barged in on him naked.”

Holly snort-laughed and nearly knocked over her glass of ice water. “God, what are the odds? Seriously—the hot naked guy in your bathroom turns out to be the new CEO for one of our biggest clients.”

“Definitely a crazy coincidence. Also, I totally lied. The look on his face in that meeting was way different from the look he had when he caught me staring at his junk.”

“I can only imagine.”

Miriam’s brain took a detour down Pervert Lane at the memory of all that glorious man-flesh on display in her bathroom. Jason Sanders looked like he’d been digitally enhanced in all the right places.

Some places more than others.

She found herself grinning at the memory, both of the meeting and the encounter in the bathroom. “It was great to see him stand up to those stuffed shirts on day one. I knew before today’s meeting that the guy had huge balls,” she mused. “It was nice to see him prove it in front of everyone.”

“Thank you.”

Both women jumped at the sound of a male voice. Miriam turned to see Jason standing in the doorway, wearing a snug T-shirt, a pair of running shorts, and a smug smile.

Heat filled Miriam’s cheeks as Holly gaped at him. “Tell me you didn’t just hear that,” Miriam said as Jason continued to grin from the doorway.

“No can do.” He unfolded his arms to reveal a chiseled chest that made Miriam want to rake her fingernails down his torso. As though reading her thoughts, he grinned wider and strode into the conference room. “But thanks, by the way.”

“No problem,” Miriam muttered, shaking her head. “How did you get in here, anyway?”

“My fault,” Holly said, finding her voice at last. “I left the door unlocked because Ben’s coming to take me to dinner. Actually, that’s probably him now.” She glanced down at her phone, then got the same goofy, love-struck grin she’d had



from the first day she'd met her new husband. She looked at Jason and grimaced. "Sorry about that. I swear we're usually very professional with our clients."

"It's after hours." Jason eased himself into a chair beside Miriam, and his knee bumped hers under the table, making her shiver. "You don't have to be professional with me."

Miriam felt a surge of desire to be anything but professional with him, but she settled for giving him an apologetic nod. "Even so, I'm sorry for my remarks. I don't ordinarily comment on our clients' anatomy."

"I'm going to assume you're not ordinarily this familiar with your clients' anatomy," he pointed out. "It's understandable under the circumstances. Also a little flattering."

Still a little red-faced, Holly grabbed her laptop and shoved it in her bag. "I have to run," she said, squeezing Miriam's shoulder as she stood up. "Want me to lock up on my way out?"

"Yeah, thanks. Have a good date night!"

"Thank you." Holly beamed. "I'm going to ask Ben to hit the drugstore for a you-know-what test on the way to dinner."

"Because nothing says romance like peeing on a stick?"

She laughed. "Exactly. Have a good night!"

Holly disappeared down the hall, which left Miriam alone with the tall, handsome, not-so-homeless guy who'd been naked in her house just a few days ago.

She turned back to Jason, surprised to realize she felt nervous around him all of a sudden. "So." She folded her hands on the table. "You're the new CEO of Urban Trax."

"It appears that way." He reached for the candy dish, picked up an orange gummy, and frowned at it. "Is this a penis?"

"Technically, it's the whole anatomy—cock and balls, to be precise."

“For a woman who just told me she’s not ordinarily focused on clients’ anatomy, this seems like an odd choice in snacks for your boardroom.”

“I said I didn’t comment on the clients’ anatomy—not that I wasn’t focused on it.”

He grinned like he’d just gotten her to admit something she hadn’t meant to, and Miriam wondered why she seemed so hell-bent on putting her foot in her mouth around this guy.

“Anyway, the gummy dongs are from a client who specializes in food shaped like genitals,” she explained as she tucked a wayward curl behind one ear. “Pasta, chewing gum, lollipops, even ice cube trays.”

“Huh.” He shoved one in his mouth and chewed without apparent hesitation. There was something oddly sexy about a man confident enough in his masculinity not to go all homophobic about a bowl full of gummy dicks, and the thought turned her on.

Then again, this guy could wear lederhosen and recite excerpts from her iPhone user manual and she’d be turned on.

She cleared her throat again. “So how did your first day go?” she asked.

“You tell me how it went. You witnessed a good chunk of it today.”

“The meeting was...*interesting*,” she offered for lack of a better word.

“Come on.” He rested his hands palms-down on the table. “I’m serious, I want your opinion.”

“You’re asking how I think you performed in the meeting?” Hell, no good could come of this.

“Yep.” He folded his hands on the table. Massive hands, she noticed.

*Pay attention, Miriam.*

“I’m the new guy,” he said. “And you’ve been working with the execs for months now. I want to know how you think

I did.”

She studied him, trying to assess how serious he was. “You want me to pat you on the ass and give you a cookie, or you want me to give it to you straight?”

Jason grinned. “I’d kinda like all of the above, actually.”

“We’ll have to do a rain check on the cookie,” she said, deliberately not mentioning the ass pat, even though her hand tingled with the thought of touching him. “So you really want feedback?”

“Lay it on me. I have thick skin.”

Her libido did an internal shudder at his word choice, but she managed to hold it together. “Well, you already heard me tell Holly you’ve got balls. That’s a compliment, by the way.”

“I took it as one.”

“Good. But the one thing you don’t have is professional polish.”

“True,” he agreed, stretching those long legs out in front of him under the conference table and bumping Miriam’s knee again. “That’s kinda why they hired me.”

“Not exactly,” she said. “They hired you because you’re an authentic, rugged, outdoorsy mountain man who happens to have solid business experience and a good head on his shoulders.”

*And between his legs*, her libido telegraphed, but she kept her gaze on his.

“You’re obviously smart,” she continued, “and you’re obviously a good businessman, but you have to show them you can do more than swing your dick around. You have to show them you can play in their league.”

He laughed and shook his head, eyeing her with renewed interest. “Are you always this blunt?”

“Yup. It’s why Holly leads most of the meetings and I sit there doodling dick pics on my iPad screen.”

“So that’s what a Chicago Art Institute-educated, ADDY Award-winning graphic designer spends her time drawing.” He grinned wider when Miriam blinked in surprise. “I looked you up after the meeting. Figured you got an intimate look at my junk, the least I could do was find out more about you.”

“Please tell me there are no nudie photos of me on the internet,” she said, only half kidding.

“None that I could find, and that wasn’t for lack of trying.”

“It’s nice to see you have ambition.”

“So back to the meeting,” he said. “You think my professional polish is lacking?”

“That can’t be surprising to you, can it?”

“Nope,” he agreed. “I suppose I’m with you on the tendency toward foot-in-mouth disease.”

“At least I have the good sense to keep my mouth shut in board meetings instead of peppering all my dialogue with profanity.”

“Keeping my mouth shut isn’t usually an option as CEO,” he pointed out. “I don’t suppose you’d care to give me some pointers on being a more polished professional?”

“What, you mean like etiquette lessons?”

“Sure, something like that.”

Miriam snorted. “We’ve known each other forty-eight hours, so I’ll give you the benefit of the doubt for not realizing I’m the last person in the world who should be giving anyone etiquette lessons.”

“I beg to differ,” he said, his gaze sweeping her body in a way that made her shiver. “You’re the most put-together woman I’ve ever met.”

“Looks can be deceiving.”

“And you totally owned it in the board meeting.”

“Owning a team of suit-clad, tie-yanking executives is only slightly more challenging than owning a housecat.”

“I’ve met your cat. Considering he sexually assaulted me, that qualifies as a challenging pet.”

“He’s well-trained.”

“That reminds me—Fuzzy?” He rolled his eyes. “You’re one of the industry’s foremost creative geniuses and you have a cat named *Fuzzy*?”

“It’s spelled P-h-u-z-e-e-i.”

“Phuzeei?”

“Yep.”

He looked at her a moment, then smiled. “That explains so much.”

She was saved from asking what he meant when he banged his hand on the table in front of him, a move that simultaneously startled her and left her wondering how he felt about spanking in the bedroom.

“Tell you what,” he said. “You give me a few pointers on polish and professionalism, and I’ll give you free outdoor adventure tours.”

“Outdoor adventure?” She wasn’t surprised to hear that the words emerging from her mouth had the same intonation she’d use if she said “Pap smear” or “Ebola.”

“Thanks, but no thanks.” She flipped open her laptop. “But actually, I can show you some of my favorite fashion websites if you want to get some ideas for professional attire and—”

“Wait, why don’t you want an outdoor adventure?”

Miriam stared at him and wondered whether to offer the real story or the one that seemed most obvious.

“I’m a city girl through and through, in case you hadn’t noticed,” she said, settling for the surface story.

“Right, but you’re a city girl who’s managing the account for the nation’s second-largest outdoor gear retailer,” he pointed out. “Don’t you think you should be at least a little familiar with our products?”

“I am familiar with your products,” she said. “I did intensive market research using the reports from—”

“No, no, no,” Jason interrupted. “Reports aren’t the same as actually experiencing it. When was the last time you played outside?”

Miriam tamped down the panic that threatened to bubble its way up from her gut. It wasn’t his fault. He couldn’t possibly know she’d spent the last year avoiding all things outdoorsy.

*Especially men with an adrenaline habit.*

She swallowed hard and forced herself to answer his question. “I went outside on Saturday,” she said. “I walked out to get the mail.”

Jason shook his head and looked at her like she’d lost her mind. “Come on, I’ll start you off easy. Maybe some spelunking or something.”

“I don’t know what spelunking is, but unless it’s a drink, a sex act, or a fashion designer, I’m not interested.”

He cocked his head to the side. “Wait, so you *would* be interested if spelunking was a sex act?”

“I was being glib,” she said, tossing her hair and making note of the eagerness in his expression. “Whatever it is, I’m guessing it’s outside my comfort zone.”

“Exactly why you should do it.” He grinned again. “Spelunking is cave exploration. I have all the gear, and there’s a really amazing cave I know of just a couple hours away. Come on, it’ll be fun.”

“I think you and I have very different definitions of *fun*.”

“I doubt that,” he said. His voice was low and molten, or maybe that’s just how Miriam heard it. Either way, it sent a shiver down her spine.

She shook her head, trying to keep her cool. “I really don’t think cave exploration is necessary. Or any other adventure, really. I can serve Urban Trax just fine from the comfort of my desk chair.”

“I disagree,” he said. “I think it’s very necessary. And as your client and the CEO of the second-largest outdoor retailer in the country, I require it.”

Miriam rolled her eyes, annoyed to realize how turned on she was by the whole alpha-male mountain-man thing. “You remember that thing I said about not needing to swing your dick around?”

“That’s the second time in ten minutes you’ve mentioned my dick,” he said. “If I didn’t know better, I’d accuse you of being obsessed with it.”

“Fine,” Miriam said, pretty sure this was the least professional conversation she’d ever had with a client. She knew she needed to call a halt to it, but his teasing had left her tingling from the nape of her neck all the way down to her toes. “I’ll go spelunking with you. But I won’t agree to like it.”

“That’s the spirit.”

“Now can we talk business for just a minute?”

“Fire away.”

As Miriam launched into a discussion of marketing plans and ad campaigns, the back of her brain stayed hung up on the simmering attraction she felt for this burly, ridiculously sexy lumberjack lookalike beside her.

The whole thing was stupid. Considering what happened with her dad, she kept her distance from guys who fed on adrenaline like it was oxygen. She’d sworn six ways to Sunday she’d never get involved with a guy like Jason Sanders.

So what the hell was she doing?

And why did she kinda wish spelunking was a sex act?

## CHAPTER 3



Jason rapped on his sister's front door and reflected on the fact that it was also sort of *his* door. He'd purchased the duplex when he moved them all to the city two weeks ago, and though he lived three feet away in the adjacent home, he liked to think there was enough separation between the two dwellings to give them each a bit of privacy.

That was especially handy when his five-year-old nephew, Henry, practiced his drumming skills with a collection of his mother's pots and pans. Though the sound didn't carry through the walls when Jason was safely in his space, he could hear it now as Ellie threw the door open to reveal a gleefully percussive little boy and one frazzled-looking mom.

"What?" barked the frazzled-looking mom, who also happened to be Jason's baby sister.

He felt a rush of fondness for Ellie, mingled with the absolute certainty he was put here on this earth to care for these two remaining members of his family.

But he was a big brother, of course, so he opted to show his fondness by tousling her hair.

"Good morning to you, too, sunshine," Jason said as she ducked out from under his hand and smacked it away. "I take it he found the drumsticks?"

"No, he's using my wooden spoons again."

"I thought you hid those."



“I did. Apparently his desire to be Alex Van Halen outweighs his fear of climbing up on the counter to reach the top of the fridge.”

“Climbing’s in his genes,” Jason said with a twinge of pride. “Maybe I’ll buy him a harness and a set of crampons for his sixth birthday.”

“And maybe I’ll be attending my big brother’s funeral after I murder you in your sleep.”

Jason laughed and glanced at Henry. “How’d he sleep?”

“Really well. Hopefully that means the new meds agree with him.” Ellie turned to look back at her son, who had reached a musical crescendo and was using a pair of stainless steel lids as cymbals. “Maybe that’s the problem,” Ellie said. “He’s well-rested and feeling good and ready to take on the world.”

“They said that might be the case at this stage in remission.” Jason peered around Ellie and called out to his nephew. “Hey, big guy! You gonna be good for your mom today?”

Henry nodded and dropped his cymbals, then scurried toward the door. He wrapped his small body around his uncle’s leg with the fierceness of a small anaconda, then released it before Jason had a chance to stoop down to proper hugging level.

Henry looked up at him, beaming, as he shoved his glasses up on his tiny freckle-spotted nose. “Uncle Jason, I have a penis and you have a penis but mommy and Mrs. O’Reilly have fa-chynas.”

“Right,” Jason agreed, unfazed by his nephew’s typical entrée to conversation. He looked back at his sister. “Mrs. O’Reilly?”

Ellie shrugged. “A woman we met at the park yesterday. One who seemed taken aback by receiving an anatomy lesson delivered by a five-year-old.”

They both looked at Henry, who seemed unconcerned by the whole thing. He’d scampered back to his makeshift drum

set and was rearranging Ellie's Dutch oven beside an overturned saucepan. Henry giggled and picked up the wooden spoons again, looking so happy and healthy that Jason's heart squeezed in his chest.

*This is the most important thing in the world. Taking care of these two, making sure Henry gets healthy and Ellie stays happy and they have everything they need. Nothing else matters more.*

“So why are you here?”

He turned back to Ellie, remembering why he'd come in the first place. “Do you still have that helmet I loaned you when Henry was in his Iron Man phase?”

“I think so. Why, you planning to build yourself a powered suit and spend your days fighting terrorism and corporate crime?”

“Maybe, if the executive team pursues this stupid plan with the layoffs.” He grimaced, then shook his head. “Forget I said that. It's a confidential personnel issue, not something I should be talking about with my sister.”

“My lips are sealed,” she said. “Not that I was planning to go post it on the Facebook page for my mommy-and-me play group.”

“I know, but I have to be careful now. Being the CEO of a major international company is a little different from running a regional outdoor adventure firm.”

“I can only imagine.” Ellie studied him a moment, her pale blue gaze so intense, he was tempted to look away. “Jason, I still feel bad about you giving up the job you loved just to support us through—”

“Don't,” he said, clapping a hand over his sister's mouth the way he used to when they were kids and she ran around the yard telling everyone he had cooties. She responded by biting him, which was also par for the course.

“I hope you've had your rabies shot,” he muttered as he drew his hand back. “Come on, El. Don't say that stuff. The new job was a good career move. The fact that it happens to

help you guys through this stage of Henry's treatment is just a bonus."

"I know, but I still wish I could contribute more."

"You *are* contributing. Remember how much you were paying for babysitters and day care before?"

"Right." She glanced over her shoulder at Henry, her expression softening a little. "It *is* nice watching over him all the time. Knowing one of us is always there in case something happens."

"Exactly. This way we don't have to trust some uneducated babysitter or—"

"Hey, it wasn't Karen's fault about the PICC line. That could have happened with one of us watching him, too."

"I know," Jason said, not totally believing it. "But this just feels safer. Not having to worry that someone else won't take care of him the way we would."

Ellie frowned but nodded. "In any case, we owe you big-time."

"So pay me back by finding that damn helmet. Come on, I've gotta go."

Ellie quirked an eyebrow at him. "Hot date involving a helmet?"

"Kinda," he said, which earned another probing look from his sister. "Not a date, exactly. Just going caving with the owner at our PR firm."

Ellie grinned like he'd just handed her a spa gift certificate. Come to think of it, he should probably do that. Being a single mom was a thankless job, and since the men in Ellie's life hadn't always been kind to her, Jason damn well ought to be.

"Oooh!" Ellie said. "Is this the same woman who saw your baloney pony?"

Henry looked up from his drums and giggled. "Baloney pony! Baloney pony! Baloney pony!" The boy dropped the

wooden spoons and began galloping around the house like a horse while Ellie and Jason looked on fondly.

“Baloney pony!” Henry shouted again. “I’m a baloney pony! Yee-haw!”

“Nice one,” Jason said. “Like he wasn’t already fixated on the whole penis/vagina thing.”

“Well until you said that, he probably had no idea what a baloney pony was.”

Henry giggled again and pointed at him. “Uncle Jason has a baloney pony.”

“That I do, kiddo.”

Ellie leaned closer, lowering her voice. “So you didn’t answer my question—you’re spelunking with the PR girl?”

“Miriam,” Jason said, liking the way her name sounded rolling off his tongue. “Yes. It’s just business.”

“You mean so you can give her pointers on caving or so she can give you pointers on being a refined and polished CEO?”

“Once again, yes.”

Ellie snorted. “If you come back here wearing a three-piece suit and lifting your pinkie when you drink tea, I’m calling the cops.”

“Actually, that’s the cool thing,” he said as he remembered his conversation with Miriam in the conference room the other day. “She doesn’t seem to want to change me much at all. She thinks the whole scruffy mountain man thing is good for the Urban Trax brand.”

“No kidding?” Ellie slugged him in the shoulder. “I hope she at least gets you to do something about your hair.”

“What’s wrong with my hair?”

“Nothing, if you want to look like Sasquatch just rolled out of a tent after sleeping in a beanie all night.”

“Maybe that’s exactly the look I’m going for.”

“In that case, you nailed it.” She grabbed him by the arm and pulled him into the house. “Come on. I think the helmet’s in the toy box.”

Ellie led him through the living room and into a corner of the small space she’d designated as Henry’s playroom, for all the good it did. The whole house was essentially Henry’s playroom, as was the world at large.

“I know it’s in here somewhere,” Ellie called from the depths of the red-and-yellow hand-painted toy box Jason had made for Henry when the boy was barely two. Back before cancer and chemo and all the heartache that came with it.

“It’s gotta be in here,” Ellie said, tossing out a plastic dinosaur, a mini basketball, and a broken lightsaber. “Here it is!”

She stood and held up the helmet triumphantly, her hair ruffled and wild and her face sweet and lovely and familiar as the back of his own hand. Jason was tempted to tousle her hair again, but he settled for taking the helmet.

“Thanks.”

“Don’t mention it.” Ellie nodded at the helmet. “Was this what you always meant when you used to remind me to bring protection on dates?”

He laughed. “I was thinking more along the lines of a Glock or a Magnum, but a condom would have sufficed.”

“I’m glad it didn’t,” Ellie said, shooting a loving glance at her son, who was back to tapping cheerfully on the pots and pans. “Even if his dad turned out to be a d-i-c-k-h-e-a-d, I got the better end of the deal.”

“That you did,” Jason agreed. He glanced down at his watch. “Look, I’ve gotta run. Call me if you hear from the doc with any new info?”

“It’s Saturday. I doubt we’ll hear anything until at least Monday.”

“Okay, then call me if you need anything. Or he needs anything. Or you run into any trouble with—”

“Go, Mr. Overprotective.” His sister shoved him toward the door. “We’ve got it covered.”

“I know you do,” he said, but he let her propel him back toward the entryway. “But I still worry about you.”

“And we appreciate that. We appreciate everything you’ve done for us, but you can relax every now and then, too, you know. Especially since he’s in remission now.”

Jason started to argue. To tell her there was no way he could ever let himself relax. Not when his family needed him, or when they’d come so close to losing Henry last year—

“Have fun today, okay?” Ellie said.

“Roger that,” Jason said, swallowing the lump in his throat as he stopped at the front door. “I’m just a phone call away if you need me.”

“Got it.” Ellie stretched up to give him a kiss on the cheek, which Jason made a big show of wiping off.

“Cooties.”

She rolled her eyes and gave him a fond smile. “You’re a jerk.”

“You’re a brat.”

“You’re a smelly boy.” She shoved him again. “Enjoy the spelunking. Behave yourself with your PR lady.”

“I’ll give it my best shot.”

“I’m sure you will.” She gave him a suggestive eyebrow wiggle, which just made him laugh.

Laugh and think lecherous thoughts about Miriam.

He was still grinning as he made his way down the walkway.

\* \* \*

MIRIAM STOOD SHIVERING at the mouth of the cave, her fingers clenched around the helmet Jason had just handed her. She

couldn't recall the last time she'd worn a helmet for anything, which didn't make her a wind-in-the-hair, helmet-free daredevil. On the contrary, she never did anything that necessitated cranial protection.

"I still can't believe you wore high heels to go caving," Jason muttered, shaking his head as he adjusted his own helmet.

"They're not high heels, they're wedges." Miriam turned her foot to the side to admire her tan leather calf-high boots. "It's only a two-inch wedge, and they're made by Keen— that company that has all the hiking stuff?"

"I know what Keen is. We sell their products through Urban Trax, and those boots are *not* for hiking. Walking on flat ground, maybe, but we're going to be trekking over lava rock and crawling on our bellies through tunnels."

Miriam glanced toward the cave and frowned. "If I'll be crawling, my footwear seems irrelevant. You should have warned me to wear full body armor."

"Here," he said, prying the helmet from her hands as he thrust a pair of sturdy-looking boots at her. "I thought this might be an issue, so I brought a whole stash of women's hiking boots."

"You keep that beside your stash of women's underpants?"

"Very funny. I used to run an outdoor adventure company. I probably have more boots and jackets in my closet than you do, though mine are a helluva lot more practical."

"Depends on the occasion, doesn't it?" She took the hiking boots from him and sat down on a boulder to swap out her footwear. "I'd much rather go into a board meeting wearing Manolos than these."

"Lucky for you, we're not going into a board meeting."

"You're going to have to explain at some point how that's lucky."

She yanked off her existing boot, throwing off her center of gravity. Before she could topple off the boulder, Jason

slipped into the space beside her, bracing her shoulder with his hip.

“Steady there,” he said. “I’d rather not have you breaking an ankle before we even get inside.”

“If breaking an ankle will get me out of going in that cave, I might give it a shot.”

Jason laughed and Miriam went back to tying her boot. Sarcasm aside, she really was a little freaked out about the cave. She didn’t like to admit it, but she’d always had just a touch of claustrophobia, and the idea of being in a cave with all those spiders and bats and—

“There are no spiders,” Jason said, reading her thoughts. “It’s too dark in there, and there’s no reliable food source.”

“What about bats?”

He shook his head. “Not this time of year, and not in this cave. Bats are amazing, though. They eat mosquitoes and pests, and the ones in this area are actually very cute and fuzzy.”

“In that case, I’ll run right out and get one as a pet.” Miriam gave a small shudder at the idea of fuzzy bats as she cinched the laces on the boots and stood up. “Let me put my other boots in the car and I’ll be right back.”

“I’m keeping the keys in case you’re plotting an escape,” he called, and she turned around to see him checking out her ass.

Okay, so at least she wasn’t the only perv ogling someone she shouldn’t be. She’d done her very best to keep her eyes off his anatomy the whole way here, not letting her gaze stray below his belt even once.

As she returned to his side, she wiped her hands down the legs of her jeans—pricey, 7 For All Mankind jeans she’d prefer not to destroy crawling through a cave, but she was going to be a good sport about this. “Okay, so—spelunking.”

“Spelunking,” he said as he plunked the helmet on her head. He began to cinch the straps and maneuver the little



wheels over her ears to tighten it around her head, and Miriam leaned into his hand just a little. “How does that feel?”

“Really good,” she answered, then realized he was asking about the fit of the helmet and not about his fingers brushing her face. “I mean—I think you have it tight enough.”

He palmed the top of her head and wiggled the helmet, then adjusted the dials again. “There. That’s better. You want to make sure it’s not going to come loose when you bonk your head on a rock.”

“Should I be concerned you said ‘when’ and not ‘if’?”

He shrugged. “It’s kind of a given. We’ll be going through some low caverns and with the helmet on, it’s inevitable you’ll underestimate where the top of your head actually is.”

“So you mean I probably wouldn’t bonk my head if I weren’t wearing the helmet?”

“Maybe not.” He grinned. “But I don’t like taking unnecessary chances.”

He reached out, and for a moment, she thought he was going to touch her face, maybe stroke the side of her cheek. She almost leaned into his palm, then realized he was reaching for her headlamp.

“There,” he said, flicking it on. “Now you can see.”

“That I can,” she agreed, thinking she was seeing a lot of him in the bright, high desert sunshine. His sandy hair glinted in the sun where it curled out from beneath his helmet, and his bright blue eyes twinkled. The stubble on his jaw made him look rugged and a little dangerous. He was definitely in his element here, and something about that started to dissolve Miriam’s anxiety. To her own amazement, she found herself feeling a tiny bit excited about this whole spelunking thing.

As if sensing her shift in mood, Jason grinned at her, then turned and strode toward the mouth of the cave. Miriam scurried after him, moving at a speedier clip than she was accustomed to. She didn’t usually move this fast unless there was a clearance sale at Barneys. As she hustled across the uneven terrain, she had to admit she was grateful for the boots.

They gave her better balance over the bumpy rocks, and the fact that Jason's presence left her a little weak-kneed made steady footing all the more crucial.

He led her down a steep incline, taking his time, turning back to check on her every now and then. "Nice and easy," he said. "Try not to lean back so much. It'll throw off your center of gravity."

"Like this?"

"That's good. Don't be afraid to brace yourself on the rocks. Here, take these."

He stopped walking and reached into the back pocket of his jeans to pull out a pair of gloves. She started to protest, knowing there was no way gloves that fit his massive palms could ever work for her hands. Then she noticed they were pink.

"You brought gloves just for me?"

"I had those in the car, too," he said. "I told you I'd provide everything you needed for the cave tour."

She pulled on the gloves, noticing they were warm from the heat of his back pocket. "You take your job pretty seriously, huh?"

"When it comes to taking care of anyone who's trusted me with their well-being, damn right I do."

There was an edge to his voice, something Miriam hadn't noticed before. She started to ask about it, but stopped herself. It's not like they were best friends chatting about their personal lives and hang-ups. This was just a business relationship, nothing more.

*You keep telling yourself that.*

Jason flashed her a grin, and she wondered for the second time if he'd read her thoughts. Then he turned and continued deeper into the cave, his footing careful and exact.

Miriam held back for a moment to watch him, admiring the slow precision of his steps even more than she admired his ass, which was quite a lot. If she was going to go traipsing into

the underbelly of the earth, at least she'd chosen to do it with a guy who believed in being cautious.

*Your dad believed that, too, and where did that get him? Dead on the side of a mountain, that's where.*

Miriam pushed the thought from her mind and pushed onward, trudging deeper into the cave. She shivered a little, grateful Jason had told her to bring a warm coat. It might be summer outside, but it was closer to forty degrees underground. He'd seemed surprised she hadn't brought some froofy cashmere thing, but a real, honest-to-goodness ski coat. She could credit her dad with that one. He'd given her a nice North Face parka for Christmas the year before he died, so at least she was warm.

She snuggled deeper into the coat, imagining she could feel her father's hug again just one more time. Lost in thought, she didn't notice Jason had stopped walking until she ran right into him.

“Ooof!”

“Sorry,” he said as he spun around and caught her by the elbows to hold her steady. “I should have warned you I was stopping.”

“No problem,” she said, kinda hoping he didn't take his hands off her anytime soon.

“I wanted to show you something.”

“I already saw it back in my bathroom.” She grinned in spite of herself.

“Very funny. Here, look up.”

She did as he told her and craned her neck to aim her headlamp overhead. She gasped as the bright beam caught the twinkle of a million sparkling stars. No, not stars, they were in a cave. Gemstones? Silver?

“What is that?” she breathed.

“Condensation,” he said. “Water seeping through tiny fissures in the lava tube.”

“It’s incredible.” She turned in a slow circle to take in the view from different angles. The tiny droplets flashed and sparkled, making her a little dizzy. Jason didn’t say anything at first, and when she dropped her gaze to look at him, she saw him studying her with a surprised smile.

“What?” she asked.

“You’re beautiful. Especially when you’re all full of wonder and excitement.”

She felt herself flushing at his words, but she kept her own words casual. “I’d be full of wonder and excitement over a sale at Nordy’s, too.”

But even she had to admit she’d never seen anything quite like this.

“Look down at the ground,” he said, and Miriam obeyed. Her gaze landed on several rounded humps of ice stuck to the floor of the cave and a few scattered boulders around them.

“What are they?” she asked, stepping closer to one for a better look at the unusual ice formations.

“Ice boobs.”

She laughed. “That’s the technical term?”

“No, but that’s what a lot of people call them.”

“I can see why,” she said, and rubbed a gloved hand over one.

“Stop doing that.”

“Why?” She frowned. “Will it disrupt the ecological systems of the cave?”

“Well, that, and you’re turning me on.”

She rolled her eyes and drew her hand back. “You’re such a guy.”

“Guilty as charged.” He grabbed her hand. “Come on, let’s keep going. I want to show you the next room.”

He trudged ahead of her, letting go of her hand, and Miriam tried not to feel disappointed. At least from this angle

she could stare at his ass again, which was becoming deliciously familiar.

He led her down a narrow corridor that got progressively smaller. He had to duck his head to continue, though she was still able to walk upright. The guy had to be six two or six three, in contrast to herself, at closer to five three without her heels.

Soon, though, she was ducking as well. She kept following him, tamping down the panic she felt as the space grew narrower and narrower. She ordered herself to breathe, not to think about creepy-crawlies or closed spaces or anything but the awe-inspiring backside of the man walking in front of her. She ran her fingers over the cave walls, reassuring herself with the solidness of the rock.

“You doing okay?” he called over his shoulder. “I think so,” she murmured.

He stopped moving and turned to look at her, probably making sure she wasn't bleeding to death or missing a limb. She tried to give him a smile, but she could tell it was weak. His smile was more reassuring. “A little claustrophobic?”

“Maybe just a tiny bit.”

“It's okay. I've got you. I promise this will be worth it.” Somehow, she believed him.

“Okay,” he said, pulling on his own pair of gloves. “It's going to get really narrow here and we're going to have to crawl for a bit. Would you feel more comfortable crawling in first, or following after me?”

She considered it for a moment, not sure which would be less scary. “I want you behind me,” she decided at last.

A glint of something flickered in his eyes, but he held his tongue. “Whatever you want.”

He gestured her toward the opening. Miriam crawled through but struggled to keep her breathing even. She banged her knee on a rock, but kept going, contorting her body to maneuver through the narrow passageway.

“Nice and easy,” Jason murmured behind her. “Take it slow, we’ve got plenty of time.”

“Okay,” Miriam squeaked, appreciating that the soft timbre of his voice seemed to slow her pulse. “How much farther?”

“About another ten feet. You’re going to hit a really sharp turn in just a second. Just follow it to the left.”

“Right,” she breathed as she squeezed herself through the passageway. “How are you doing this? You’re like a foot taller than me, and your feet have to be a size eleven or twelve.”

“Thirteen, actually,” he said, grunting a little as he followed close behind her. “I’ve had a lot of practice squeezing into tight spaces.”

It was on the tip of her tongue to make a suggestive comment, but she held back. This was a professional relationship, after all, and they were here for business purposes.

The feel of his hand on her ass gave her a moment to reconsider that.

“Oh,” she gasped.

“Sorry about that,” he said. “I was reaching for that rock behind you and you moved.”

“It’s okay,” she said, kinda wishing he’d do it again. “Almost there,” he said. “You see the opening?”

Miriam nodded, which was dumb, since he couldn’t possibly see her. “I think so.”

“As you start to emerge, you’ll see a big boulder to your right. Grab on to that and boost yourself up onto the narrow rock ledge below that.”

“Got it,” Miriam said, grateful for his gentle coaching and his warm hand and pretty much everything else about him right now. She caught hold of the rock he’d described and pulled her body up and out of the narrow tunnel. The top of her helmet bonked a low-hanging rock, but she kept going until her butt touched the rock ledge.

Then she scooted off to the side, making room for him to get out, too. “What now?” she asked.

Jason’s arms emerged first from the tunnel, impressively chiseled even beneath the puffy arms of his winter coat. He braced himself on either side of the opening, then pulled himself out and into the larger cavern where Miriam now found herself.

He hopped to his feet, dusted himself off, and grinned at her. “Kinda like being born, huh?”

Miriam glanced back at the hole they’d just emerged from. “If that’s supposed to be the birth canal, it’s the sharpest hoo-ha I’ve ever seen.”

He laughed and peeled his gloves off. He stuffed them into his coat pocket, turned, and strode deeper into the cave. “Come on, this is my favorite part.”

Miriam followed behind him, shaking a few pebbles out of her hair. She was feeling more sure-footed now, even a little excited by this adventure.

*It’s not like we’re BASE jumping off a mountain or something, she reasoned. As far as adventures go, this is a tame one.*

Still, it teetered dangerously close to her threshold of outdoorsy pursuits. The one she’d pledged never to cross. Why was that so exhilarating?

“Here,” he said, warning her this time so she wouldn’t go crashing into his back again. “Now look up.”

She half expected to see another series of twinkling lights or maybe a giant octopus. Anything seemed possible at this point.

“Where’s the ceiling?” she asked, blinking to clear her vision.

“About two hundred feet up,” he said. “This is the largest part of the lava tube. Right now we’re standing directly under the highway.”

“No kidding?” She kept staring upward, though she still couldn’t make out the roof of the cave.

“If you look over there, you’ll see some really cool mineral deposits.”

She followed the direction of his finger, letting her gaze drop to the iridescent white patterns on the wall. “It’s beautiful.”

“It’s the same stuff that makes up opals. That’s what gives it the iridescent quality.”

Her hands felt hot now, so she peeled off her gloves and shoved them into the pocket of her coat. She traced a finger over the pattern on the cave wall, noticing the way the formations twisted together like delicate lace.

“Ready for the coolest part?”

“Cooler than this?”

“Cooler than this,” he repeated.

Something in his voice made her tear her gaze off the cave wall to look him in the eye. Jason stared back, unblinking, his eyes molten in the beam of her headlamp. Her pulse kicked up, thrumming in her ears as those bright blue eyes studied her with an intensity that made her dizzy. He smiled then and pulled something from his pocket.

Miriam looked down at his hand, her eyes registering *condom* as her libido telegraphed *let’s go!*

It took a few beats for her brain to catch up with the parade and point out she was getting hot and bothered over a Life Saver.

She watched him unwrap the breath mint and slip it into his mouth. As his lips parted, her pulse sped up again. He smiled and reached for her hand.

“You ready for this?”

Miriam nodded numbly, though she had no idea what she was agreeing to.



Okay, maybe she had *some* idea what she was agreeing to. His lips looked soft and inviting and she could have sworn they were closer now to hers than they'd been mere seconds ago. Holy hell, was he going to kiss her?

"I'm ready," she breathed, savoring the sturdy grip of his warm fingers entwined with hers. She was fixated on his mouth, drawn to him by the scent of wintergreen and the desire pooling in her belly.

Jason's hand tightened around hers, and she tipped her head back a tiny bit, braced for the kiss.

"Get ready to see sparks," he murmured. "Okay."

Then he reached out and switched off her headlamp.

## CHAPTER 4



Jason felt Miriam sway a little as he plunged them into darkness with the flip of a switch. He dropped his hand from his own headlamp, his other hand still holding hers. He gripped it tighter, letting her know he had her, that he wouldn't let her fall.

“Ready?” he asked, his voice echoing off the cave walls. “Uh-huh.”

The breathiness of her reply reminded him that he hadn't told her what to be ready *for*, and the fact that she'd said yes without hesitation gave him the titillating sense that he'd severely underestimated Miriam Ashley.

He knew what she was thinking. Hell, he was thinking it, too. He'd been thinking it ever since she'd come sashaying out to his car in those ridiculous shoes with her dark curls bouncing and her eyes bright and her lips so plump and kissable he'd nearly driven off the road a dozen times just thinking about claiming that delectable mouth for himself.

Picturing those lips now in the darkness, he ached to pull her closer, to find out if they were really as soft as they looked.

But that wasn't what he planned to do. Not yet, anyway. “So this is total darkness,” he said, giving her hand another squeeze. “Where we are right now, this deep into the cave, there's not even a trace of light that can reach us. Let's give our eyes just a few seconds to adjust.”

The slight hesitation that followed told him he'd surprised her, and his brain strayed back to the thought of kissing her.

But he felt her shift a little, and he wondered if she was nodding in the darkness.

“Okay,” she said. “Total darkness. Got it.”

“Now watch.”

Before she could point out the silliness of him telling her to watch when they’d just established they were in total darkness, he opened his mouth wide, then cracked the wintergreen Life Saver between his teeth.

“Oh!”

Miriam’s gasp told him the stunt had worked, but he chomped the candy a few more times, just to make sure.

“See the sparks?” he asked, swallowing the tiny bits of Life Saver as he reached into his pocket with his free hand and pulled out two more cellophane-wrapped candies.

“Oh my God, what was that?”

“Triboluminescence,” he said, grinning in the darkness at the delight in her voice.

“Say what?”

“Triboluminescence,” he repeated. “It’s what happens when the molecules of crystalline sugar are forced out of their atomic fields. The free electrons collide with nitrogen molecules in the air, which causes them to vibrate.”

“I can’t tell if you’re talking dirty or talking geeky, but either way, I like the way it sounds.”

He laughed and pressed one of the Life Savers into her hand. “Here. Unwrap it carefully and stick the wrapper in your pocket so we don’t leave litter behind. Got it?”

“Yes.” He heard the crinkling of the wrapper and the sound of her popping the candy into her mouth. “It’s wintergreen.”

“Yes. Methyl salicylate or oil of wintergreen is fluorescent,” he said. “It absorbs light of a shorter wavelength and emits it as light of a longer wavelength, so it produces light on the visible spectrum.”

“The sparks looked blue when you did it.”

“Yes. Blue light. That’s part of the visible spectrum. Go ahead, try it.”

He heard the crunch of the candy between her teeth, and he watched the crackle of blue sparks in the darkness.

“Did I do it?” she asked, her voice oddly giddy. “I can’t see if I’m doing it right.”

“You’re doing it right.” He popped a second piece of candy into his mouth. “Here’s another one.”

He slid another Life Saver into her warm palm as he bit down on his own candy, rewarded by the sound of her giggling in the darkness. “Wow! That’s so cool!”

“I’m glad you like it.”

Glad and surprised. He’d expected her to be polite, maybe even mildly amused, but the excitement in her voice was something altogether different. He’d led tours with bored city kids before who’d dismissed this little blue spark phenomenon as “like, *so lame*.”

But Miriam’s enthusiasm made him want to stand here cracking Life Savers between his molars all day long.

Something clicked in the darkness, and he wondered what she was fiddling with. He could have sworn he smelled something perfumy, like his sister’s makeup drawer, but maybe that was just Miriam’s hair.

He heard the crack of a Life Saver, followed by a soft squeal. “It worked!” She crunched again. “I see it in the mirror. I see sparks in my mouth!”

“You have a mirror? On a cave tour?”

“Of course. I always have a compact in my pocket.” Jason snorted. “I carry a pocketknife, you carry a mirror.”

“You’re just jealous you can’t see your own sparks.”

“You’re kind of right,” he said, nudging closer to her.

“I’ve been doing this on cave tours for ten years and I never thought to bring a mirror. Let me see.”

He moved closer, shoulder to shoulder with her now. He couldn’t see anything in the darkness, but he leaned close so his cheek brushed hers. He reached out in front of him and caught hold of the hand that held the compact.

“It’s right here in front of us,” she said, steadying the mirror—and his hand—about five inches from their faces. He heard her crunch down on a Life Saver, and she laughed again as blue sparks flashed in the small mirror.

Jason unwrapped another candy and stuck it in his mouth. He bit down on it, rewarded by another flash of blue in the mirror.

“This is so cool!” Miriam gushed.

“It is,” he agreed, though it had never seemed quite this cool before. Something about her childlike delight made the whole experience like the first time he’d ever done this.

He chewed the last little tiny pieces of Life Saver as the chilled flavor of wintergreen slid down his throat. Miriam’s breath felt warm on the back of his hand, or was that his breath? They stood so close in the darkness, still cheek to cheek. He should probably pull back, but he felt melded together with her here in the mint-tinged darkness.

“Got any more?” Her voice was warm in his ear, her mouth so close he could feel her breath against his lips.

“No more candy.”

She lowered the hand holding the mirror and slid it to her back pocket. That was probably his cue to let go, but he didn’t. He kept his hand on hers, letting her guide it to the back of her jeans.

“You’re aware that you’re grabbing my ass right now?”

“Yes.”

“Just checking.”

He hesitated, giving her a chance to push him away, to tell him this was a bad idea. Miriam didn't move, so he lowered his head. His lips brushed hers in the darkness, and their helmets bumped softly against each other. He tilted his head, getting the angle right, feeling her lean into him.

“You're aware that I'm going to kiss you now?”

He felt her nod against him, lips light against his. “Yes.”

“Just checking.”

Then he did it. He started slow at first, getting acquainted with the softness of those lips, the gentle pressure of her tongue touching his. He'd never kissed anyone in a cave before, and felt struck by the contrast of it all. The coolness of the air, the heat between their bodies. The softness of her mouth, the hardness of the rock as he leaned her back against the cave wall, bracing them both with his free hand.

She gave a soft moan and tilted her head to the side, kissing him deeper. Her hand bumped his hip in the darkness, fumbling for—what? He wasn't sure at first, and his cock throbbed with anticipation. Her palm opened and moved over his hip and around to cup his ass. She pulled him against her to bring their bodies tight together as he deepened the kiss.

Something about the darkness made him bolder, and he moved his hand from the back pocket of her jeans into the small of her back. Her body felt lush and hot against him, despite the thick layers that separated them, but he ached to feel more of her. At the edge of her coat, his fingers found the hem of her sweater. He lingered there for a moment with his fingertips grazing the soft cashmere above her belt loop. Then he slid his hand up, tunneling under the sweater until he found bare skin.

“Oh,” she gasped against his mouth, her breath soft and minty as her body arched against him.

He explored her skin with the tips of his fingers, taking his time to catalog every ridge of her spine, the hollow of her waist, the deliciously abundant curves. He brushed the clasp of

her bra, aching to undo it and then slide his hands around to cup her breasts as they spilled out into his palms.

Miriam moaned again as though responding to his thoughts, and Jason let his hand slide back into that narrow dip at her waist. She felt so warm, so lush, so unlike the rock-hard fitness fanatics he usually dated. Girls with chiseled bodies who ran ten-milers before breakfast and could bench-press as much as he could.

But Miriam felt soft. Soft *everywhere*, a delectable playground for his fingers. She was all female, a scrumptious buffet of curves and flesh that he wanted to sink into and lose himself completely. Her body moved against him, so he let his hand drift up to graze the underside of her breast.

“Yes,” she breathed, which was all the encouragement he needed. He flicked open the clasp of her bra, pretty impressed with himself for doing it one-handed. As the bra popped open, his fingers moved beneath the underwire and freed the soft globe into his hand.

“God, you feel good.” He moaned against her mouth as he cupped her breast in his palm. In response, she pressed her pelvis against his, grinding into the hardness that strained against the front of his jeans.

“So do you,” she murmured, sliding against his hard-on in a way that left little question which part of him she found favorable.

He went back to kissing her, moving from her lips along the edge of her jaw and down. She gasped as his lips grazed the hollow of her throat, and she threw her head back to—

“Ow!”

Her yelp of pain came at the same instant he heard the crack of plastic on rock, and Jason clutched her tighter to keep her upright.

“Are you okay?” he asked.

“Holy crap. I thought the helmet was supposed to protect me. I’m seeing stars.”

He drew back, putting some distance between them without letting go of her. “From the sound of that hit, you wouldn’t be seeing much of anything right now if you weren’t wearing a helmet.” He slid his hands to her waist, testing to see if she felt unsteady on her feet. “Are you hurt?”

“No, I’m fine. A little rattled.” She cleared her throat in the darkness, and something told him she was having second thoughts about the wisdom of making out in a cave.

Jason could relate.

Hell, it was his fault she’d whacked her head. If he hadn’t been kissing her, this wouldn’t have happened. What was he thinking getting distracted like that? He was supposed to be taking care of her down here, not groping her like some horny teenager.

He let go of her waist and reached for her hand instead. “Look, I’m really sorry—”

“It’s fine, I’m okay,” she said. “Just—could you help me?”

“You need a Band-Aid? I have one in my pocket, or some ibuprofen or—”

“I’m not hurt, Jason. I just need a hand getting my bra hooked again.”

“Oh.” He slid his hands back around her waist, trying to execute the move in the most professional, respectful manner he could muster. He should probably turn the headlamps on to make this easier, but part of him didn’t want to break the spell of intimacy. “Sorry,” he said, still fumbling with the bra clasp. “Just give me a sec.”

“I really can dress myself, I promise. It’s just that I usually put it on with the clasp in front and wiggle it around to the back before putting my arms through, so I don’t usually hook it when it’s already on my body or when I’m wearing four layers of clothing.”

“Huh. I guess I never really thought about how women get a bra on.”



She laughed. “You mean you focused all your attention on learning to get the bra off?”

“Pretty much.”

He had it hooked again now, so he should probably stop touching her. Any second now. Okay, just one more second—

“Look, Jason—”

“You’re right, I know.” He slid his hands out from under her shirt and found her hands again, ready to catch her if she was still shaky on her feet. “Absolutely, this was a bad idea.”

“I wasn’t going to say that, exactly.”

“No?”

“Well, not exactly.” She gave a breathy little laugh. “I didn’t plan to use the word ‘bad,’ anyway.”

“But you don’t disagree with the sentiment?”

“No,” she admitted.

He kept reeling from the sensation of her body pressed up against his, every atom in his body screaming at him to touch her again.

*Stop it. That’s how she got hurt.*

He took another step back and let go of one of her hands so he could reach up and flick on his headlamp.

He’d hoped the wash of light would douse his raging libido, but it had the opposite effect. The sight of her tousled and blinking in the glare of yellow light just made him want her again. She smiled up at him, her helmet adorably askew, her lips plump and luscious, and his need for her surged again.

Then he noticed the gash on top of her helmet.

“Wow.” He reached out to touch it as a fresh wave of guilt socked him in the gut. “You really whacked it hard. You sure you’re okay?”

“Positive,” she said, then rolled her eyes upward like she could see the top of her own head. She lifted her hand to feel the dent in her helmet, and her fingers grazed his again.

He jumped back, feeling guilty for the rush of lust, for the ding in her helmet, for the fact that he'd let himself get so distracted. Hell, how long had they been down here? What if Ellie and Henry needed to reach him? There was no phone service in the cave, and they'd been down here for an hour at least. What if something happened?

A flash of light brought him back to the present, and to Miriam. She'd flicked on her own headlamp and stood there blinking, holding her arms around her as a shield against cold.

She smiled at him and gave a little shrug. "Hey, no harm, no foul."

"Absolutely." He nodded and did his best to return her smile. "We can just pretend it never happened."

"Good plan." She grinned again and dropped her hands to the sides, then pulled out her gloves and tugged them back on. "Ready to head back?"

"Yeah." He scrubbed a hand over his chin, an effort to wipe away the tingling effects of that kiss, but he only succeeded in drowning his senses with the scent of her perfume.

As he turned away, he knew one thing for damn sure: there was no way in hell he could pretend that hadn't happened.

\* \* \*

TWO DAYS LATER, Miriam switched off the blow dryer, then wrapped the cord around the handle. She stashed it in the cupboard before nudging the door closed with her knee. A glance at the clock told her it was nearly 8 p.m.

She stood downstairs in her guest bath instead of in the master bath upstairs because the showerhead down here was better for rinsing out the deep-conditioning treatment she'd just done on her hair.

Okay, that was only partly true.

Honestly, she'd liked the idea of standing there on the same cool tiles where Jason had stood ten days ago, feeling the water sluice over her naked body as she thought about him with rivulets of water threading through the fine hairs on his chest, sliding down, down, down...

Was that so wrong?

"Mrow." Phuzeei nudged his head against her bare calf, answering the question Miriam hadn't spoken aloud.

Miriam looked down at her pet, then bent and scooped him into her arms. She planted a kiss on his kitty forehead as she walked out of the bathroom. "What do you know, anyway?" she muttered. "You lick your own butt."

"Mrow," Phuzeei replied, not arguing, but clearly not helping matters, either. He struggled to get down, never one for affection, so she set him gently on the couch and pulled her robe tighter around her. She glanced outside to where some neighborhood kids were playing Frisbee at the playground down the street, enjoying the extra hours of daylight on a summer evening. It was Monday in June, and fifty-three hours had passed since she'd talked to Jason.

Not that she'd been counting.

It was better this way. They'd agreed to keep things strictly business between them, and Miriam planned to stick with that. No good could come from locking lips with a client.

*That's not the only reason you shouldn't get involved with him.*

True enough. The last thing she needed was another daredevil outdoor adventurer who took risks and lived dangerously until he stopped living entirely. Hadn't it been hard enough losing her dad?

Phuzeei jumped onto the arm of the sofa and bumped her elbow with the top of his head, jarring Miriam back to the present.

"It's better this way," she told her pet. He looked at her with disdain and nudged her with his head again.

“Right,” Miriam said.

She padded to the laundry room to see if her favorite Lululemon yoga pants were dry yet. She yanked open the door of the dryer, and a pink glove tumbled out onto the floor. Phuzeei bent down to sniff it, and Miriam picked it up.

Jason’s glove. The one he’d loaned her in the cave.

She’d wanted to wash them before returning them to him, and she’d nearly forgotten about it. Of course, she’d see him Wednesday at the First Impressions office when the Urban Trax team came to meet with them again, but what if he didn’t want anyone else to know they’d gone caving? As the new CEO of a prestigious company, it seemed possible he wanted to keep his personal time private.

Miriam fished into the dryer for the other glove, weighing her options. He’d pointed out where he lived the day they first met. Blue duplex, white shutters. It wouldn’t be hard to run the gloves over, maybe tuck them in his mailbox or leave them on the doorstep with a note—

*Liar. You just want to see him again.*

True enough. Was that so wrong? At least this way she’d spare them both the awkwardness of having their business colleagues know they’d been hanging out together socially.

*His* business colleagues, she amended. Holly already knew all about the cave outing and the kiss, since Miriam had told her every last detail the moment they’d returned.

“I can’t believe he kissed you in a cave,” Holly had said.

“I can’t believe he stopped,” Miriam muttered.

“Well, what did you want him to do, take you from behind up against the wall of the cave?”

*Kinda...*

Before she realized she’d made up her mind, Miriam had her clothes on and her makeup done to perfection. Nothing too dramatic—a little mascara, some blush, a hint of lipstick. She wore a pale yellow cotton sundress chosen to look like she’d thrown it on haphazardly after work instead of standing in her

closet for twenty minutes trying to choose just the right thing. With a light spritz of perfume, she picked up the gloves and headed toward the door.

“Be back in just a second,” she said to Phuzeei as she scooped up the bottle of red wine she’d chosen from her well-appointed wine rack. “But don’t wait up just in case.”

She walked more quickly than usual, her sandal-clad feet easily covering the two blocks from her house to the blue duplex he’d pointed out earlier. She hesitated on the doorstep, realizing she didn’t actually know which place was his. The doors looked identical, but the one on the right had a tiny bronze nameplate on it. Miriam squinted at the letters, trying to make out the word.

*Sanders.* Yep, this was definitely his place. She’d just lifted her hand to knock when the door flew open.

A slender blond woman with her hair in a ponytail stared back at Miriam. She pushed wispy bangs off her forehead, revealing an enviable pair of blue eyes that looked stunning without a trace of makeup.

Miriam resisted the urge to want to gouge out those eyes. “I’m sorry,” she stammered, glancing at the nameplate again. “I was looking for Jason Sanders, but I must have the wrong—”

“I’m Ellie,” the blonde said, and offered a friendly smile that made Miriam regret thinking evil thoughts about her eyes. “Jason just ducked out for a sec, but can I help you with something?”

“Ellie,” she repeated, trying to make sense of things.

Had he mentioned a roommate?

The woman smiled and leaned against the doorframe, giving Miriam a glimpse of the framed photo on the wall behind her. An image of Jason and Ellie perched side by side on matching mountain bikes on the edge of a canyon. Before Miriam could peer closer to see if they were holding hands or striking a friends-only pose, Ellie shifted again.

“He’ll be right back,” Ellie said. “He just ran to the grocery store to grab tampons and baby aspirin, but he shouldn’t be more than five more minutes.”

*Tampons? Baby aspirin?* A faint buzz started in Miriam’s ears, filling her whole brain with a chorus of self-doubt and dread.

But that crescendo was nothing compared with the sound she heard next.

“Mommy! Who’s there?”

Miriam felt her gut hit the floor. She looked down to see a little blond boy with pale blue eyes magnified by plastic-rimmed glasses and a dimple that matched Jason’s.

*Holy shit.*

Miriam took a step back, feeling like an idiot. For crying out loud, the guy had a wife and a kid. She’d locked lips with a married man.

Before Ellie or Miriam could respond to the kid’s question, the tyke grinned up at her and shoved his glasses up the bridge of his freckled nose. “I have a penis but mommy has a fa-chyna,” he announced.

Miriam took another step back, nearly falling off the front step in the process. “Um—yes. Yes. I’m sure she does.”

She tried not to look at Ellie, not wanting to consider the fact that Jason was clearly quite familiar with the other woman’s fa-chyna, if his son was any indication.

*How could you be so stupid?*

“I should go—” Miriam said, but Ellie cut her off.

“Oh, awesome—you brought my gloves back.” She pointed at Miriam’s hand, and Miriam looked down at them, trying to think of an excuse for having Jason’s wife’s gloves. “Right,” she said, and handed them over. “I was just—washing them.”

Ellie looked at her oddly but didn’t question the likelihood that Jason might have hired someone to wash a pair of stretchy

pink Dollar Store gloves. Miriam tried to think of something else to say, but her tongue felt glued to the roof of her mouth.

Seemingly unperturbed, Ellie set the gloves on an end table and gestured toward her living room. “You’re welcome to come on in and wait for Jase,” she said. “He shouldn’t be more than a few minutes. I’m sorry, how did you say you know him?”

With a start, Miriam realized she hadn’t said a word about why she’d come, but work seemed like a good enough cover. It was true, pretty much. Hadn’t they agreed to keep things strictly business?

*Never mind that kiss.*

“Right,” she said, finding her voice at last. “I’m—um—Miriam. I work with Jason.”

*Work. Is that what he’d been doing with his hand up Miriam’s shirt while his wife and kid waited at home for him?*

“Ahhh,” Ellie said, looking Miriam up and down with an expression Miriam couldn’t quite read. Was the other woman suspicious? Maybe Jason had a history of extramarital dalliances.

Miriam cleared her throat. “I was just dropping those off, but I’d better run.”

“Is the wine for him, too?”

Miriam looked down at the bottle tucked beneath her own arm. Under the circumstances, it seemed like a much too intimate gift. “Oh—uh—this isn’t for Jason. I was just out for a walk and thought I’d—”

“Get thirsty?”

“Right.” Miriam shifted the bottle under her arm and tried not to look too guilty. “So it was nice meeting you—”

“Ellie.”

“Ellie, right. Have a good night. Tell Jason I said hello. Or not. Or—actually, I guess I’ll see him at work.”

With her cheeks flaming and her gut boiling with a toxic blend of hurt and anger, Miriam turned and stalked down the steps.



## CHAPTER 5



Jason watched from across the boardroom table as Miriam stacked a pile of papers that clearly did not need stacking. She was smiling, but the furrow between her brows looked like someone had chopped it into her forehead with a hatchet.

“Well, I believe we’ve made some excellent progress here today,” she announced with what seemed like forced cheer, making eye contact with everyone around the table.

Well, everyone but him.

Hell, she’d barely spoken to him the whole meeting, except for the occasional business-only conversation about ad campaigns and design concepts. She’d been professional enough, but definitely nothing more.

*That’s what you agreed to, dumbass. Remember?*

Beside him, the accounting director shifted in his seat. “So you think these dollar figures are a solid estimate of the cost of moving forward?” Rex flipped a page on one of the handouts Miriam had presented at the start of the meeting.

“I do,” she said, resting a manicured hand beside her laptop. “This sort of rebranding effort doesn’t come cheaply, but I’m certain you’ll find—”

“I’m sorry, but our board of directors will never go for it.” Rex frowned and looked at Jason. “I know you’ve been lobbying them to take a shot with a campaign of this magnitude, but given the last round of financials we were presented, I’m not sure the time is right.”

Rex's words hung in the air between them, and Jason filled in the blanks on his own. He knew what the tight-ass accounting director was referring to. They'd both been in the meeting Monday morning, and Jason had fought like hell to convince the board that moving forward with the plan to lay off two hundred employees wasn't the best course of action. Not yet, anyway.

Across the table, Miriam opened her mouth to respond, but Jason beat her to it. "Actually, Rex, what I took from Monday's meeting with the board is that they're open to hearing creative solutions to the current financial challenges." He glanced at Miriam, who met his gaze with an unreadable expression. He turned back to Rex and tapped the mock-up of a logo concept he'd found particularly clever. "I think what Ms. Ashley and Ms. Colvin have just shown us here is creativity at its finest."

From the corner of his eye, he saw Miriam shift in her seat. He looked back to see her cheeks looked faintly flushed and she was watching him with a guarded expression.

"Thank you," she said tightly. "And as we've shown you from the case studies we presented from other First Impressions clients, we have a proven track record of helping clients make great financial strides with a few changes in the overall marketing approach."

Rex sighed. "Be that as it may, the Urban Trax board of directors is concerned about the bottom line."

"I'm concerned about the bottom line as well," Jason agreed. "But I'm also concerned with the bottom line for our employees. With our commitment to them and their families."

"Likewise." Miriam stared at Jason from across the table. "Few things in the world are more important than commitment and loyalty to family."

Jason nodded, surprised by the passion in her voice, but glad they were on the same page. "I couldn't agree more."

Rex frowned but said nothing. Jason watched as Miriam and Holly exchanged a look he couldn't quite read. The two

women seemed to have a shared language all their own, which probably explained why they ran such a successful business together.

“Well,” Holly said, taking charge of the meeting again. “It sounds like the Urban Trax executive team has a lot to discuss. We’re already over our allotted time, so we won’t keep you any longer.”

Miriam nodded and closed her laptop. “If you have any questions about what we’ve presented here today, please don’t hesitate to reach out.”

Again, Jason couldn’t help but notice she was avoiding his eyes. Was it normal post-grope awkwardness? Was she playing it cool? They’d agreed to pretend the kiss never happened, but what was going on here seemed like something more.

Ellie had told him Miriam stopped by to drop off the gloves, and he’d been bummed to miss her. “She’s pretty,” his kid sister had said, grinning like she had in grade school when she found out he had a crush on a girl. “I tried to get her to come in and hang out until you got back, but she didn’t want to wait around for your sorry ass.”

So that’s the way it had to be between them. It made sense, but Jason couldn’t pretend to like it. He’d been trying like hell to forget that kiss for the last four days. Maybe Miriam had had better luck with that than he had.

Around the table, the other executives were beginning to stand up and stuff papers into briefcases. Rex seemed intent on ignoring Jason, but the marketing director, Pete Marshall, gave him a nod. “Do you need a ride back to the office?”

“Nah, I biked here,” Jason said. “You go on ahead. I want to stay a minute longer to go over some of the ad concepts with Holly and Miriam.”

“Actually, Holly has another meeting scheduled in here,” Miriam said with a glance at her business partner. Holly gave what looked like a sympathetic head tilt before Miriam turned back to Jason.

Her eyes shone bright and a little wary, but at least she was looking at him now. “We can talk in my office,” she offered.

“I’d like that.”

Miriam nodded, not echoing the sentiment, but not arguing, either. They both stood up and gathered their things, Miriam moving with crisp efficiency. She headed for the door, and Jason followed, admiring the sway of her hips and the gloss of those dark curls. He remembered the feel of those curls tangled around his fingers, and he ordered himself to stop ogling her.

She rounded a corner into an office, so Jason followed and sat when she gestured him to a straight-backed chair in front of her desk. She pushed her door shut behind him, then turned and plugged in an electric teakettle. He watched in silence as she went about making a pot of tea, arranging a handful of fancy-looking cookies onto a plate, filling a delicate little creamer from a milk carton in the mini-fridge, then carrying the whole thing on a tray to her desk.

She set the small feast on the surface between them, centering the little tray of cookies in the middle of her desk before setting a thin china plate in front of him. She poured each of them some tea in a flowery cup that looked like it was made for a dollhouse.

Finally, she took a seat on the other side of her desk. She looked at him for a few beats and Jason felt the same prickly-skin sensation he used to have when he got summoned to the principal’s office in middle school.

“So,” she said, breaking the silence at last. “Commitment to family is important to you.”

“That’s right,” he said slowly, not sure whether he was supposed to pick up a cookie or just admire them. “I appreciate you underscoring that just now in the meeting.”

“Of course.” Her voice was oddly brittle, and her green eyes flashed with something he couldn’t quite read. “There’s nothing in the world more important to me than loyalty.”

“Good,” Jason said, not sure why they were rehashing this point. “I may be new to Urban Trax, but as CEO, it’s my duty to protect our employees. To look out for their well-being and security.”

“I see.” Miriam steepled her hands together on the desk in front of her as she stared at him with ice in her eyes. “So at what point were you planning to tell me you have a wife and kid?”

“Oh.” A lightbulb flashed in the back of his brain, and he leaned back in his chair, glad to have this out in the open at last. “Well, I guess *never*. Since I don’t actually have a wife and kid.”

She narrowed her eyes. “What?”

He laughed, so relieved to realize what all the hostility was about that he didn’t care that her frown deepened at the bark of his laughter. “Ellie,” he said, shaking his head a little as the puzzle pieces clicked together. “You’re talking about Ellie?”

“That’s right,” she said slowly, sounding less sure of herself now. “And your son, Henry?”

“If Henry were my son, this would be a conversation for Jerry Springer.” He laughed again, then scooped his teacup into his palm and took a fortifying slurp. “Henry’s my nephew. Ellie is my sister.”

“Your sister,” she repeated, looking as stunned as he’d felt just a few seconds ago. “And your nephew.” Miriam closed her eyes and covered her face with her hands. “God, now I feel like an idiot.”

“Don’t,” he said, setting the teacup down. He kept grinning as he shoved a cookie into his mouth and chewed, dropping crumbs down the front of his shirt. Miriam uncovered her face and he offered her a sympathetic smile. “To be fair,” he said. “I never mentioned them to you.”

“Why on earth not?” she asked, her gaze flickering to the cookie crumbs on his shirt before returning to his face. “We were in the car together for a long time on Saturday. You

might have mentioned that you live with your sister and her kid.”

“Technically, they live next door. I own both sides of the duplex, and you just happened to knock on their door instead of mine.”

“Okay,” she said with exaggerated patience. “Still, it seems like something you might have mentioned. We talked about a lot of other things on Saturday.”

He shrugged and brushed cookie crumbs off the front of his shirt before licking the buttery residue off his finger. “I guess I’m a little protective of them. Of their privacy. Henry was diagnosed with leukemia eighteen months ago—”

“Oh my God, I’m so sorry!”

“Thank you. Anyway, it’s been a long battle, but he’s in the early stages of remission now. Partial remission, they call it. He’s not out of the dark, but it’s looking promising.” He reached for another cookie. “The whole process has been really hard for Ellie and for Henry. Ellie’s a single mom, and she had a bad experience with a sitter watching him one night she had to work.”

“What happened?”

“They were roughhousing a little and they dislodged his PICC line—the dedicated catheter they use for delivering chemo drugs? Everything turned out fine, but it was scary for everyone.”

“I can imagine.”

“Anyway, that was the straw that broke the camel’s back as far as I was concerned. After that, I kinda stopped trusting anyone else to watch Henry, so I took this job and we moved out here and now Ellie gets to stay with him all the time.”

“Wow,” she said, her green eyes brimming with compassion. “You sound like a very dedicated brother. And uncle.”

“I am,” he said, though he knew Ellie would probably say “overprotective” instead of “dedicated.” Not that she didn’t

tell him every day how grateful she was, but he also knew she felt smothered sometimes.

Jason cleared his throat, not wanting to dwell on that. “Anyway, I guess I’m a bit guarded about sharing too much of their story. I tend to shield them a little, to give them some privacy after all they’ve been through. That’s why I didn’t bring it up earlier.”

“No, of course. I understand totally.” She grimaced, shaking her head. “I mean I can’t relate, of course—what a horrible thing to go through. But I can understand why you might be protective.”

Jason nodded and took another swig of tea, then wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. “Thanks. Anyway, sorry for the misunderstanding.”

“No, *I’m* sorry—I should have asked questions instead of just assuming you were some sort of cheating jerk.”

He grinned. “I might be a jerk, but never a cheating one.”

“That’s good to know.” Miriam picked up her own teacup, her fingers delicate and graceful on the little handle. She took a small sip, then returned the cup to its saucer before speaking again. “I lost my dad a year ago. It wasn’t cancer, and obviously he wasn’t a child, but I think I can relate a little bit to the kind of worry you feel when someone you love has a major medical crisis. To the constant sense of fear and anxiety you feel in that situation.”

Jason watched her, touched by the realization that she probably didn’t share this story with everyone. That she’d chosen to tell him seemed to say something, though he wasn’t totally sure what. “How did he die?” Jason asked softly. “If you don’t mind me asking, that is.”

“No, it’s okay.” Miriam set her teacup down and folded her hands on her desk again. “Mountain climbing. He’d just summited Middle Sister over in the Cascade Range when he fell into a crevasse and—”

She broke off there, not needing to finish the sentence. As Jason knew all too well, those kinds of falls were almost

always deadly, especially in Oregon's unforgiving Cascades.

"I'm so sorry."

"They say he died on impact." Her throat rolled as she swallowed. "That he didn't suffer, at least."

"Still, I imagine that was terrible for you," he said softly. "Middle Sister's a tough one. He must have been a very good climber to have even attempted it."

"He was." She pressed her lips together, her eyes glittery with tears. "The best. He'd been climbing his whole life."

"Was it comforting at all to know he died doing something he loved?"

Miriam shook her head, her jaw clenching tight before she spoke. "No. It really wasn't. Not at all." Jason watched as something that looked like rage flashed in those bright green eyes. "Some goddamn adrenaline rush was more important to him than keeping himself alive for his family? That's not comforting at all."

She reached for a tissue from the box on the corner of her desk and dabbed at her eyes. Jason said nothing, waiting for her to compose herself. Part of him wanted to reach out and touch her hand, but he sensed the gesture wouldn't be welcomed. Not now, anyway.

At last, Miriam tossed the tissue aside and looked at him again. "Anyway, I'm sorry for the misunderstanding. About the wife and kid, I mean. Sorry for being a bitch."

"All things considered, it's flattering." He broke a cookie in half, scattering crumbs across her desk, but he scooped them into his palm and shoveled them in his mouth. "Actually, part of me likes the idea that maybe you were a tiny bit jealous."

"Hmm," she said, taking another sip of tea. She set down her cup and gave him a small smile. "Mostly I thought you were a jerk, but I suppose there was a little jealousy mixed in."

"I see." Jason grabbed another cookie and took a bite, sending a fresh waterfall of crumbs spilling down the front of



his shirt. Miriam picked up her teacup again, watching him over the rim as he dusted crumbs off his shirt. “These cookies are kind of crumbly.”

“I suppose they are.” She set her cup back in the saucer. “Maybe if you bit into it over your plate instead of over your lap?”

“Huh. Yeah, I guess that would make sense.” He leaned forward again to grab another cookie. “I suppose I should brush up on my table manners before this Saturday.”

“What’s this Saturday?”

“Some fancy-schmancy dinner party with the Urban Trax executive team. We’re all going to Spoon for dinner.”

“Spoon?” Miriam frowned. “That’s like the hottest restaurant in town.”

“Is it? I didn’t know that, but I did try to talk them out of it. For crying out loud, we’re in financial crisis. Is now really the time for the execs to go out for dinner?”

“What did they say?”

He shrugged. “That the board of directors insisted. They made the reservation months ago, long before I got here. Apparently we’d be charged anyway if we tried to cancel.”

“I see,” Miriam said, watching as he scooped up his teacup and drained it in one final gulp. “Remember how you asked me to give you a few pointers on becoming a more polished and refined CEO?”

“Yep.” He grinned at her. “And then I sort of hijacked things by giving you pointers on being an outdoor adventurer instead.”

“Exactly. So it’s my turn.” She spread her palms out on the desk. “How about we bone up on table manners?”

“I liked the first four words of that suggestion,” he said. “But the rest was fine, too.”

He watched as she replayed her own words in her head, then laughed. “Nice. Here’s your first tip—sex jokes at the

dinner table are probably not your best starting point for conversations with the executive team.”

“Duly noted. Probably not with my branding consultant, either, eh?”

“Not when we’ve agreed to keep our hands off each other.”

“Such a shame.”

She smiled again, and Jason wondered if it was too late to take back that promise to keep things platonic between them. She was so beautiful, with her eyes flashing fire and her body lush and rounded under that expensive-looking outfit.

“No,” Miriam said, seeming to read his thoughts as she trailed a finger over the rim of her teacup. “We can’t fool around, obviously.”

“Obviously,” he said, echoing her wording if not the certainty in her tone.

“It could compromise our working relationship. And we’re all wrong for each other. Plus—”

“Why do you sound like you’re trying to convince yourself?”

Miriam pressed her lips together. “No fooling around,” she repeated.

“All right.”

She grinned. “But come to my place tonight at six and I’ll put something delectable in your mouth anyway.”

## CHAPTER 6



Miriam stood arranging an artful display of mortadella, prosciutto, chicken liver pâté, and fennel seed-flecked finocchiona when her doorbell rang. Her ridiculous heart leaped into her throat, but she forced herself to finish setting out the crostini and a little bowl of apricot chutney before turning toward the door.

She took her time getting there and reminded herself this was a business function and not a date.

The instant she opened the door, her brain short-circuited a little.

*Good thing it's not a date. If it were, you'd be climbing this guy like a jungle gym right now.*

He wore a well-tailored suit and a cheerful smile that gave Miriam the urge to shimmy out of her panties right there on the doorstep.

The panties got one step closer to the ground as Jason thrust out a bouquet of irises. "For you," he said. "I was going to bring this or wine, but I don't know a whole lot about wine, so this seemed like the safer bet."

"You can never go wrong with flowers." She accepted the bouquet as she stepped aside and waved him in. "Thank you. Come on inside. You look very nice."

"Thanks. Ellie made me buy a couple suits before we moved out here, but I kinda hope I don't have to wear them very often. I feel like I'm going to a funeral."

The word “funeral” made Miriam’s heart turn over in her chest, but she forced herself to keep smiling, not to think about her dad now. Jason must’ve noticed a shift in her expression, because his trademark grin dropped away. “God, I’m sorry. Faux pas number one. I know you lost your dad a year ago. I didn’t think before saying that.”

“It’s okay,” she said, grateful she didn’t have to pretend the thought hadn’t crept through her mind. “The suit fits you well. Your sister has good taste.”

“Thanks. You look amazing.”

She started to demur, *This old thing?* But she wore a green-and-blue Diane von Furstenberg wrap dress she knew flattered her curves and made her look both professional and sexy, so she settled for a simple, “Thank you.”

Jason tugged at his tie a little and gave her a grin that made her lady bits do a happy squeeze. “If I’m being honest, you look downright hot.”

Miriam laughed and pushed the door closed, conscious of his gaze traveling her body. “Thanks. And thank you for not being annoyed by my suggestion that we dress up a little.”

“No problem. I figured bike shorts weren’t the best dinner attire anyway.”

The visual sent Miriam’s libido surging again, but she held it together. “I think it’s important to replicate the feel of your Saturday-night dinner party as much as possible.”

“In that case, do you have two dozen scowling men in suits waiting for us in the coat closet?”

She grinned and led him through the living room and into the dining area. “Will you settle for a framed photo of my great-grandparents scowling over the dinner table with German disdain?”

“Close enough.”

She stopped in the dining room, where she’d set the table with a black linen tablecloth and a set of stylish art deco plates. “I’m going to put the flowers in water,” she said as she

headed toward the kitchen. “Feel free to dive in to the charcuterie.”

“I’m trying to figure out from context if charcuterie is something you’re supposed to swim in, discuss, or do to a person you’d like to see naked.”

Miriam laughed, and her lady bits clenched again. Ignoring the heat rising up her throat, she gestured to the hors d’oeuvres laid out on her midcentury modern sideboard. “Charcuterie is an array of cured meats, usually served with breads and jam for contrast to the salt. There’s crostini right there. Can I get you some wine?”

“Sounds great.”

“Red or white?”

“I don’t know.” Jason picked up a crostini and popped it in his mouth. “What would a proper CEO with professional-caliber social skills choose at a fancy business dinner?”

“He’d probably match it to what’s being served, but that can be tricky if you don’t know wine very well,” she said. “You can never go wrong with a Pinot Noir. Or you could also try something like a Mourvèdre or a Grenache or even a Carménère.”

Jason frowned. “Are you planning to give me a pronunciation guide I can pull out of my pocket at dinner?”

“Let’s stick with the pinot.”

“Sounds good. To be honest, I usually avoid ordering wine at all.”

“You don’t like wine?”

“No, I actually love it. But I don’t know much about the different kinds or how the hell to pronounce anything, so it seems safer to stick with water or beer and not sound like a dumbass.”

Miriam laughed and grabbed a bottle of her favorite Sunridge Vineyards Pinot Noir off the wine rack. “Sometimes looking like a dumbass is the best way to learn.”

“Maybe so,” he said, but didn’t sound convinced.

Miriam set the bouquet of irises on the counter and made a mental note to take a subtle approach to coaching Jason on professional dining etiquette. Clearly the guy wasn’t a fan of looking dumb, which seemed reasonable enough.

She uncorked the pinot, then turned and pulled two wineglasses out of the cabinet beside the table. After setting them on the counter, she bent to retrieve a cut crystal vase on the lower shelf. When she stood up, Jason stood staring at her backside. Desire coursed through her, but she ordered herself to keep this professional.

“Here’s your first lesson on dinner etiquette,” she said. “If you’re going to stare at women’s asses, try being a little discreet about it.”

He grinned, not looking terribly ashamed. “I wasn’t planning to stare at women’s asses,” he pointed out. “Just yours. That’s a singular ass, not plural.”

Miriam set the vase on the counter and tried to look stern, but who was she kidding? She loved having his gaze on her. She’d love having a lot of other things on her, too, starting with his hands, then moving to his mouth, then—

“Flattering though that may be,” she said, interrupting her own dangerous train of thought, “we’re practicing proper business etiquette here. No ogling.”

“You steal all my fun.”

She smiled. “Eat your charcuterie.”

“That still sounds dirty.”

“You mean like when you told me you wanted to take me spelunking?” She poured two servings of pinot, then handed him one, her fingers tingling as they grazed his on the stem of the glass.

“Spelunking.” He shook his head. “Can’t say I ever thought of it that way until you came along.”

“You’re welcome.”

Jason took a careful sip of wine. “Hey, this is really good.”

“Thanks. Oregon pinot is always a good bet, so that’s a smart thing to look for on the menu.”

He grabbed another hunk of crostini and shoved it in his mouth, and Miriam ordered herself not to scold him for it. The guy was the CEO of an international corporation. He might eat like a caveman, but helping him get over that would require a subtler touch than jumping on his case every time he showed subpar table manners.

“There’s a bread plate right there,” she said as she pointed at the edge of the side table. “Feel free to grab that so you can pile on whatever you want from the charcuterie.”

“Thanks.” He picked up the small plate as Miriam turned and filled her vase with water. She took a moment to arrange the flowers, trying to get her libido in check before turning back to face him.

As she set the vase on the table, she saw Jason using his fingers to grab a hunk of prosciutto off the charcuterie board. He glanced at her, then gave a sheepish look. “Let me guess—you’re going to tell me to use the tongs, not my fingers.”

“I didn’t say a word, but that’s a good idea.” She smiled. “The tongs would definitely be a better choice with the prosciutto.”

“And the little knifey thing is probably for the smeary stuff?”

“The knifey thing is called a spreader and the smeary stuff is chicken liver pâté, but yes. See? You’ve got it all figured out.”

“Yeah, but I’m likely to forget when you distract me with sexy words like *charcuterie* and *prosciutto* and *spreaders*.”

She laughed. “If that’s your idea of sexy talk, I’m not sure how I feel about the prospect of having dinner with you.”

Jason grinned and picked up the tongs. She watched him pile meat on his plate, impressed that he managed to work the

small utensil with those massive hands of his.

*Stop staring.*

“Do you know how they’ll be handling appetizers at your dinner event?” she asked. “Passed apps, buffet style, or a sit-down dinner with everyone ordering separately?”

“I’m not sure. Why?”

“Different rules of etiquette. If it’s passed apps or a buffet situation like this, you’ll want to keep your portions fairly small to make sure there’s plenty for everyone else.”

He set the tongs down and frowned. “Maybe I should play it safe and skip the apps.”

“No, definitely don’t do that. That will make other people feel awkward about eating if you’re not. Besides, it gives you something to do with your hands.”

He gave her a funny smile, and Miriam half expected him to come up with a risqué suggestion for what he might do with his hands. She was almost disappointed when he didn’t.

Instead, he looked at his plate. “So with all these meats and little bready things, I assume I’m okay to eat with my hands instead of asking for a fork or something?”

“Use the crostini—the little bready things—for the chutney or the pâté. You can use your hands for everything else, but be discreet about it. No sucking your fingers or licking crumbs off the plate.”

“No licking, no sucking.” He grinned. “Got it.”

That grin disarmed her again, so Miriam took another sip of wine and ordered herself to keep breathing. “Any idea how many people will be attending the event?”

“Let’s see...we have thirteen board members, eight people on the executive team, plus me. I guess that’s twenty-two?”

“Who’s hosting?”

“What do you mean?”



“There’s usually a host when it comes to business dinners—the person who arranged the whole thing. Usually the person who’s paying.”

He took a careful bite of prosciutto, then chewed and swallowed before answering her question, which was a plus. Somewhere along the line, he must’ve learned not to talk with his mouth full. The guy might be rough around the edges, but he wasn’t a total lost cause.

“That’s probably the board president, Jack Wainswright,” he said. “I guess he’d be the host.”

“Okay, so you’ll want to watch him closely. Take your cues from him when it comes to knowing how many courses you order, when you start eating, that sort of thing.”

“Sounds a little stalker-ish,” he said. “Please tell me I don’t have to watch him for a cue to use the restroom.”

“You’re on your own for that one.” Miriam set her wine down on the sideboard and picked up a plate. Handling the tongs with dainty precision, she selected a few charcuterie items for herself, adding a few bites of mortadella and a smear of pâté on her crostini. She stepped back from the table, lifted her plate a few inches above her cleavage, and took a careful bite of crostini. A few crumbs landed on the plate, and she saw Jason grin.

“Are you teaching by example?” He raised his own plate to the same level and bit into a cracker, laughing a little when it split in two and half of it hit the plate. “You’re right, holding the plate up here is probably better than dribbling crumbs down the front of my shirt.”

“Happy to help,” she said after she’d swallowed the bite. “So while you obviously don’t want to talk with your mouth full, you do want to keep the small talk flowing, especially over appetizers.”

“I’ve never been one for small talk.”

“Just ask questions. People love to talk about themselves, their hobbies, their families.” She took another bite of crostini,

then set down her plate and dabbed at her mouth with a cocktail napkin. “So how old is Henry, anyway?”

At the mention of the little boy’s name, Jason’s face brightened. “He’s five, going on twenty-one.”

“What do you mean?”

“You may have noticed his obsession with genitals?”

She laughed and took a bite of prosciutto. “I take it he greets everyone with commentary on penises and fa-chynas?”

“Pretty much. His Sunday school teacher was not amused.”

“That’s a pity.”

“It actually makes a good icebreaker,” he said. “Maybe I’ll consider it for business dinner small talk.”

“Absolutely. I’m sure the board of directors would be delighted to hear about your penis.”

Jason laughed, and Miriam felt her cheeks flush ever so slightly. She hadn’t meant to turn the conversation toward the sexy CEO’s anatomy once again. But now that she’d said the words, she couldn’t stop remembering the sight of him standing naked in her bathroom, his torso lean and muscular, the dark trail of fine hair leading down toward—

“This is good sausage,” he said. Miriam choked on her wine.

He set his plate down and started to reach for her, but she waved him off. “I’m fine, I’m fine,” she sputtered. “I don’t need the Heimlich.”

“Okay, but I do have first aid training if you need it.” The thought of having him give her mouth-to-mouth resuscitation was enough to make her want to choke on her wine again, but she settled for eating a piece of mortadella.

“So you and your sister must be close,” she said, desperate to steer the conversation back to safer ground.

“Very close,” he said. “Our parents died in a car wreck when I was seventeen and Ellie was fifteen. There were no

other relatives in the picture, so I took over raising Ellie.”

“Wow,” Miriam said, impressed. “How did you manage to do that and finish college?”

He shrugged and took a sip of his own wine. “It wasn’t always easy, but we got along okay. Just like we’re managing now with Henry.”

“And Henry’s dad is—”

“A grade A ass-hat,” Jason finished with an apologetic smile. “Sorry, I promise I’ll keep the swearing to a minimum at the dinner event. But sometimes, there’s just no other word for it.”

“Very true. I take it he’s not in the picture?”

“Nope. The state seizes part of his paychecks for child support, but beyond that, he wants nothing to do with his son or with Ellie.”

“That’s so sad.”

He nodded, and Miriam caught a glint of something dark in his eyes. “It is, but we’re better off without him. For as long as I’m around, Ellie will never be alone as a parent, and Henry will always have a man in his life who adores him and enjoys spending time with him.”

The passion in his words surprised her a little. Her own feelings about kids tended to be a bit ambivalent, though she’d wondered what it might be like to feel that sort of love for a tiny human. Watching Jason now, she kind of got it.

Something in his love of his nephew touched a soft, dormant part of her heart.

“They’re lucky to have you,” she said.

“Nuh-uh. I’m lucky to have them.”

Miriam was about to ask another question when something bumped her shin. She glanced down to see Phuzeei ramming his head against her leg.

“There’s the little pervert who gave you a glimpse of my junk,” Jason said as he bent down to scratch the cat behind the

ears. “Hey, big guy.”

“Mrwow,” her cat said and nudged Jason’s hand with his head.

“Phuzeei,” Jason said, shaking his head as he stood back up. “I can’t say I ever imagined myself stroking a froofy white Persian named ‘Fuzzy.’”

“He may look froofy, but he’s kind of a badass.”

Jason quirked an eyebrow. “You mean beyond his skills at opening bathroom doors like some sort of furry ninja spy?”

“I taught him more skills than that one. Watch this.”

Miriam set her plate down and reached for a notepad she’d been using to doodle sketches for an ad campaign. She tore off a sheet and crumpled it into a ball. Phuzeei whirled around and pricked his ears at attention.

“You ready, boy?” Miriam asked, grinning. “Fetch!”

She hurled the paper wad down the hall. In a blur of fur and paws, Phuzeei went tearing after it, his plummy tail streaking behind him. The cat skidded to a halt at the end of the hall, furry feet sliding across the polished wood floor. He picked up the paper in his teeth, turned around, and trotted back with his prize.

“I’ll be damned,” Jason said as he bent down to take the paper Phuzeei deposited at his feet. “You taught your cat to fetch?”

“I told you he’s got mad skills.”

“Color me impressed.”

“Color me starving,” she said. “You ready to move on to dinner?”

“Anytime you are.”

“I’ll take that,” she said, plucking the paper from his hand. “Feel free to wash up in the guest bath. I’ll put the finishing touches on dinner.”

“Need any help?”

“Nope, I’ve got it. I prepped most of it ahead of time, so we’re just about ready.”

She turned and hurried into the kitchen where she lost herself in the last-minute bustle of sautéing and garnishing and sneaking little tastes of everything to make sure the meal had turned out okay.

She’d almost forgotten about Jason until she heard his voice behind her.

“Holy cow!” he said. “Are you some kind of gourmet cook?”

She grinned and dusted a sprinkling of fresh chives over a side of roasted potatoes she’d just plated. “Sort of,” she said. “I love good food, and cooking’s a hobby of mine.”

“This looks amazing. You weren’t kidding about replicating the restaurant experience. This looks better than any restaurant meal I’ve had.”

“Thanks. I’ll stop short of getting out my silver cloches.”

“Since I don’t know what a cloche is, that’s probably best. Unless it’s something sexy?”

Miriam laughed. “A cloche is a bell-shaped cover the chef puts over the plate to keep things warm until the waiter removes it with a flourish.”

“I think you’ve got plenty of flourish going on here. Can I help you carry something?”

“Can you grab those salads right there?”

She scooped up the dinner plates, admiring the presentation of dishes and the heady fragrance of herbs and caramelized onion. She led the way back out to the dining room and set the plates down. “You can put the salads right here,” she said and pointed to a spot at the top of her place mat.

He obeyed, then stood waiting while she took her seat. “I see you’ve got some of the etiquette down pat,” she said. “Waiting for a lady to be seated is a nice touch.”

Jason grinned and sat down next to her. “I may not be a gentleman in all regards, but I do my best. I’m also a pretty quick learner.”

She wondered for an instant what that meant, her brain sauntering down a vivid path that left her pondering in what other capacity he exercised his gentlemanly tendencies and quick learning. What was Jason like in bed? Was he rough and wild, or gentle and slow? Was he the sort of guy to softly stroke a woman’s cheek as she unzipped his fly and dropped to her knees, or was he the sort to thread his fingers into her hair, gripping tightly as she sucked him deeply into her—

*Hiccup!*

Miriam clamped a hand to her mouth, horrified by her own faux pas at the dinner table. She was trying so hard to set a classy example, too. She started to excuse herself, then realized Jason hadn’t heard her. He was too busy studying the utensils laid out beside his plate, picking up one fork at a time and frowning at it.

She took a few deep breaths, hoping to get the hiccups under control.

There, that was better. She took a careful sip of wine, grateful the hiccup seemed to be a onetime thing.

Jason had already picked a fork and was grasping a knife in the other hand, preparing to cut into his meat. Miriam touched his hand. “Here’s another tip,” she said. “You don’t want to start eating until you’ve been given the signal.”

“There’s a signal?”

She nodded. “It’s another reason you need to keep a close eye on your host.”

“This is sounding more and more like a weird game of charades.” He frowned. “Okay, what’s the signal?”

“It’s—”

*Hiccup!*

“Pardon me,” she said and clamped a hand over her mouth again as the heat rose to her cheeks. “I apologize.”

“No worries. What’s the signal to start eating?”

“The napkin,” Miriam said as she spread hers across her thighs in illustration. “Don’t take a bite until your host puts the napkin in his or her lap.”

“Oh.” He set down his utensils and picked up his own napkin. “Right, I guess I knew that. I got distracted.”

“No problem. That’s why we’re practicing.”

“So I’ve always wondered where I’m supposed to put the napkin if I have to get up and take a leak. On the back of my chair or on the table or what?”

“First of all, you probably don’t want to announce at the dinner table that you have to take a leak.” She smiled a little to soften her words. “Say ‘pardon me for just a moment.’ Then put the napkin on the seat of the chair.”

Jason snorted. “I feel like I should be taking notes here.”

“There’ll be a test later.”

“Why do I think you might be serious?”

Miriam smiled. “Okay, so don’t take a bite until your host has spread the napkin in his lap, but it’s even better to wait until he’s started to—”

*Hiccup!*

Miriam covered her mouth, then picked up her water glass. “Excuse me,” she said, then took three big gulps of water. Her cheeks felt warm, and she realized she was royally blowing this polished image she was working so hard to teach him.

To his credit, Jason seemed unfazed. He was busy adjusting his napkin on his lap and bumped Miriam’s leg under the table. “Whoops, sorry,” he said as his fingers grazed her bare thigh. “I didn’t mean to grope you.”

“Not a problem,” she said, still focused on trying to control her hiccups. She took two more gulps of water, then set her glass down and tried a sip of wine instead. There. That seemed better.

Her thigh kept tingling where his hand had brushed her skin, and her face burned with the embarrassment of losing control of her diaphragm at the dinner table. For crying out loud, could there be a worse time to have hiccups?

“All right,” she said at last, then swallowed hard. “So speaking of the napkin, when your meal is finished, you’ll want to place it on the left hand side of your plate.”

“What if the waiter already took my plate?”

“The napkin still goes to the left of where your plate used to be.”

“Do I have to fold it back up the way it was? Because I don’t think I can do that fancy napkin origami where it looks like a swan or a fan or the *Titanic* or whatever.”

“Just place it neatly,” she said. “Try to tuck any really big food stains inside.”

“And I already know I’m not supposed to spit gum in a cloth napkin,” he said, grinning a little sheepishly. “Learned that one the hard way once.”

“Right.” Miriam took another small sip of wine. Okay, good. The hiccups seemed to be gone. She picked up her own knife and fork and cut a small bite of pork. She speared it into her mouth and began to chew, savoring the freshness of the rosemary and the zing of balsamic glaze. She’d gotten the meat nice and juicy, which was a plus.

Jason watched her for a moment, then picked up his own knife and fork. He sliced into the meat, his hand huge and strong-looking on the shaft of the knife.

“Oh my God,” he said around a mouthful of pork, and the look of bliss on his face was enough to stop Miriam from reminding him not to talk with his mouth full. “What is this?”

“Rosemary-brined pork chops with a balsamic glaze,” she said. “Beside that, you have smoked fingerling potatoes, porcini mushrooms dressed with Greek yogurt and pancetta, and a roasted beet salad with shallot vinaigrette, watercress, and a Cypress Grove chèvre sachet.”



“Holy shit.”

She grinned and rolled her eyes. “Thank you, but you may want to work on coming up with a different way to express your appreciation for a meal.”

“Duly noted. You made all this?”

“Yes. Normally at a restaurant, the meal would come out one dish at a time, but I thought it would be better if we—”

*Hiccup!*

Jason laughed as Miriam flushed again. She shook her head and picked up her water glass. “I’m so sorry,” she said between gulps of water. “I have no idea why this is happening.”

“Well, it’s an involuntary spasm of the diaphragm and respiratory organs, resulting in the sudden closure of the glottis.” Jason grinned and took a sip of wine while Miriam sat staring at him in disbelief.

“You sounded like a medical dictionary just then.”

He shrugged. “I took a lot of anatomy classes when I was earning a degree in exercise physiology.”

“Oh.” She gulped some more water, emptying her glass. Before she could reach for the pitcher, he’d picked it up and given her a refill.

“You’re on the right track with the water,” he said. “You could try plugging your ears while you swallow it, or taking a mouthful of water and bending at the waist before taking a drink.”

She frowned, pretty sure either of those activities would kill the sophisticated dinner vibe she was aiming for. “I think I have it under control,” she said. “Thank you, though.”

“Suit yourself.”

Miriam cleared her throat. “Anyway, like I was saying. Ordinarily at a restaurant, the meal would come out with multiple courses. An appetizer, then maybe a soup course,

salad, then your entrée. You want to defer to your host on how many courses to order,” she said.

“What if I’m hungrier than Jack Wainswright?”

She shook her head. “The idea is to keep everyone at the table eating at the same pace. You don’t want him to be digging into dessert while you’re still working on your salad.”

“Unlikely.” Jason grinned. “I’m a fast eater.”

“For the sake of a professional dinner, that’s not a selling point. There’s no shame in going slow.”

“Sure there is. It means I get to eat less.”

Miriam raised an eyebrow at him, but Jason just grinned and lifted his wineglass in a mock toast to her. He took a sip, then set down his glass, picked up his utensils, and sliced into his meat again. With the skill of a surgeon, he cut his pork into a dozen little bite-sized hunks, his hands moving with meticulous precision. Miriam watched, fascinated, almost reluctant to stop him.

“Um, Jason? You’re very efficient there, but you kinda want to cut just one bite at a time,” she said.

“Got it,” he said, nodding once as he forked a bite into his mouth and chewed. “See? This is good stuff. The advice, I mean, but so is this mushroom thingy. Unreal, seriously.”

“Thanks.” Miriam took a bite of her own pork and savored the burst of flavors and the moist juiciness of the meat. “I take it you didn’t do a lot of formal business dinners in your previous job?”

“No. Half the time I was guiding trips, which meant roasting weenies over a campfire or eating baked beans straight from the can.”

“After opening it with a machete?”

He grinned. “Only if I forgot my Leatherman.”

Miriam flashed on a memory of her dad doing the same thing on a family camping trip, grinning at her with cracker

crumbs in his beard. A prick of sadness needled her in the gut, and Miriam took a sip of wine to tamp it down.

“So what if I sit down in the restaurant and there are a zillion utensils?” Jason asked, pulling her back to the present. “I think I figured it out here, but I’ve seen TV shows where they have this huge arsenal of forks and knives and spoons and—”

“Right,” Miriam said. “When in doubt, start with the utensil farthest from the plate and work your way inward.”

“Oh,” he said. “That seems simple enough.”

“It gets a little more complicated when you throw in early courses like soup or fish or oysters. In cases like that, you’ll want to—”

*Hiccup!*

“Okay, that’s it,” Jason said as he threw down his napkin. “Every time you do that, you get this look on your face like you just cursed in church or something. It’s just a hiccup. Everyone does it. Hell, if it’ll make you feel better, I can probably work up a belch or something.”

“That won’t be necessary. I just—”

*Hiccup!*

“Dammit!” Miriam set her water glass down hard. “I’m trying to teach you proper dinner etiquette. I’m hardly setting a good example.”

“It’s an uncontrollable reflex, Miriam. Besides, it’s not like you farted at the table.”

“God,” she said as she dropped her fork with a clatter. “This meal is going downhill fast. I feel like I need to—”

*Hiccup!*

“That you do,” Jason said with a grin. “Wanna try one of the cures I suggested?”

“What were they again?”

“There’s plugging your ears while you swallow water, or bending over to drink it,” he said.

“Oh. Well, maybe I could try—”

*Hiccup!*

Jason grinned wider. “Of course, we had a guy on a backpacking tour once that had seriously chronic hiccups. He’d tried some really crazy cures. Pulling on his tongue, having someone cover his mouth and blow air up his nose, rectal massage, or—”

*“What?”*

He held up his hands in mock defense. “I’m just telling you what my client tried. But hey, I’m game for anything.”

“Water,” she said and picked up her glass. “I’ll try the stuff with the water.” She started to take a drink, then frowned. “Wait, how am I supposed to plug my ears and hold a glass at the same time?”

“You could get a straw,” he suggested. “Or we could make it a two-person job.”

She hesitated, thinking about it. She’d already embarrassed herself enough during this meal. Did she really want to humiliate herself by having this guy stick his fingers in her ears? Maybe if she tried—

*Hiccup!*

“Okay,” she said with a sigh of resignation. “Will you please plug my ears?”

“My pleasure.” Jason stood up, flexing his fingers with dramatic flair.

“I can’t believe we’re doing this,” Miriam said, trying to stifle another hiccup as he pushed in his chair and stepped closer, making goose bumps prickle her arms.

“Hey, you got to bail me out when I was covered in mud and locked out of my house,” he said. “It’s only fair that I come to your aid when you need a couple of fingers stuck in your—”

*Hiccup!*

“Nice timing on that one,” he said with a smirk. “Just shut up and stick ’em in.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

He moved behind her, and Miriam felt conscious of the big, solid heat of him. She felt his fingers slide into her hair, and he pushed it back off her face. His palms were warm where they grazed the edges of her cheekbones, and Miriam thought of the way Phuzeei purred when she stroked the sides of his face.

She was on the brink of purring herself.

“Ready?” he asked, and his voice was almost a growl. “Uh-huh,” she murmured, ready for just about anything he cared to offer.

Miriam picked up her water glass and braced herself for another hiccup. Nothing, at least not yet. She drew the glass to her lips. “Okay,” she said.

His fingers grazed the edges of her earlobes, and Miriam shivered. He slid his fingertips upward, dipping softly into the shells of her ears. It should have been weird. It should have been a turnoff.

But it was neither of those things. There was something ridiculously intimate about it, about feeling those thick, warm fingers pressing into her, those large thumbs skimming the edges of her lobes. She could feel his belt buckle against the nape of her neck, or at least she thought it was his belt buckle. Was he as turned on as she was?

Miriam tipped her head back and parted her lips, sipping at the icy water. She swallowed, marveling at the sensation of doing it with someone’s fingers in her ears. Her senses seemed duller and heightened all at once. He heard the thrum of her own heartbeat, along with the strange *glug-glug* of water moving down her throat. She kept breathing, her lungs filling with the scent of rosemary and maybe Jason’s soap. His hands felt huge and warm on the edges of her face, and she kept

swallowing, since it seemed like a good alternative to turning around and grabbing his ass.

“Keep going,” he said, or at least that’s what it sounded like. She couldn’t hear very well with his fingers in her ears.

“Swallow,” he commanded, and she did it, getting more turned on by the minute. This was ridiculous. There was nothing erotic about a guy sticking his fingers in her ears while she gulped ice water and tried not to make a fool of herself with another obnoxious diaphragm spasm.

At last, she set her glass down, her breath coming fast even though she hadn’t done anything strenuous. Jason’s fingertips slid from her ears, and felt stupid for missing the warmth.

He sat down next to her, grinning, his knee bumping hers beneath the table. “How’s that?”

She waited, breathing in and out, checking in with herself. “Good, I think.” She took a few more breaths, waiting for another hiccup. Nothing. She looked at him and grinned. “I think I’m cured.”

“Excellent.”

“Yay!”

“High five,” he said, and held up his massive palm. She had no choice but to smack her hand against his. It didn’t budge, the palm solid and enormous against hers.

“Okay, give me some more etiquette tips,” he said as he eased back in his chair. “Seems like talking might be your trigger, so let’s put that to the test.”

“All right.” She tried to think of something she hadn’t already covered. “Okay. No elbows on the table at any point during the meal.”

“I already knew that one. What else?”

“Um, use your napkin often, both for your hands and for wiping your mouth.”

“Roger that,” he said. “So far so good.”

“Um, don’t put your phone or your keys on the table.” She was struggling to come up with something instead of obsessing over whether she might hiccup or if Jason would touch her again if she did. “And don’t take photos of your food for Instagram or Facebook or whatever.”

“Please,” he said with a dramatic shudder. “Do I look like the kind of guy who’d want to post pictures of a pork chop?”

“Probably not,” she agreed, still trying to keep focused on her body. “Okay, uh—don’t reach across the table to sample someone else’s food, not even if they offer. And if your food isn’t cooked properly—like if your steak is too rare or they forget to put the dressing on the side instead of—”

*Hiccup!*

“Dammit!” She dropped her head into her hands. “Want to try another cure?”

“I think we should call it a night, Jason.” She peered up at him through her fingers. “I’m so sorry. This is terribly embarrassing.”

“No way.” He shook his head and leaned toward her again. He was close enough she could feel the heat of his shoulder, close enough to feel his breath ruffling her hair. “You haven’t even given me a chance to show off my first aid skills.”

“Your first aid skills extend to hiccups?”

“Not exactly. But I’m willing to give it a shot.”

“Fine,” she said, then covered her mouth as she felt another hiccup coming on. “What else do you have up your sleeve?” she said through her fingers.

Jason reached up and touched her hand. One by one, he peeled her fingers away from her mouth. Instead of letting go, he held fast to her hand, tightening his grip just a little.

“I have one more surefire cure.”

Miriam shivered, even though she wasn’t cold. “What’s that?”

“It’s guaranteed to work.”

“Then why didn’t you do it before?”

“Because,” he said as he brushed her hair back from her face, sending her heart pounding into her skull. “You told me not to kiss you again.”

“Oh.”

And then he did it anyway.



## CHAPTER 7



As Jason lowered his lips to Miriam's, he remembered her words from earlier that day.

*No fooling around.*

He braced himself to be pushed away, to have her tell him this was a terrible idea for all the reasons they'd discussed before.

But instead of pushing him away, she grabbed him by the lapels and pulled him closer. "Yes," she murmured against his mouth, kissing him back a lot harder than he'd kissed her.

Maybe she was taking this hiccup cure thing seriously, figuring this was worth a shot. Maybe that's what this was about.

But her hand on his ass put a stop to those thoughts. "God, I want you," she breathed, sending a shot of adrenaline straight to his cock.

Okay. He didn't need any more encouragement than that. He tunneled his fingers into her hair, threading them through those thick, luscious curls he hadn't stopped thinking about since Saturday. They felt like silk, like smooth coils of energy, electrified by the intensity of her kiss. She hadn't come up for air or hiccuped again, which seemed like a great sign on several levels.

Still, he should probably put this cure to the test.

"Gentle throat massage," he murmured as he planted a careful trail of kisses down her throat. She gasped when his

lips brushed the hollow of her neck, and he could feel her pulse leaping against the delicate skin there. He kept kissing her, moving his way down.

“Throat massage,” she repeated, sounding a little dazed. “I can see how that might work.”

“It pays to follow the esophageal system all the way down.” He kissed his way between her breasts and wondered if this was the weirdest form of dirty talk he’d ever come up with.

But it seemed to be working.

He felt her squirm beneath his lips, her breath coming fast and heated now. His mouth grazed the lacy edge of her bra cup, teasing the warm globes of flesh.

Miriam gasped again. Her hand was still on his ass, but Jason felt the other one drop from his lapel and slide down the middle of his chest. Her fingertips grazed his abs and kept moving down, catching his belt buckle with surprising enthusiasm.

She dug her nails into his ass, hard, which forced him up off the chair. His lips broke contact with her breast, and he drew back, breathless as Miriam yanked him to his feet.

“Stand up,” she ordered, though he was already halfway there.

“What for?”

“Because I just thought of another hiccup cure I want to try.”

“What’s that?” He scrubbed a hand over his jawline as Miriam yanked at his belt buckle. His cock strained against the zipper of his pants, anticipating what Miriam had in mind.

But Jason wanted her to say it. He wanted to be absolutely sure this is what she wanted.

“I want to suck you,” she said.

“Okey-dokey,” he said, too dizzy to spend any time considering what a dork he sounded like.

She had his belt buckle undone and was dragging his zipper down, working with an efficiency that took his breath away. Or maybe it wasn't the efficiency doing it. Maybe it was the feel of her hand on his dick through his boxer briefs, the warmth of her breath against his abdomen, the smell of rosemary and red wine making him dizzy.

She tilted her head back and grinned up at him, those green eyes twinkling like she'd just stolen a peek at her Christmas present two weeks early. Jason gripped the back of the chair, not sure how long his legs would be willing to hold him up.

Her words echoed in the back of his brain, *no fooling around*, and though his libido screamed at him to shut the fuck up, he had to ask again. "Miriam, are you sure?"

*Hiccup!*

She giggled, then nodded with mock solemnity. "Absolutely. It's a legitimate medical treatment, after all."

She dragged his boxer briefs down his hips and let his pants drop with them. He felt like an idiot standing here in her dining room with his trousers around his knees and his dinner half eaten on the table beside him.

And then he felt something else entirely.

Her fingers wrapped around the base of his shaft and she lowered her mouth to him, making a delicate *O* with her lips. She drew him in slowly, letting him glide to the back of her tongue, and he let go of the chair with one hand and reached for her hair.

Delirious with need, he tangled his fingers in those curls and closed his eyes as Miriam drew back, then slid her mouth over him again. There was so much heat, so much wet, soft suction, that Jason thought he might pass out.

She was doing something with her hand, some sort of twisty maneuver that worked in time with her mouth and left him wondering if she'd taken a class in this or was naturally gifted. He'd never felt anything like this in his whole life, not with anyone.

“God, Miriam,” he groaned as she sucked him in again, her mouth working miracles. He could feel her tongue flicking over the underside of his shaft, her fingers still tight around the base of him as she swirled her tongue around the head of his cock. He tightened his fingers in her hair. He was going to lose it if he wasn’t careful.

“Miriam—”

“Mmm,” she said, and the vibration traveled all the way up his spine to the nape of his neck. She drew back and grinned up at him. “I think the cure is working. I feel better already.”

“You’re not the only one.”

She laughed and started to lower her mouth again, but Jason caught her under the arms. He knew he wouldn’t last much longer if she kept at it, and he wasn’t ready for this to be done.

They’d already crossed the line. They might as well sprint full speed ahead on the other side of it.

Her eyes widened as he lifted her to her feet. He shoved his chair back and spun her around, pinning her against the table. He kissed her hard, claiming that magical mouth with his as he kicked his shoes off and freed himself from his pants and underwear. Miriam had gone to work on his jacket and tie and shirt, though he barely realized it until he noticed she was shoving them off his shoulders and onto the ground behind him.

He pulled back, breaking the kiss. “Well, that’s not very fair, is it?”

“What’s that?”

“You’re still fully clothed. We owe it to medical science to remedy that.”

She gave a dramatic sigh, though he saw her eyes flicker with desire. “If we must,” she said.

He grabbed hold of the ties at the side of her dress and said a silent prayer his years of camping tours would pay off and he’d remember how to untie a knot under duress. He was

under serious duress. If he didn't get her dress off in five seconds, he'd be even more duressed. Or undressed? Holy hell, he was losing it, making up words and fumbling with knots like an eight-year-old Boy Scout.

"Thank God," he breathed as the ties came loose and the dress slipped open to reveal the sexiest bra and panty set ever created. It was some sort of flimsy black lace, and the sight of it made him even more eager to devour her from head to toe.

"You're fucking beautiful." He grinned. "Sorry for cursing at the dinner table again."

"I'll let it slide this time."

"Will you?" He trailed a hand down her abdomen and under the seam of her panties.

She gasped as he slid a finger inside her, finding her warm and wet and very, very ready.

"I want to taste you." He didn't wait for her reply as he caught her waist with his free hand, angling her body the opposite direction of the dinner plates. Then he lifted her onto the table, satisfied by the little gasp of surprise she gave as she let herself fall back.

His chair was still behind him, so he sat down hard and let his fingers slip beneath the lace of her panties. He shoved the fabric aside and shouldered her thighs apart, more eager to taste her than he had been with anything on his dinner plate.

The second he touched her with the tip of his tongue, her whole body arched clear off the table.

"Oh God!" she cried, and gripped the back of his head like she feared he might stop.

Jason had no intention of doing that.

He slid his tongue along her opening, getting more turned on by the way she writhed and gasped on the table. His tongue found the sensitive little bud he'd been seeking, and the instant he touched it she bucked again. He held tight, gripping her hips with both hands as he circled her with his tongue, feeling her grow tense beneath him.

“Jason. I’m going to—”

“Do it,” he growled, taking one hand off her hip and sliding a finger inside her. He felt her clench around him, so tight, so wet, so close.

She screamed, a primal howl that left him grateful they were here at her little house instead of his duplex with the shared wall. He kept his hold on her hip, working her with his finger as she rocked against him and gripped the tablecloth in a fist, knocking over his empty water glass.

He didn’t let go until he felt her go lax. She lay breathing hard for a moment, then propped herself up on her elbows and grinned at him.

“Now there’s a hiccup cure someone should write up in a medical text.”

“Happy to be part of the scientific study.”

She pushed her hair off her face, flushed and lovely in the candlelight from the centerpiece. “I’m not hiccuping anymore.”

“You’re cured.”

“Seems that way,” she said, then glanced at the sideboard. “I really think we should continue the treatment.”

“You have something else in mind?”

“Maybe.” Again with the glance at the sideboard and a grin he was starting to really love.

“Are you planning something kinky with napkin rings?”

“No. But it’s possible I stashed a condom in there right before you showed up.”

He laughed and stood up, already halfway to the sideboard. “What happened to ‘no fooling around’?”

“I meant it,” she said. “Mostly. But a lady must be prepared for anything.”

“Thank God for that.”

He grabbed the condom from the drawer and headed back to her, tearing the wrapper as he went. She set a hand on his and stopped him. “Let me,” she said, then took it from him and reached for his cock once more. “I want to feel you again.”

“I’m pretty sure you’ll be feeling a lot of me in just a few seconds.”

She laughed and slid the condom on with expert hands. Jason reached for her again, a little dumbstruck by how this whole lesson was turning out. “Do you have any more dinner etiquette suggestions for me? Anything about choosing the right tie or sniffing the wine cork or something?”

“How about a lesson on tipping,” she said as she drew him closer and slid the head of his cock along her wet opening. She drew him inside, just the tip, and Jason gave a low moan of pleasure.

“Just the tip?”

“No way,” she said, drawing her legs up behind him and pressing her heels into his back. “I want the whole thing.”

“Whatever you say,” he said, and slid deep inside her.

She cried out, her ankles locking behind him as he started to move inside her. He went slowly at first, giving her time to adjust, but it was clear Miriam didn’t need that.

“Fuck me!” she gasped as her thighs clenched around him. “God, yes! Like that.”

Jason didn’t need to be told twice. He was a lot better at taking direction with sex than he was with table manners, which seemed to bode well for both of them.

He drove into her again, loving the way she moved beneath him. This wasn’t a woman content to lie passively beneath him, batting her lashes like a princess. Miriam knew how to fuck back, how to take what she wanted, how to move her hips to bring him right to the edge.

He held his breath, not ready for this to be over yet. Maybe he could slow his pace, recite the user manual for his snowmobile or envision his favorite hiking trail to keep his

brain locked on something besides the fact that he was dangerously close to coming inside her.

“I’m close,” she gasped.

“Thank God.”

He drove into her hard, and Miriam arched up again, pressing herself against him. He glanced down at where their bodies joined, mesmerized by the sight of her wrapped tightly around him as he slid himself deep inside her again and again until he felt something burst behind his eyelids.

“Christ!” he ground out as he exploded inside her, driving harder and harder until they were both spent.

When they stopped moving at last, Miriam gave a sigh of contentment and angled up on her elbows again. “Well,” she said. “That etiquette lesson went a little differently than I expected.”

Jason grinned. “Do I get a gold star?”

“You get something, all right.” She smiled back and pulled him down for another kiss.

\* \* \*

AS MIRIAM MULLED her usual array of normal postcoital activities, it occurred to her that doing the dishes had never made the list.

Then again, she’d never slept with Jason Sanders before.

“Careful,” he said as he glanced up from the salad bowl he was drying. “I dropped a knife in there somewhere under all those suds.”

“Was it my puntilla knife or my boning knife?”

“Again with the dirty talk?”

She snorted and slipped her hand carefully into the sudsy water so she could feel around along the bottom of the sink. “Got it.” She fished out the knife and gave it a good scrub



before handing it to him and plunging her hands back into the dishwater.

There was something utterly perfect about standing shoulder to shoulder with him at her kitchen sink, scrubbing and drying in tandem like an old married couple. She'd tried to insist he leave them all to her, but he'd insisted with equal fervor that he wanted to help.

She got the sense he was used to getting his way.

Besides, this seemed less awkward than pillow talk and a sleepover. While she might have planned for the possibility of a hookup, she definitely wasn't ready for anything that smacked of relationships or commitment. Or fine, maybe commitment wasn't the issue. Maybe it was the idea of committing to someone whose notion of a good time involved an ice ax and crampons.

*That's not his only notion of a good time...*

Her cheeks flushed with heat as she finished scrubbing the cast-iron skillet she'd been washing and handed it to him. "So do you feel more ready for Saturday night's dinner?"

He grabbed the skillet like it weighed next to nothing, even though it was heavy enough that Miriam needed both hands to lift it. He gave her a knowing grin, probably wondering why she'd made such an abrupt shift from flirty banter to business mode.

But Miriam knew why. She had to set some boundaries, dammit. To let him know this was fun and fabulous, but also very, very casual. That was the only way to do this without risking her heart.

"I feel great," he said, and the gravelly undertone in his voice made her cheeks warm up. "About the dinner," he added. "I feel great about my preparation for the dinner."

"Of course. I knew that's what you meant."

"I feel great about other things, too." He grinned and set the skillet aside, then reached for the serving platter she handed him. "You certainly showed me some things I'd never seen before."

“Likewise.” She smiled in spite of herself as she remembered what he’d done with his thumb and— “The hiccup cures,” she blurted. “That was new to me.”

Jason gave her a knowing grin, but nodded. “And the stuff about napkin placement and silverware—that was new to me.”

She looked down into the sink full of soapy water and began scrubbing the little copper saucepan she used for melting butter. “Let me know if there’s anything else I can help with.” She paused, moving more delicately as she washed the blade of her mandoline. “You never mentioned what time the dinner event starts. Is it early or late?”

“I think it’s at six thirty on Saturday evening, which is kind of a pain.”

“Why’s that?”

“Well, since it’s a three-day weekend, I was hoping to head over to the Cascades to climb Three Fingered Jack,” he said.

A rush of ice sluiced through Miriam’s veins. She kept her eyes on the spoon she was scrubbing, not trusting herself to look up. “Okay,” she said, though it came out more like a squeak than an affirmation.

“I planned to drive over Thursday evening to set up base camp at the bottom of the mountain, but Ellie has this support group she goes to for parents of kids with cancer,” he continued, blessedly oblivious to Miriam’s discomfort. “His oncologist offered to hook us up with a babysitter who’s a nurse. Someone who knows all about kids in remission and that sort of thing.”

“That’s great!” Miriam said, doing her best to focus on Henry instead of her fears about Jason’s climb. “It must be a relief to have someone you can trust.”

“That’s just it. I don’t. I don’t trust anyone with Henry. Even though it’s only for an hour. Even though Ellie insists it would be totally fine.”

“Oh.” Miriam frowned, trying to understand. “So Henry’s doctor thinks it’s okay to leave him with this nurse for an hour, and his mother thinks it’s okay—”

“It’s not okay.” The vehemence in his voice told Miriam the topic was off-limits for discussion, so she shut up and kept scrubbing.

“Anyway, I’m staying here with Henry,” Jason said. “Which means I can’t take off until Friday morning, which means I’ll get a later start than I wanted on the climb.”

Miriam didn’t say anything. Several long seconds passed before she realized she’d been washing the same spoon for at least three minutes. She rinsed it off and handed it to him. “Three Fingered Jack,” she said, trying to keep her voice even, though she could feel her hands starting to shake. She plunged them back into the soapy water, determined not to make a big deal of this. “Didn’t I see a headline about a guy falling to his death there just a couple weeks ago?”

“Yeah. It was on the descent about a hundred feet from the summit. He wasn’t roped in.”

“Oh.” She bit her lip. “But you’ll be roped in?”

“At that spot we will be. Plus my climbing buddy and I are doing the south route, which is a little safer.”

“I see.” She wished she could find the words reassuring, but instead she just felt cold. She could feel Jason watching her, but opted to keep her eyes on the sink full of dishes, on the nest of silverware glittering beneath the suds.

“The sad thing about that climber a few weeks ago is that he bonked right after he summited,” Jason said.

Miriam frowned. “Bonked?” The term sounded familiar from her father’s years as a climber, but she couldn’t recall what it meant.

“It’s where body systems shut down due to dehydration or a lack of nutrients or altitude or some other factor. With the muscle-glycogen bonk, the brain works fine but the legs stop working. Or the blood-glucose bonk, where the brain is the thing that shuts down.”

“Okay,” she said slowly, still fighting to keep from jumping out of her skin and *bonking* him over the head with her skillet or tying him up in her closet so he couldn’t go. She

looked up at him, hoping like hell her expression didn't give away how terrified she felt. "And how do you keep yourself from bonking?"

He looked at her, his gaze seeming to assess whether she was genuinely curious or on the brink of yelling at him. Miriam wasn't too sure herself.

"I eat smart before I climb, I drink plenty of water, I make sure I'm well rested, and I stop moving if I'm feeling weird or dizzy," he said slowly. "But obviously there are no guarantees."

"Right." She swallowed hard. "No guarantees."

Those two words underscored everything Miriam had been thinking these last few hours. *Don't get attached. Keep it casual. Nothing good can come from you losing your heart to an adrenaline junkie, so make damn sure that doesn't happen.*

This conversation stood as a good reminder of why.

She cleared her throat. "Well, I guess I don't have to tell you to be careful."

"You don't," he said, offering her a small smile. "But I will anyway."

"And since we've agreed this is a casual thing between us, I guess I don't have to waste my time fretting about your well-being or worrying about how you might not come home."

He laughed as he set the skillet aside. He started to reach for the saucepan, then seemed to stop himself and reached for her instead.

"You don't," he agreed as he pulled her tight against him, sudsy hands and all.

Miriam started to protest, but he felt so good and solid and warm that she gave up and twined her wet fingers behind his neck.

"You don't *have* to worry about me at all," he said. "But you're welcome to do it anyway."

“Why would I do that?” she asked, annoyed with her traitorous heart for speeding up.

“Because you care about my well-being. Even if we’re not getting attached. Or involved. Or anything else that implies something other than a casual fling.”

“Right.” She buried her face against his chest. “Nothing serious at all.”

She closed her eyes, thinking it was easier said than done.

## CHAPTER 8



“*Y*ou want a lick of my ice cream, Uncle Jason?”  
“Well—”

Jason looked at the waterfall of melted chocolate running down Henry’s arm and reached into his pocket for a handkerchief.

Ellie beat him to the punch by whipping out a packet of wet wipes. “Uncle Jason has his own ice cream, sweetie,” she said as she swiped vainly at her son’s hands and face.

“But that’s very nice of you to offer,” Jason said. “Sharing is good.”

“Yeah,” Henry said. “Just not underpants. Or boogers. Or spit.”

“No, those aren’t good things to share,” Jason agreed, though he didn’t entirely rule out spit-swapping. The thought made him remember what it felt like to kiss Miriam, deep and wet and—

“Open wide,” Ellie said, and Jason looked back to see her popping the last piece of ice cream cone into Henry’s mouth. “There you go. Now you can run off and play on the swings.”

“Will you come push me?”

“In a minute,” Ellie said. “I want to talk to your Uncle Jason right now.”

“Grown-up stuff?”

“Grown-up stuff,” Ellie confirmed.

Henry frowned, and Jason reached out and tousled his nephew's hair. "Too bad there aren't any real grown-ups around."

Henry giggled and ducked out from under his uncle's hand. "I did good at the doctor, right?"

"You did great," Jason said. "That's why you got the ice cream."

"And the playground," Ellie added.

"And remember what else I said we'd do?" Jason prompted.

Henry's eyes lit up. "We're going canoeing."

"That's right. Not today, but this weekend. You and me and your mom."

Ellie nodded and took one more swipe at Henry's mouth with a wet wipe. "That's right. Maybe we'll even take a picnic."

"Cool! I can go play now?"

Jason took a deep breath. If it were up to him, he'd swaddle Henry in protective Bubble Wrap and never let him get more than two feet away, but Ellie seemed a little more willing to give her son some space.

"You can play," she said. "Be careful, though. Remember what the doctor said about being gentle with your body?"

"Uh-huh."

"Stay where we can see you," Jason said. "And don't climb on the monkey bars. Or go on the swings. Or pick up any bugs. Or—"

"Have fun, baby." Ellie elbowed Jason in the ribs as Henry scampered off. Then she turned to face her brother.

"He's fine," she said. "You heard what the doctor said the other day. At this stage, fresh air is good for him. So is a little bit of independence."

"I just don't want anything to happen to him."

“Neither do I,” Ellie said, then took a bite of her own chocolate raspberry truffle ice cream. “But I also want him to get the chance to be a normal little boy. He hasn’t had that for the last eighteen months.”

Jason sighed. His sister was probably right, but nothing she could say would make him feel any less protective of the two of them. They were all he had left, the only remainder of his family.

He watched as Henry smiled at a little girl with pink butterfly barrettes, then picked up a bark chip to show her. Jason felt his heart twist in his chest.

*Nothing in the world is more important than this.*

“So,” Ellie said. “You nailed your PR chick.”

Jason sighed and bit into his ice cream cone, not surprised this was what his sister wanted to discuss. “I never said that.”

“You didn’t have to. I could read it all over your face the next morning. You’re transparent as a wet T-shirt, brother of mine.”

“Can we not talk about this?”

Ellie laughed and slugged him in the shoulder. Her gaze swung to the playground where Henry was playing on some sort of spinnny swing thing that would probably make him barf, but he seemed to be having a good time.

“What do you want to talk about then?” she asked. “The presidential debates? The price of milk? Niels Bohr’s theory of atomic structure?”

“You’ve been watching the Discovery Channel again.”

“Henry loves it.” She spooned up another bite of ice cream as her gaze stayed fixed on her son. “And it took his mind off worrying about the doctor visit all week, so that was a plus.”

“He did great today,” Jason said.

“Yeah, he did.” She smiled. “And I’m glad his levels are staying down. I know it’s too soon to get to hopeful, but—” She shrugged and looked down at her ice cream.



“I know.” He squeezed his sister’s knee as his heart did the same in his chest. “I’m hopeful, too.”

“So back to your girlfriend—”

“She’s *not* my girlfriend,” Jason said, a little surprised by the vehemence in his own words. But Miriam had seemed pretty certain about the whole no-strings-attached thing, hadn’t she?

“This was fun, but I’m not looking for anything more, okay?” she’d told him that night as they’d said good-bye at her front door.

“Right,” Jason had said, wondering why the words stung even though he’d had the same damn thought not ten minutes before as they finished up the dishes. “So I’ll see you around.”

“Absolutely. Text me and let me know how the dinner event goes.”

The dinner, not the climb. He’d wondered if it was a deliberate choice, her unwillingness to hear anything about an activity that clearly made her nervous. Or maybe it was just logical that if he texted after the dinner, she’d know he’d survived both without incident.

Either way, the thought that she cared about him left him with a warm feeling in the center of his chest.

“You’re thinking about her, aren’t you?” Ellie nudged him with her elbow.

Jason frowned at his sister. “What, you’re telepathic now?”

“I can just tell. You get this funny little smile like someone’s diddling you under the dinner table.”

“Very nice,” he said. “And people think I’m the one who lacks class.”

“How’d that go, by the way? Your dinner the other night with all those executives.”

“Really well,” Jason admitted. “Miriam’s lessons helped me not to do anything embarrassing like eating with the wrong fork or tucking my napkin in the front of my shirt.”

“Sounds like she really helped you out.”

He didn't take the bait, despite the suggestive note in her voice. Instead, he watched Henry, who'd given up on the spiny thing and was busy picking dandelions from the grassy patch beside the playground.

“So are you going to see her again?”

“Who?”

“You know who, you big dork.” Ellie slugged him in the shoulder again. “Miriam, of course.”

Yeah, all right. He'd known what she meant. Hearing her name—even from his sister's lips—sent him smiling again like an idiot. Maybe Ellie had a point.

“We're meeting with them again next week to go over some scaled-down ideas for the rebrand,” Jason said. “The board is still on the fence about how to proceed, in light of the current financial challenges.”

“You gave 'em hell, right? About their stupid idea to lay off all those people?”

“Yeah, I did.”

He definitely had, not that he'd made any headway. Besides spelling out his case in the board meeting this week, he'd mixed, mingled, and schmoozed like a pro at the dinner last weekend, trying to get his point across to the board members over canapés and crudités.

For all the good it had done.

“We're considering all our options at this point,” Jack Wainswright had told him elusively, making Jason want to slam the guy's head in a car door.

“So, do you think you'll see Miriam again outside work?” Ellie asked, never one to let a subject drop.

“I don't know. I texted her Sunday to let her know things went well with the dinner and the mountain climb. Sounded like she had a pretty busy week lined up.”

“Did you try asking her out?”

“No. It’s not like that, El.”

His sister raised an eyebrow. “What is it like, then?”

“Just—casual, I guess. Nothing serious.”

“Is that what she wants?”

“Definitely.”

“And it’s what you want?”

“Yeah,” he said, hesitating only a little. “It is.”

His sister looked at him a moment, then gave an eye roll that summed up every thought echoing in Jason’s head the last week.

“Whatever you say, bro.”

And with that, she stood up to go push Henry on the swings.

\* \* \*

“SO IT’S OFFICIAL.” Miriam grinned and wrapped her best friend in a bear hug at her dining room table, doing her damndest not to think about what she and Jason had done on that very table just over a week ago. “Congratulations, hot mama. Now I can start sending you links for all the trendiest designers of fashionable maternity wear.”

Holly hugged back, her hair tickling Miriam’s nose. “Thanks.” She pulled free from the hug and sat down, then grabbed a handful of rosemary-dusted almonds from the bowl in the middle of the table. “These are my favorite. I can’t seem to stop eating lately.”

“I’ll grab you some more,” Miriam offered. “I’d open a bottle of champagne, but I’m pretty sure that’s off-limit for peggos.”

“Right you are,” Holly agreed. “I’ll take ginger ale, if you’ve got it. Or anything fizzy. My stomach’s been giving me fits all week.”

“Is Ben over the moon?” She hustled to the fridge and grabbed two cans of club soda and a couple glasses. She hurried back to the dining room, not wanting to miss Holly’s answer.

“Yeah, he is. He’s always wanted to be a dad. To do better than his dad did with him.”

“I’ve met his dad, so I know that won’t be too tough,” Miriam pointed out. “But I know Ben’s going to be a great father.”

“Lyle did set the bar pretty low, but I’m positive Ben will rise above it,” Holly said. “We knew we wanted to have kids right away, but we kinda didn’t expect it to happen so fast.”

“Well, that *is* the way the birds and the bees work.”

Holly grinned and cracked the top on her soda. “Speaking of which...” She trailed off there, but gave a pointed look at the dining room table. “Please tell me you’ve sanitized it since then.”

“At least twice,” Miriam said. “You don’t see any butt prints on it, do you?”

“Ew.” Holly poured her soda, then took a sip. Then she set it down and looked at her friend. Miriam knew that look. It was the same one Holly gave their clients when she sensed they weren’t giving them the full story on a project.

“So,” Holly said as she adjusted a bobby pin at the edge of her chignon. “You’re sure it’s just a casual, no-strings-attached kinda thing with Jason?”

“Positive. *Please*. Can you see me with a scruffy mountain man in any long-term capacity?”

“You mean because you’re the world’s most citified city girl, or because of what happened with your dad?”

“Both,” Miriam said, her throat tightening a little as she lifted her own glass of soda. “I mean come on, can you imagine a worse match?”

“I can. And I’ve been happily married to him for two months now, so don’t knock it ’til you’ve tried it.”

“I just—”

She stopped herself, not sure what she'd been about to say.

*I just can't see myself with a guy like that? I just can't go through that again?*

*I just can't stop thinking about him?*

She settled for something simpler. “We're not a good match. Outside the bedroom, I mean.”

Holly laughed and picked up her soda. “From the way you've been grinning all week, whatever happened inside the bedroom was enough to make up for the rest.”

Miriam tried to smile back, but she knew it didn't quite reach her eyes. Holly seemed to notice and set her soda down. “Hon, I know it's scary. The idea of getting attached again?”

“Not just attached.” She hated the pinprick of tears that stabbed her eyelids. “Attached to a guy who likes to take risks. Who goes skiing down mountains and climbing up cliffs and doing all sorts of things that could get him killed.”

“I know,” Holly said, and her eyes were so kind, Miriam's heart nearly split in two. “But you can't spend your whole life avoiding the great outdoors and everyone who frolics in it just because you're afraid of getting hurt again.”

Miriam looked down at the table and swallowed back the threat of tears. “You were there, Holly. You were the one who had to mop me up and carry my weight at work after my dad died. You saw how devastating that was.”

“I remember.” She put her hand on Miriam's and gave a gentle squeeze. “But I also saw before that how much you loved your dad. And I'm seeing now how much you're starting to care for Jason. The way your whole face lights up when he walks into a room. It's like you're electrified or something.”

Miriam was spared from responding as her phone buzzed on the table beside her. She glanced at the readout, and her heart gave a silly little lurch at the sight of Jason's number on the screen. She drew her hand out from under Holly's and reached for the phone.

“Hi there,” she said, trying for casual and breezy and probably just sounding like a woman trying too hard. “How’s it going?”

“Actually, not so great.”

“Oh? What’s wrong?”

“It’s Ellie—my sister? The woman you mistook for my wife.”

“You’re never going to let me live that down,” she muttered. “What’s wrong with Ellie?”

“She just got hit with a migraine.”

“I’m so sorry,” Miriam said, not sure what that had to do with her. “That sounds awful.”

“Right. That’s not the worst of it. I promised Henry I’d take him canoeing today. It was his reward for being really good at the doctor the other day. Ellie was supposed to go with us so we’d have another person paddling and an extra set of eyes on Henry.”

“Oh,” Miriam said, wondering if this call was headed the direction she thought it was and why she wasn’t working harder at coming up with an excuse not to go in case he asked. Instead, she felt a silly little flutter of excitement in her gut, which was kind of awful. She didn’t want Ellie to be sick.

“So I was thinking maybe you could come with us,” Jason said. “With Henry and me. Canoeing.”

“Um, right,” Miriam said. “The thing is, I’ve never been canoeing before. I’ve never been around kids much, either.”

“Which of those things scares you most?”

“Um—well, a little of both.”

*And the possibility of falling for you.*

“It’s safe, I promise,” he said, and for a second she thought he was addressing her unspoken thought. “Henry doesn’t bite, and neither does the canoe.”

“But how am I going to be helpful if I don’t know what I’m doing?”

“Believe me, an extra set of eyes and hands goes a long way with a five-year-old. Besides, haven’t we talked about how you need to be familiar with all the Urban Trax product lines? Canoes and kayaks are among our best-selling products this time of year.”

“Okay,” she said, not wanting to admit she kinda liked the idea of seeing Jason in a tight T-shirt and swim trunks. Was that what people wore to go canoeing? She had no idea, and she probably shouldn’t be thinking about ogling him when they’d have a five-year-old in tow.

“So can I pick you up in an hour?” he asked.

“I have no idea what to bring or wear or—”

“No high heels,” he said. “Keep it casual. Maybe a swimsuit under shorts and a T-shirt or something. And shoes you don’t mind getting wet.”

“So I’m going to get wet?” She hadn’t meant for the words to sound suggestive, but she wondered if he’d heard them that way.

The laughter in his voice told her he probably had. “I can’t promise that won’t happen,” he said. “But I’ll do my best to take care of you if it does.”

“That’s reassuring,” Miriam said, feeling more turned on than reassured. “All right. I’m in.”

Beside her, Holly smiled and mouthed words Miriam wished she could ignore.

*You’ve got it bad.*

## CHAPTER 9



Miriam tucked a stray curl behind her ear and stared at the big silver canoe glinting in the sun. It didn't look terribly dangerous, but looks could be deceiving.

Like the cherubic-looking five-year-old standing beside her. Looks were definitely deceiving there.

"Hey, Miss Miriam!"

She looked down to see young Henry beaming at her with his fist closed tight around something. "Yes?"

"Wanna hear a dirty joke?"

"Um—"

"Mud!" The boy squealed with delight, then opened his palm to reveal a fistful of brown goop. "Funny, huh?"

Miriam snort-laughed as she fished into the pocket of her shorts for a tissue. She came up with nothing but a breath mint, which probably wouldn't be too effective for cleaning grubby little hands.

"That is, without a doubt, the best dirty joke I have ever heard from a five-year-old," she told him. "Or from most grown-ups, for that matter."

"Really?" His eyes got wide at that, as he considered the fact that he'd bested his elders in the realm of dirty joke telling.

"In the interest of full disclosure, I guess I should admit I've never been around kids, but I know plenty of adults who



can't tell a joke like that."

"What's fold-us-clothes-hurt?"

"Fold clothes—oh, full disclosure?" She tried to think of how to explain it to a five-year-old, then realized she had no earthly idea. This whole kid thing was like another planet requiring an entirely different language.

It didn't seem to matter to Henry, who was already wandering off toward the edge of the lake.

"Don't get too close to the water," she called, pretty sure that's what she was supposed to say as a grown-up in charge. He had a life jacket on, but probably wasn't old enough to go wandering into the lake by himself, was he?

Hell if she knew.

She glanced back toward the parking lot where Jason had gone to get the rest of their things, but she didn't see him, and she didn't feel right taking her eyes off Henry, so she settled for watching the little boy instead.

He sure was cute. All big ears and huge dimples and little glasses that magnified a pair of blue eyes that looked just like Jason's. The boy scooped up another handful of mud, whooping as he flung it out over the lake. A cluster of birds swooped down to investigate, then fluttered off when they realized there was no food to be had. Henry looked back at her and laughed, and Miriam smiled back as something warm pooled behind her breastbone.

She'd always joked that she was born without a biological clock, and she'd never been one to *ooh* and *ahh* over babies.

Still, she'd always been open to the idea that she could change her mind someday. That maybe she'd have the capacity to fall in love, get married, have a child. Then her father died, and the thought of bringing a new life into a world so callous and dangerous seemed much too risky. Besides, she didn't have it in her to love someone else that much again. Not with such a huge dad-shaped hole still gaping in her heart.

"How's it going?"

She turned to see Jason smiling at her with a picnic basket in his hand. He wore battered-looking cargo shorts that shouldn't be sexy, but left her drooling with the way they hugged his ass. His T-shirt was practically threadbare, but that just made it easier to see every ripple of muscle beneath.

Muscles she'd been well acquainted with a week ago. "It's great." She glanced back at Henry. "I made sure he didn't drown, just like you said."

"I knew you were up to the task."

Spotting his uncle, Henry scurried back over, his hands still streaked with mud. "Uncle Jason! I made sure she didn't drown, just like you said."

Henry held out his little mud-covered palm, and Jason high-fived him without hesitation. The boy turned to Miriam, hand still outstretched, and she paused only an instant before giving it a little smack.

"Good job," she said. "I feel much safer with you here."

Oddly enough, it was true. What was it about the easy, fun-loving dynamic of these two that left her feeling like she was part of a family again? It was something she hadn't realized she was missing.

"Okay, then." Jason set down the picnic basket and dug out a wet wipe. He handed that to Henry without comment, then turned to Miriam and thrust a long wooden object into her hand. "Shall we get started?"

"Oh," Miriam said, frowning down at it. "I didn't realize I'd have my own rower."

"Roar?"

"*Rower*. The thing to row the boat?"

Jason laughed and picked up a roar of his own. "It's called a paddle."

"Not an oar?"

"No. An oar has a flat blade and is usually fastened to a ship with oarlocks." He held up his paddle in illustration.

“Henry, can you remember the parts of the paddle?”

Henry frowned in concentration, then pointed to the spot where Jason’s hand wrapped around. “That’s the drip?”

“Close,” Jason told him. “It’s the grip.”

“I like his version better,” Miriam said as she did her best to mimic Jason’s hold on the paddle. “How about this part?” she asked, stroking the long middle part of the paddle.

“That’s the shaft.” Jason gave her a heated smile. Miriam stopped stroking it as heat crept into her cheeks.

“Right.”

“And if you slide your hand down the shaft, you’ll get to the throat.”

“Seriously?”

“Yep.” Jason grinned wider as Henry looked on, luckily oblivious to the adults’ salacious thoughts. “The throat is what connects the shaft to the blade.”

“This is the blade,” Henry said, whacking Miriam’s paddle with the back of his hand. “But not a blade like for cutting people. Like a ninja has. I’m gonna be a ninja when I grow up. Or a brontosaurus.” He fished a plastic dinosaur from his pocket and held it up.

“I’m positive you’ll make a very good ninja or brontosaurus,” Miriam assured him as she adjusted her grip on the paddle, mimicking Jason’s hold on his own.

“Very nice,” he said. “Good grip. You’re a natural.”

She couldn’t tell if he was being dirty or not, so she settled for a simple “thank you.”

“So how does this work?” She glanced at the boat they’d hauled down from the car’s roof rack earlier. “Where do I sit?”

“I’m going to have you in the bow,” he said. “I’ll be in the stern, and Henry can hang out right there in the middle where he’ll be nice and safe.”

“Yes!” The little boy did a fist pump of excitement and clambered into the boat, his little red life jacket almost as rosy as his cheeks.

Miriam looked back at Jason. “I assume you’re going to tell me which one’s the bow and which one’s the stern?”

“You’ll be in front facing forward,” he said. “I’ll be behind you.”

“Got it.”

The thought of Jason behind her sent a shiver up her spine. Was it her imagination, or did he give her a knowing look?

But instead of saying anything, he reached into the boat and grabbed a bright blue life vest. “This one’s for you. Want help putting it on?”

“Please,” she said, not sure if she really did want the help, or just wanted him in close proximity.

He stepped closer, near enough now that she could feel his breath ruffling her hair. He put his arms around her, and she started to fall into the embrace as if by instinct, but she realized at the last second he was just securing the life jacket behind her.

“Arms out through the holes,” he said. “That’s it.”

“Ooof,” she said as he began to tighten the straps around her chest.

He laughed and fiddled with the strap, grazing the underside of her breast. Was that intentional, or not? Miriam couldn’t tell, but it turned her on just the same.

“A little snug here,” he said.

“Does it have to be so tight around my—”

“Boobies!” Henry shouted from the boat.

“Right,” Miriam said, nodding at Henry. “Thank you for that.”

“Girls have boobies and boys have boobies, too,” Henry offered. “But they’re not the same kind of boobies.”

“True enough, kiddo.” Jason cinched the strap the rest of the way. He let go of it and looked at Miriam. “Sorry, but it does kinda have to be tight. You okay?”

“I think so.”

“You’re not going to get hiccups again, are you?”

“If I do, we’ll have to come up with a family-friendly cure.”

“Pickle juice!” Henry hooted. “That’s what mommy gives me when I have the hiccups.”

“That’s one way to do it,” Jason said as he fiddled with one of the buckles on the front of her life jacket, then flashed her a sexy look. He leaned closer, lowering his voice so only she could hear. “I might be intimately acquainted with a few other options.”

“So I hear,” she breathed, gripping her paddle a little tighter.

“Shall we get going?” he murmured. “Before I ravish you right here in the mud and corrupt my poor nephew?”

“That might be the least sexy idea I’ve ever heard.”

“Then why are you squirming?”

She grinned and turned toward the water. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.” Still clutching her paddle, she waded carefully out into the water, sucking in a breath as the cold wetness closed around her ankles. She was grateful she’d worn sandals that could handle the water and the muck, though her pedicure was probably a goner.

“It’s freezing,” she said.

“I promise you a foot massage later to make up for it.”

“Deal.” She grinned. “You sure you want me in front? I’ve never done this before.”

“That’s why I want you in front. The person in back steers the boat. And ogles the person in front.”

“Ogles!” Henry shouted from his seat in the middle of the boat. “I wear ogles when I go swimming so my eyes don’t burn.”

Miriam stifled a giggle and shot a glance at Jason, who was staring pointedly at the back of her shorts. “Yep,” he said. “That’s a big risk sometimes.”

She snorted and touched the edge of the boat, steadying herself. The water was up to her knees, and she wasn’t entirely sure how to get in gracefully.

“I’ll hold it steady,” Jason said, reading her thoughts. “You’re safe. Just hop in.”

Reassured by his words, Miriam anchored the blade of her paddle into the muck at the bottom of the lake. Steadying herself, she swung one leg into the boat, then the other. She planted her butt on the seat, appreciating the dished-out shape that cupped her backside.

She looked over her shoulder at Jason, who seemed to be thinking scandalous thoughts about her backside. Henry seemed distracted by the plastic dinosaur cradled in his lap, so he didn’t notice the heated look exchanged by the two grown-ups.

“Very nice,” Jason murmured as he shot a look at her ass. “I’m going to enjoy this view very much.”

“Absolutely,” Miriam replied with mock haughtiness. “Not a cloud in the sky, and the mountains look stunning.”

He grinned. “Too bad the life vest blocks my view of the mountains.”

“Uncle Jason! When I’m big like you, I’m gonna go mountain climbing, too!”

Miriam felt her smile falter, but she tried not to let either of them see it. She tucked a curl behind her ear and breathed deeply to get her bearings back.

Perhaps sensing her discomfort, Jason chose to change the subject. “You ready to head out on the water, sport?”

“Yes! Do I get a paddle?”

“Nope, not this time.”

“Does brontosaurus get a paddle?” He held up his dinosaur.

“You and brontosaurus have another very important job here.”

“What’s that?”

“You’re my navigator,” Jason said. “I need you to tell me where to go. You think you can do that?”

“Yeah, I’m a good nabinator!”

“That you are.”

Miriam felt something tugging at her heart, and she watched as Jason gripped the end of the boat and pushed them out into the water. Gripping his own paddle, he slung himself into the rear seat and grinned at her.

“Ready to do this?”

Something about that grin sent her stupid libido bubbling again. Dammit anyway. “Are you going to tell me what to do?”

“I’m getting there. Okay, watch me for a sec.”

She’d been watching him all morning, admiring those well-defined pecs and biceps that looked like they’d been chiseled out of granite, but that probably wasn’t what he meant.

“This is a basic forward stroke,” he said. “You want the paddle to be nearly vertical, and your grip hand out over the water.”

He demonstrated, executing a series of crisp, even strokes that made his muscles ripple, the boat move forward, and Miriam’s whole body hum with desire.

“You see how my shoulder rotates forward, then I plant the paddle, then rotate my shoulder back as I pull through?”

“Uh-huh,” Miriam said, trying not to be distracted by those glorious shoulders.

“You try.”

“Okay.” She gripped her paddle and turned to face forward. Now that she wasn’t gaping at him like a damn fool, she gave the paddling thing her best shot. “Like this?”

“Close. A little deeper.”

The words were perfectly innocent, but they sent a jolt of adrenaline straight to her lady bits just the same. She ordered herself to concentrate, to focus on dipping the paddle into the water like he’d demonstrated. The canoe sliced through the water with ease, propelling them farther out onto the lake.

“Keep your back nice and straight and draw the paddle along the edge of the boat,” he said. “That’s it. Just like that.”

“Should I switch sides?”

“Not unless you want to. I’ll steer from back here, but feel free to switch if your arms are tired or you want to try it out over there to see how it feels.”

Miriam drove the paddle into the water again, getting the hang of it now. “This is kinda fun,” she said, surprised to realize it was true. “It’s not as tippy as I thought it would be.”

“You’re a natural,” Jason said, and the pride in his voice made her turn to see his expression. It was equal parts happiness and pleasure and maybe...love?

*No.* It couldn’t be. They’d agreed that wasn’t happening. Not for either of them, absolutely not. It was lust, that’s all.

But with her gaze locked in his, she couldn’t shake the feeling that something was happening here.

“Why do you guys keep looking at each other like that?” Henry asked.

Miriam blinked as the spell broke between them. “Like what?”

“You know...” Henry said, his voice five-year-old singsong. “Like you’re a dog and he’s got a bone you really want.”



Miriam felt her cheeks go crimson. She was working so hard to stifle a laugh that she had tears pooling in her eyes. Behind her, Jason was making no such effort. He was laughing so hard the canoe began to rock.

“You’re a real romantic, sport,” he said. “Now turn around and tell me where we’re going.”

\* \* \*

“SO THIS WAS FUN,” Jason said as he reached up to tuck a stray curl behind Miriam’s ear.

Not like she couldn’t fix her own hair, but his need to touch her was so all-consuming that he couldn’t help himself. He let his finger graze the edge of her ear, savoring the soft warmth of her skin and the way her bare knee brushed his.

They were sitting close together in a patch of sunshine on a picnic blanket, the remains of their lunch spread out between them. On a far corner of the blanket, Henry snoozed in the shade, his little boy body curled tight like a potato bug.

“It *was* fun,” Miriam agreed, sounding surprised. “I didn’t think it would be.”

“That’s the spirit.”

“No, really.” She plucked at a blade of grass near the edge of the blanket. “I mean I grew up occasionally doing outdoorsy things with my dad, but never canoeing. And as I got older, I stopped getting to do those things with him.”

“How come?”

She shrugged and began to shred the thick blade of grass. “My folks split up when I was ten, and I spent most of my time with my mother after that.”

“I take it she wasn’t an outdoor enthusiast?”

Miriam laughed. “My mother makes me look like Davy Crocket. She always saw herself as more of a cross between Martha Stewart and one of the Real Housewives.”

“Quite a combination,” he said, catching one of her hands in his. “Does she live around here?”

“No. After the divorce, she moved back east on a quest to become a New York City socialite. I lived with her until I graduated from high school, but came back out here after college.”

“And here you stayed.” He planted a lazy kiss across her knuckles.

“Yep. I’m more of a West Coast socialite, minus the actual social scene.”

He grinned and began tracing the outline of her hand against the picnic blanket, his fingertip dipping and trailing between her digits. “So your folks were pretty opposite?”

She nodded and looked up to meet his eyes for the first time since the conversation had started. “Yes. So it’s probably no surprise that didn’t work out.”

The words hung there between them for a moment, casting a dark shadow over an otherwise perfect afternoon. Jason tried to think of the right thing to say, but he couldn’t come up with something clever.

His parents may have died young, but they’d always loved each other. Even when he was seventeen and rolling his eyes over their need to hold hands at the dinner table, he appreciated how much his mother and father cared for each other.

He had no idea what it was like to come from a broken home.

He glanced at Henry, who was still sleeping peacefully, his little body twitching the way it sometimes did when he was deep in dreamland. What was it like not knowing his dad? For all intents and purposes, not having a father at all.

*You’re the father he doesn’t have. It’s your job to make sure he’s happy and well adjusted and safe and loved.*

“He looks so much like you.”

Jason glanced up to see Miriam watching him. She smiled and nodded at the boy. “Henry, I mean. The resemblance is strong. It’s no wonder I thought he might be your son.”

“We get that a lot,” he said, and he heard the tinge of pride in his own words. “How old are you?”

Miriam laughed and shook her head. “Anyone ever tell you that’s not a polite question to ask a woman?”

“No.”

“Well, it isn’t. It’s much too intimate.”

“Honey,” he said, lowering his voice even though Henry was the soundest sleeper in the universe. “I’ve been buried deep inside you while you screamed my name. I think we’re well beyond the point of intimate.”

Miriam’s cheeks turned pink, but the faint smile on her face told him she remembered it as fondly as he did. She opened her mouth to say something—maybe that she wanted to do it again?—then closed it again.

She glanced away for a moment, then looked back at him. “I’m thirty-one. How old are you?”

“Thirty-four. So can I ask you another personal question?”

“Fire away,” she said, throwing an arm up. “Might as well keep going while you’re on a roll.”

She looked more amused than annoyed, so Jason pressed on. “How come you’re not married?”

“Jeez.” She grabbed a potato chip from the bag between them and chomped down on it. He watched her jaw move as she chewed, taking her time with the question. “I guess the simple answer is that I never found the right guy.”

“What does the right guy look like?”

“Looks aren’t the important thing,” she said a little haughtily, though he noticed she shot a glance at his pecs when she said it. “The right guy has to be smart. Passionate. Funny. Successful. Sexy as hell.”

“Sexy? I thought you said looks weren’t important.”

“I said they’re not *as* important. Besides, sexy isn’t about looks. It’s about chemistry.”

“Got it,” he said, not entirely sure why it mattered to him, but pretty sure they had enough chemistry bubbling between them to power a Bunsen burner. “So where do you plan to find this smart, passionate, funny, successful, sexy-as-hell husband?”

“Maybe I’m not looking,” she said, glancing away. “Maybe I stopped looking altogether.”

He nodded, his gaze locked on her face. He sensed there was more to the story than that, and was deciding whether to push for it when she turned back to look him right in the eye.

“So how about you?” she asked. “You seem like a good family man. You’re obviously devoted and love kids. Why aren’t you shackled to a wife with a house in the suburbs and a dog in your backyard?”

Jason shrugged and let his gaze dart to Henry before he returned his attention to Miriam. “I guess I feel like I already have a family. No real need to do anything different.”

“Huh.” She nibbled another chip. “Think you’ll ever get hitched?”

“Kind of a heavy subject for a third date.”

“This isn’t a date, and you’re the one who brought it up, remember?”

“Good point. Okay, I guess I’m not sure. I mean, it’s not a priority for me. I know how much time and attention and devotion it takes to keep a family safe and protected and happy. I can’t afford to divert any attention away from the family already entrusted to me.”

She was silent a moment, but her gaze stayed locked with his. He had the disconcerting sensation she could look right through his eyeballs and into the back of his skull. Like she could read his mind.

“I can see that,” she said at last, and he had a hunch she really could.

Something crackled in the air between them. Something warm and electric and delicious. A flash in her eyes told him she felt it, too. That it wasn't just his imagination.

He was halfway to closing the distance between them before he even realized he'd moved. One minute he was sitting in his own quiet spot on the picnic blanket, minding his own business, and the next he was leaning close to kiss her.

Miriam had a dazed look in her eyes, and Jason wondered if he had the same expression. She was drifting toward him the same way he was moving toward her, almost as though they had magnets in their foreheads, drawing them together.

When his lips touched hers, it was the most natural thing in the world. He kissed her softly, taking his time, marveling at the softness of her mouth against his. This was nothing like the kiss in the cave, or like the passionate fuck on her dining room table.

This was something different altogether.

He knew she felt it, too, as her fingers stroked the back of his neck, gentle instead of insistent this time. Her kiss was gentler, too, and there was something so deliciously sweet it made his chest ache.

“Whoopsie!”

Jason jerked away and dropped his hand from the back of Miriam's neck. He blinked at the edge of the woods where an older couple wearing matching cargo shorts stood grinning at them.

“Sorry to interrupt,” said the woman, smiling as she brushed her salt-and-pepper hair back from her face. She shot a nostalgic look at the man beside her, then touched the wedding band on her finger. “We remember exactly what it's like trying to get a little alone time with a little one in the house,” she whispered with a knowing smile.

“Gotta get creative, that's for sure,” the man chimed in, smiling at Jason. “Take it from me, son—keep on kissing your wife just like that and you'll have lots of happy years ahead of you.”

“And a little brother or sister for *him*.” The woman beamed at Henry. “How old?”

“Five,” Jason said automatically, not bothering to correct their notion that they’d interrupted a stolen romantic moment between a mom and dad watching over their sleeping child. “Henry turned five in February.”

“Such a cutie,” the woman said. “Looks just like his daddy.”

“That’s what I always say.” Miriam shot Jason a private smile to say playing along was an act of kindness for the older couple. “Lucky for me, I married into a good gene pool.”

The word “married” made Jason’s heart clench in his chest, and he couldn’t figure out if it was terror or fondness that gripped him.

But he was sure about one thing.

He was dangerously close to falling for Miriam Ashley.

## CHAPTER 10



“Uncle Jason, I’ve gotta dump some apple juice!”

Miriam glanced in the rearview mirror at Henry, who didn’t appear to be holding any sort of beverage. She looked at Jason in the driver’s seat. “Apple juice?” she murmured, reaching for her purse. “I think I might have some sparkling water left in my bag—”

“No, that’s his word for relieving himself,” Jason said, turning off the highway on the exit that led toward their neighborhood. “We had to give him an alternative to announcing to everyone that he had to drain his penis.”

“I can see how that would be better,” Miriam said, glancing again in the rearview mirror. “How badly do you have to go, little man?”

“Bad!” Henry announced, crossing his legs. “*Real* bad.”

Jason glanced over at Miriam. “You mind if we take him home first? I know it’s just a couple of blocks from your place, but a couple of blocks can make all the difference with a five-year-old who’s still mastering the fine art of bladder control.”

“By all means,” Miriam said as she shot Henry a teasing look. “If you’re worried about your upholstery, I can just hold him by the ankles and hang him out the window.”

“Whoa!” Henry beamed. “That’d be cool!”

“Maybe next time,” Jason called. “We’re almost home, buddy. Think you can hold it ’til then?”

“Uh-huh.”

Miriam watched in the rearview mirror as the little boy took the suggestion quite literally, and was now gallantly “holding it.” She put a hand over her mouth to stifle her own laughter.

“Just a few more blocks,” Miriam offered, not sure if Henry even knew what a block was, but hoping it sounded helpful anyway. “Can you think about something else to take your mind off it? Bubble gum or baseball or gummy bears?”

“Yeah,” Henry said, his little face looking a bit less pinched as he pictured whatever it was that gave him the most joy.

“Here we are,” Jason announced as he pulled up to the curb like a pizza delivery guy running ten minutes late.

“Out you go.” Jason scrambled out of the car and helped his nephew with the buckles on his car seat. “You’ve got this, big guy. Just a few quick steps.”

Miriam got out of the car, careful to give them a wide berth. “I can just walk home from here.”

“Actually, would you mind grabbing that bag?” Jason called as he hustled his nephew up the walkway. “It has Henry’s medications in it, and he’s due to take a pill right now.”

“Of course,” Miriam said, secretly relieved not to have to say good-bye so abruptly. She grabbed the little blue backpack from the backseat and pushed the car door closed, following close behind as Jason and Henry hustled toward the house.

Jason pushed the door open and ushered Henry ahead of him, while Miriam followed, admiring the careful way Jason guided the little boy toward the house without pushing or growing impatient. “There you go, buddy. Use the powder room right there. Atta boy!”

Miriam trailed Jason into the living room, smiling as Ellie came walking through a door wiping her hands on a dish towel.

“You made it back.” She grinned at her brother before turning to Miriam and sticking out her hand. “Allow me to



introduce myself properly this time. I'm Ellie, and I'm definitely *not* this dork's wife."

"I'm so sorry about that," Miriam said, returning the handshake that was surprisingly hearty. "I'm so embarrassed."

"Don't be. I should have been clearer right from the start. How was the canoeing?"

"Wonderful," Miriam said. "Are you feeling better?"

"Yeah, this was a quick one. I used to get migraines so bad they'd leave me incapacitated for days, but I got my meds on board fast with this one, and it passed in just a couple hours."

"Is that your lasagna I smell?" Jason asked as he made his way toward the door Ellie had just come through.

"It is," she said. "I figured I owed you something for bailing on you at the last minute."

"You don't owe me a damn thing, but I'll take it," Jason called over his shoulder as he headed into the kitchen. "We had a great time without you."

"I'm sure you did." Ellie smiled at Miriam in a way that made it clear she knew exactly what was going on between them.

Well, maybe not *exactly*. Hell, Miriam wasn't even sure about that.

"So, Miriam, Jason tells me you'd never been canoeing before," Ellie said. "Did you fall in?"

"Nope!" she said, feeling a little proud. "Actually, I loved it. Even better than the spelunking. If I'd known how much fun it was, I'd have picked up a paddle years ago."

"You should try kayaking then," she said. "Personally, I think that's a lot more fun, plus you can do it all by yourself without needing another person along to help lug the boat off the car."

"A kayak, huh?" She thought about the bright yellow one she'd seen on the Urban Trax website, then pictured herself gliding through the water with effortless precision. She was

amazed to realize she rather liked the image. “Maybe I’ll look into renting one sometime.”

“Thanks, El,” Jason muttered, grinning as he walked back into the room munching a piece of French bread. “You just rendered me unnecessary to the girl I’ve been flirting with.”

“I’ll render you unnecessary if you don’t quit eating my bread.” Ellie swatted him with her dish towel. “I’m using that to make garlic bread for dinner.”

“There’s still plenty left to go with the lasagna.”

“Lasagna!” Henry said, bursting out of the bathroom. “We’re having lasagna for dinner?”

“We sure are.” Ellie beamed at her son as she tousled his hair. “I’m so glad your appetite is back. Remember how icky you felt during chemo?”

“Yeah,” the little boy said solemnly, looking at Miriam. “Sometimes I got milkshakes for dinner.”

“Protein shakes,” Ellie told Miriam. “It was the only thing he could keep down sometimes.”

“That must have been hard.” She wasn’t sure what else to offer.

“This little guy is quite the fighter.” Ellie smiled at her son. “The heart of a lion. Takes after Uncle Jason.”

“I like lions,” Henry said. “Remember that one time we went to the zoo and the boy elephant had a great big, huge, ginormous—”

“We remember.” Jason grinned. “You can spare us the elephant anatomy lesson. Did you wash your hands, buddy?”

“I did. Can Miriam stay for dinner? I promise she won’t eat too much and I’ll let her sit next to me.”

“Oh, that’s very sweet.” Miriam ruffled Henry’s hair, then glanced at her watch. “I don’t want to impose, and I really should get home.”

“Please stay,” Ellie insisted. “Feeding you is the least I can do after you bailed out my stupid brother this morning.

Besides, I've got a killer Chianti to go with the lasagna."

Jason smiled at Miriam. "Odds are good you'll get more than your share of the wine, since she tends to go easy on it after a migraine."

"That's very tempting, but I really shouldn't—"

"Please stay?" Henry pleaded. "I'll bet Mom will even let you lick your plate, even though we're not supposed to."

Miriam glanced at Jason, not sure if she should accept the invitation or call it a day. After all, they'd been together since early this morning, and maybe he could use a break from her.

But the smile he gave her wasn't the smile of a man eager to see her headed out the door, and when he slung his arm around her shoulders, it wiped away any doubt she might have had about whether he wanted her to stick around.

Okay, so they'd agreed they weren't interested in a relationship, but maybe this friends-with-benefits thing could work.

"Please stay," Jason murmured in her ear, his voice deep and rich like melted chocolate. "I'll bet you'll let me lick your plate, even though we're not supposed to."

Miriam shivered with desire, and glanced over at Ellie and Henry to make sure they hadn't heard. Henry was busy showing Ellie how his dinosaur could do the backstroke, so the boy was blessedly oblivious to the dirty things his uncle was whispering in the houseguest's ear.

But Ellie glanced over and grinned. "Come on, buddy," she told Henry as she caught her son by the hand. "I think Uncle Jason's powers of persuasion might work best without us in the room."

"That's what I'm afraid of," Miriam murmured, not needing any persuasion at all.

\* \* \*

JASON LEANED back in his chair, folding his hands behind his head as he stretched out his legs and resisted the urge to undo the top button on his shorts.

“Amazing dinner, El,” he said, feeling warm all over. “You’re going to need to roll me out the door to get back to my place.”

“Please,” Jason’s sister said as she kicked his foot under the table, then turned to Miriam. “Honestly, the guy eats like a starving water buffalo and never gains an ounce. It’s so unfair.”

“I hear you.” Miriam took her last bite of lasagna and chewed carefully before setting down her fork. She stood up and began to gather their empty plates. “If I even *look* at a second helping, it goes straight to my hips.”

Jason reached across the table for his sister’s empty salad bowl, then stacked it in his own before reaching for Henry’s. The boy had already headed off to bed after clearing away his own dinner plate, but he’d left behind the bowl and a juice glass.

“All right, ladies,” Jason said. “This isn’t going to turn into one of those conversations where I have to reassure you both you’re beautiful and fabulous and don’t need to lose a pound, is it?”

“Definitely not.” Miriam grinned at Ellie. “We already know we’re beautiful and fabulous, so we don’t need you to tell us.”

“And the only pounds I want to talk about right now are British ones.”

Miriam gave her a perplexed look. “Are you planning a trip to England?”

“No, I have this e-commerce site I’ve been trying to set up for my new business,” Ellie said as she pushed her blond hair back off her forehead. “I’ve spent the last couple days fighting with the currency conversion for the online sales portal, and I’m about ready to tear my hair out. If I didn’t have such a

strong interest from the UK, I probably wouldn't even bother with overseas sales."

"Maybe I can help," Miriam said as she carted the stack of plates to the kitchen and set them beside the sink. She returned to the dining room and picked up the salad bowls Jason had stacked. "I've done quite a bit of Web design in the past. I'd be happy to take a look."

"Thanks, but I'm running on a pretty shoestring budget," she said. "I don't really have the money to hire a PR firm, but I appreciate the offer."

"You already paid me in lasagna," Miriam said. "Besides, it sounds like you've already got most of it set up. What are you selling?"

Ellie glanced down the hall toward Henry's bedroom door, which was closed tight. The grown-ups had already doled out hugs and kisses, and Jason noticed Miriam had earned an extra pair from the little boy. At Henry's urging, she'd even taken a turn reading a page from his favorite bedtime story about dinosaurs and underpants, and it had taken every ounce of self-control Jason possessed not to let his libido surge each time she spoke the word "underpants."

Watching his nephew throw his arms around Miriam's neck had left Jason feeling warm all over. It was almost a shame they'd agreed not to let things get too serious between them.

*You don't have the bandwidth for that.*

He shook his head and tipped his chair back on two legs, trying to focus on the conversation between his sister and Ellie. It was nice seeing how quickly the two had clicked. Ellie hadn't gotten the chance to make many friends since they'd moved, and he knew she'd been eager for some girl time.

His sister was still talking, and he realized he'd missed part of the conversation.

"...and they have the largest selection of vibrators in the entire—"

“Wait, what?” Jason felt the legs of his chair hit the floor. “How’d you end up talking about sex toys?”

Ellie rolled her eyes at him. “Because that’s what I’m selling, Jason. Haven’t you been listening?”

“Apparently not,” he said, not sure how he felt about his baby sister peddling dildos. Okay, fine. She wasn’t exactly a baby, and had in fact welcomed her own baby a couple years before she turned thirty. Still.

“Sex toys,” Miriam said, giving Ellie a nod of approval as she kicked Jason under the table. “Terrific choice for a home-based business. Very high demand.”

Jason frowned. “Wait, when you told me you were starting an online business, I figured it was candles or Tupperware or something.”

“You figured wrong,” Ellie said. “This is much more fun.”

“But what about Henry?”

Ellie rolled her eyes. “What about Henry? I’m not having him upload images of nipple clamps or take inventory of dildos. I do all my work when he’s napping or after he’s gone to bed.”

“Sensible,” Miriam said, giving Jason a look. It either translated as, *shut up and be supportive* or maybe *you have spinach in your teeth*. Women were hard to read.

“I’ve been very discreet,” Ellie assured them. “Everything’s set up under a pseudonym, so they can’t trace anything back to my big brother the CEO.”

Jason knew he was probably being an overprotective dumbass, but he still found himself glancing around the room, half expecting to see a paddle sticking out from under the couch. Not the canoeing kind, either.

“You don’t have the sex toys here, do you? Where Henry can find them, I mean?”

“Of course not,” Ellie said. “Not that there’d be anything wrong with it if I did. Why are you being such a prude all of a sudden?”

“I’m not,” he insisted, trying not to look at Miriam while talking with his sister about sex toys. “I’m just worried about Henry.”

“Henry sounds like he’s more familiar with human anatomy than most grown-ups,” Miriam pointed out. “I doubt he’d be too traumatized by the sight of a rubber penis.”

“Which he won’t see because there aren’t any here anyway,” Ellie said. “They’re all in the storage area at your place.”

“My place?” Jason said. “You stuffed my closet with dildos?”

“And lube. And vibrators. And—”

“Wait, what’s the difference between a dildo and a vibrator?” Jason asked, not sure he wanted the answer.

Miriam gave him a knowing look before exchanging a smirk with Ellie. “I see your brother has a lot to learn.”

“And I’m quite certain you’d be a good woman to teach him.”

Miriam laughed and clinked her wineglass against Ellie’s water glass, and Jason felt an odd sort of warmth in his chest. Which was ridiculous, really. Did he really want his sister and Miriam bonding over sex toys?

“Come on,” Miriam said as she stood up. “Jason can work on the dishes while you show me this website of yours. We’ll worry about educating your brother later.”

“Deal,” Ellie said. She stood up, too, and began leading the way to the office.

Jason watched Miriam follow, admiring the sway of her hips, the curve of her ass, pretty sure this wasn’t supposed to be turning him on.

\* \* \*

FOUR HOURS LATER, Jason lay sleepless in bed. He wasn't really upset about Ellie's sex business or Miriam's eagerness to help out.

But he was upset.

Or maybe "upset" wasn't the right word. "Disturbed" was more like it. Shaken up by the fact that Miriam had gotten under his skin beyond the physical chemistry between them. He loved spending time with her, loved the way she meshed with Henry and Ellie and his whole life.

She'd asked that they keep things casual between them, and that's what he wanted, too, dammit.

Wasn't it?

Aw, hell. Fine, he could admit it. Seeing her with his family had unraveled him a little. He loved the way she interacted with Henry and Ellie. He loved the way she threw her head back when she laughed. He loved how she could be a prim and proper city girl one minute and a sex goddess on the dining room table the next. He loved how passionate she was about her career.

But he didn't love *her*, right? It wouldn't do him any good to confuse the two.

And even if he *did* love her, there was no sense in doing anything about it. Not with Henry still recovering and Ellie still fragile and both of them still needing his full attention and protection and love and—

The creak of a door made him roll over in bed. He'd left his bedside lamp on, intent on reading the latest issue of *Mountain* magazine to keep his mind off Miriam.

But as he heard someone tiptoeing down the hallway toward his room, his libido surged. He knew the sound of her footsteps like he knew the beat of his own heart. She was here, in his apartment, and he knew what she was coming for.

He sat up in bed as she stopped in the doorway. Her hair flowed loose and wild around her shoulders, and her breasts bloomed full and round over the cups of her lacy bra. She



wore thong panties and a salacious smile that sent all the blood rushing from Jason's brain straight to his cock.

“I hear you have a closet full of sex toys,” she murmured, then licked her lips. “I just earned myself a hundred-dollar store credit. I was wondering if you might like to test out some of the merchandise.”

## CHAPTER 11



Miriam stepped into Jason's bedroom, heart thudding in her ears. Part of her felt nervous about waltzing scantily clad into his private domain while he lay in bed wearing nothing but boxer shorts and a bemused expression.

But most of her just wanted him. Badly. From the look of things, he felt the same.

"Hello, there," he said as his gaze traveled the length of her body, starting with the scalloped edge of her lacy yellow bra and moving down her abdomen, across her hips, and over the matching thong panty. He shifted a little on the bed and the sheet slipped off his hips, revealing the impressive bulge in his boxers. "I take it you've finished helping my sister?"

"Yes," Miriam breathed, then took a step into the room and drew two small boxes out from behind her back. "And now I'm here to help you."

Jason's gaze dropped to the packages in her hands, then back up to meet her eyes again. He quirked one eyebrow.

"Help me what?"

He sounded intrigued, so Miriam took a few more steps into the room. She was grateful for the flattering hue of dim lamplight, grateful that even though she'd spent the day wearing practical clothing and footwear, she'd worn totally impractical underwear. As she approached the bed, she ordered herself to stand up straight, to suck in her stomach, to look sexy as hell.

But the heat in Jason's eyes told her none of that mattered. One way or another, she was going to end up naked and sprawled on that bed in a matter of minutes.

She'd almost reached the bed. "I'm here to help you become more educated about the adult products offered by Madam Butterfly," she said, shivering a little at the hunger in his gaze.

He started to reach for her, but she was just out of his range. Good. She wanted to savor this feeling a few moments longer, the sensation of having his eyes devour her.

"Madam Butterfly?" he asked.

"That's your sister's company."

"I think we need to stop talking about my sister now. It's kinda distracting with you standing there in your underwear looking hot enough to set my headboard on fire."

Miriam laughed and set one of the boxes on the nightstand. The other she opened carefully, keeping her eyes locked with Jason's as she lowered herself onto the bed beside him. He was the first to drop his gaze, taking in the package in her lap.

"What is it?" he asked, voice tinged with intrigue.

"This is the Super Sex Sleeve." She pulled the soft rubbery object out of the box and held it up so he could see, giving it a squeeze in demonstration. "It's designed to enhance a gentleman's pleasure during a solo session." She grinned as he reached out to touch it, letting him squeeze it a few times to see how soft it was. She leaned closer so she could murmur in his ear. "But from what I understand, it's even better when you have a little help."

"I see," he said, then drew back to look at her. His eyes glowed molten, and that bulge in his boxers wasn't getting any smaller. He dropped his hand from the Super Sex Sleeve and trailed a finger along her body, stroking from the edge of her breast and over the curve of her hip before skimming the edge of her panties. Miriam shivered with anticipation and desire.

"Sounds intriguing," he said. "But I might need a little product demonstration. Maybe you could show me how it

works?”

She laughed as the liquid heat pooled between her thighs. “My pleasure.” She reached for the front of his boxers, her hands eager as she stroked him through the thin fabric. “Or yours.”

He groaned as Miriam eased the boxers down over his hips, skimming her fingertips lightly over his cock. She pushed him onto his back, and Jason went willingly, propping himself up on his elbows to watch her.

Gripping the Super Sex Sleeve in one hand, she leaned down and grazed him with her lips. He made a soft hiss in the back of his throat, which made her smile. With aching slowness, she teased him with her breath, her hair, the tops of her breasts. She took her time, moving over him, grazing him with her nails, breathing him in, letting the anticipation build.

Then she drew back, smiling as she held up the Super Sex Sleeve. “Shall we give this a try?”

Before he could answer, she slid the sheath over him, gripping his shaft through the latex as she eased it all the way down. The head of his cock slid out the open end, and Miriam leaned down to lick the tip.

“Oh my God.” He gripped the curve of her waist. “What’s in that thing?”

“More than five hundred soft tickler nubs and Madame Butterfly’s warming lube in passionfruit flavor.” She swirled her tongue over him again as she held her grip firm around the base of shaft. “It’s delicious.”

“So are you.” He groaned as she gripped him harder, squeezing the sleeve around the base of him as she flicked her tongue along the sensitive groove at the head of his cock.

With her hand still gripping him through the sleeve, she drew him deeper into her mouth, sucking, squeezing, releasing, clenching again, using her hands and mouth and breath and belly and breasts to make him mindless with the mix of sensations.

At least, that’s what she was aiming for.

“Holy Christ.” He threaded his fingers into her hair. “That’s unreal.”

She smiled with her mouth still around him, drunk with the thrill of delivering the kind of gratification that could make a big, burly mountain man curl his toes into the bedsheet. She skimmed the tops of his thighs with her breasts, letting her hair trail over his belly. She squeezed, released, squeezed again, sucking him in deep as she built to a frenzied pace that left him gasping.

“You’d better stop,” he groaned. “I can’t take much more of that.”

Miriam grinned and drew back. “We don’t want that,” she said, sitting up a little. “There’s still plenty of merchandise to play with.”

“Oh yeah?” Looking dazed, he angled himself up to peer at the other box she’d left on his nightstand. “What else did you bring?”

Before she could answer, one muscular arm snaked out and his large hand closed around the box. He drew it back, holding it up to the desk lamp to read the words.

“Triple Ripple Pleasure Vibe,” he read, grinning as he opened it up. “Batteries included, but not instructions.”

Miriam sat back on her heels, a little breathless. “I guess you’ll have to figure it out for yourself.”

“I have a few ideas.”

“Oh?” The gravel in his voice sent her squirming again.

“Yep.” He pulled the toy out of the box, then tossed the packaging aside. Flashing a grin, he grabbed her by the waist and flipped her onto her back.

“Oh,” she gasped, writhing beneath him as he used his impressive bulk to pin her back on the mattress. His cock was still hard as granite, but somehow he’d managed to slide the sheath off somewhere in the tangle of sheets. She tried to reach for him, but he pushed her hand aside.

“Uh-uh,” he said. “It’s your turn.”

Miriam wriggled beneath him, gasping as his hand moved over her breast and his mouth claimed hers. He kissed her hard and deep, rolling to the side so his hands had better access. He dragged down the straps of her bra and laid a trail of kisses over her newly bared flesh. Her breasts popped free and he claimed them one at a time, his tongue swirling over each nipple.

God, the man had a magical mouth.

He slid one hand down and grabbed the waistband of her panties, then tugged them over her hips. His left hand still clutched the Triple Ripple whatever the hell it was called, but he shifted it to the right hand and gave her a devilish grin.

She licked her lips as he flicked a switch on the bottom of the gadget, laughing as it began to buzz.

“I think I used something like this to sharpen the edges of my skis once.”

“I can’t speak for your skis, but I’m about to melt.”

He grinned and drew a finger through the wetness between her legs, making her shudder with pleasure. “You certainly are.”

He pushed her onto her back again, nudging her legs apart with his hand. Then he moved between them, his head dropping low so she could feel his breath warm and soft at the apex of her thighs. His hair tickled her hip, and the stubble on his chin grazed the heat between her legs.

“Hmmm,” he said, and the resonance of that single syllable sent shock waves of pleasure through her as his mouth made contact with her clit. He drew the vibrator up, teasing her opening with it as he licked into her with slow, languid strokes. “How shall I use this?”

Miriam cried out as his tongue made soft, lazy circles. He probed her opening with the toy and Miriam felt her whole body arch to meet it. She wanted more. *Needed* more.

He was happy to oblige.

“You want this inside you, baby?”

She nodded, then gasped as he slid the first inch of it in.

The vibrations chattered all the way up her spine, sending pulses of pleasure to every nerve ending she owned. As his tongue continued to probe, it dawned on her that she'd never felt anything so exquisite, so deliciously fulfilling, in her entire life.

“More,” she gasped.

His tongue moved over her, teasing her as he slid the gently buzzing shaft in and out. His mouth moved in perfect harmony with the toy, the contrast of delicious softness and hard heat making her dizzy with sensation. *Hard, soft, hard, soft*—the two things melded together until she couldn't tell where one stopped and the other started. The gentle pressure of his tongue, the solid thrusts of the toy, the heat of his breath, the rasp of stubble on her thigh, the soft suction of his mouth—

“Oh God!” she cried, gripping his hair with one hand. The other hand snatched a pillow and drew it to her mouth. She bit down hard, conscious of the need to be quiet, of the shared wall and the tremors racking her body like nothing she'd felt before.

Jason drove into her again, his tongue still sweeping over her as her whole body arched beneath him, trailing hot ribbons of lava through her veins. She cried out again, surging beneath the pounding of the vibrator and the feathery strokes of his tongue.

Her orgasm had barely ebbed before she felt him switch off the toy and plant a kiss on her hip. She opened her eyes to see him pulling a condom from the nightstand. She grinned, amazed by her body's desire for him. The thought of having him inside her made everything clench tight with need, and she spread her legs wider in anticipation.

“Need a break?” He stroked a hand down her side, making her shiver.

“No way,” she said as she reached for the condom. “I want you.”

He grinned and angled himself into the space between her thighs as Miriam slid the condom on. “How do you want me?”

“Deep. Hard.”

He laughed and obeyed, nudging her opening with the tip of his cock. “Anything else?”

“*Now!*”

She dug her heels into the back of his thighs to pull him inside her. He groaned as Miriam closed her eyes and arched up to meet him. They moved together like that, thrusting, withdrawing, giving, taking, building to the brink all over again. He was bigger than the toy, that was for damn sure, and her whole body hummed with greedy need.

His back rippled with hard muscle and she spurred him with her nails to feel him buck. He drove into her again, hard and slick, and something began to pound in the back of her brain.

“I’m close,” she gasped, surprised again by the hunger of her own body. She’d always been quick to come, but this was insane. It was like some kind of porn flick, but all too real.

“Do it,” he murmured, and she could tell by his tone that he was close, too.

She grabbed the pillow again and bit down, crying out as he slid in deeper. His glutes tensed beneath her palms, and she knew he was there, too.

He gave his own muffled groan and thrust into her again, and Miriam felt the muscles bunch in his shoulders.

She squeezed her eyes shut, riding out her orgasm as she wondered how the hell she never knew this happened in real life and not just erotic novels.

When they finally drew apart, Jason rolled to one side and pulled her against him. She went willingly, her whole body limp as she snuggled up to him and rested her head on his chest. He was breathing hard, and she matched her breath to his, still dazed from pleasure. She stroked a hand over the light



dusting of fur on his chest, pretty sure that was the only movement she'd be able to make for at least an hour or two.

“Holy shit,” he breathed.

She laughed and planted a tiny kiss on his shoulder. “No kidding.”

“Well,” he said. “I guess you’ve got me beat with product demos. Headlamps and canoe paddles have nothing on your gear.”

She giggled and nuzzled closer, pretty sure she'd never been so sated in her life.

\* \* \*

THE NEXT MORNING, Miriam rolled over to see Jason fast asleep in a sunbeam drifting through a slat in his blinds. The stubble on his jaw was even thicker than yesterday, and he had one muscular arm thrown over his eyes. The other hand was beneath the sheet, covering her thigh as though claiming her even in sleep.

She gave a little shiver of pleasure.

Last night had been amazing. Not just the sex—though that was obviously mind-blowing. It was the knowledge that his sense of adventure spanned from the bedroom to the boardroom to mountaintops and beyond. He was smart. Passionate. Funny. Successful. Sexy as hell.

In other words, everything she'd been looking for in a man.

*Uh-oh.*

She clutched the sheet closer to her breasts, not willing to go down that path. Yes, he was everything she wanted. But he was also everything she *didn't* want. The last thing she needed was a guy who got off on risking life and limb for the adrenaline rush. Been there, done that, spent six months crying herself dry at Holly's kitchen table and in a cemetery outside of town.

She thought about her father, which was a weird thing to think about in bed on a Sunday morning with a guy who'd made her come her brains out all night long.

That was the thing about grief. It didn't always hit at convenient times.

She remembered her father's laugh, deep and booming like a foghorn. She remembered his eyes lighting up as he cracked the spine on another travel guide or sorted through his climbing gear as he prepared for his next big adventure.

Yes, her dad had died, leaving her with a big, aching hole in her heart.

But her dad had also lived. He'd seized life by the balls, conquering mountains and chasing dreams and living every day to its fullest no matter what the cost.

*He would have wanted you to do the same, you know.*

Jason's phone buzzed on the nightstand, startling Miriam from her thoughts. She watched his eyes flutter open, then brighten as his blue gaze skimmed her bare shoulder.

"Good morning," she said, smiling a little self-consciously.

"Morning." He angled up on his forearm to kiss her. One hand slid from her thigh to her backside, caressing her as she shivered with pleasure beneath his palm.

The phone buzzed again with the sound of an incoming text message.

She broke the kiss and glanced at the nightstand. "Do you need to get that? It could be work or Henry or something."

"Henry." Jason sat up, the sheet sliding down his torso. He reached past Miriam to grab the phone off the nightstand, and she watched as his face creased into a frown. "Dammit," he muttered.

"What is it?"

He raked his fingers through his hair and looked up at her with guilt in his eyes. "I totally forgot I promised Henry I'd take him hiking today near Mount Hood while Ellie has

brunch with one of the moms she met through that support group of cancer parents.”

Miriam glanced at the clock. “You can still go, right? It’s only eight thirty.”

“Yeah,” he muttered, still staring at the phone. “I can’t believe I forgot in the first place. I’m usually good about my commitments to Henry.”

“You’re still good,” she said as she gave his leg a reassuring squeeze. “Just give me a second to wash my face and I’ll get out of your hair so you can—”

“Come with us.” He grabbed her hand under the covers.

“To Mount Hood?”

He smiled, and Miriam knew she was a goner. “Henry adores you. I know he’d love to have you join us.”

She bit her lip. “I’m not one for climbing mountains.”

“We’re not climbing the mountain, just hiking near it. It’s very safe, I promise. Especially this time of year.”

“Well—”

“Please,” Jason said, stroking the back of her hand. “Henry would love to spend another day with you.” He caught her by the waist, kissing her again before she had a chance to protest. “*I’d* love to spend another day with you.”

The words made a warm puddle of emotion in her belly. Not just the fact that Jason wanted to see her, but that Henry did, too. That this family had started to carve out a little place for her, a small warm spot where she felt like she belonged.

She hadn’t realized until just now how much she’d missed that. How much she’d longed for it since her father’s death and her mother’s choice to move to the other side of the country to escape the memories of her failed marriage.

“Okay,” Miriam said, drawing back from the kiss a little breathless. “I’ll give it a shot.”

With those words, she knew she was agreeing to more than a hike.

## CHAPTER 12



Jason stepped over the fallen log, then stopped to hold back a low-hanging branch on a ponderosa pine. He watched Miriam coming up the trail toward him, her hair laced with pine needles, the small day pack she wore thrusting her breasts forward beneath a snug lavender T-shirt.

God, he wanted her. How was that possible? Last night should have left him sated and exhausted, but it only made him want her more.

“Thank you.” Miriam smiled up at him as she ushered Henry in front of her beneath the branch Jason held. She took hold of the little boy’s hand and helped him up onto the log. Then she let go, ducking beneath the branch and bringing herself face-to-face with Jason.

He leaned close, breathing in the flowery scent of her shampoo and savoring the tickle of her curls against his chin. She’d gone home to feed Phuzeei and shower before their hike, and part of him longed to get her dirty all over again.

“Do I get a kiss for saving you from this attack branch?” he asked.

She laughed. “I already gave you a kiss for the piggyback ride across the creek,” she said as she leaned up to kiss him again anyway. “And one for lending me these hiking boots. And one for brunch.”

“I think Uncle Jason likes your kisses,” Henry piped. He jumped down on the other side of the log and landed with his feet planted in a bed of soft earth and crushed pine needles.

The boy scrambled forward, then stopped to pick up a pinecone that he promptly hurled at a nearby boulder.

“Uncle Jason *definitely* likes your kisses,” Jason murmured as he offered Miriam a hand down.

She accepted, even though it was clear she was steady enough on her feet that she didn’t need his help. It felt good to hold her hand, so he didn’t let go as they started walking again. The trail was wide enough here for them to walk side by side, which felt nice after an hour of single-file trekking. Jason breathed in the earthy scent of moss and fern, marveling at the monstrous pines surrounding them. It was beautiful here. The air was misty and cool, a drug that left him invigorated. Or maybe that was just Miriam. It felt good to have her shoulder brushing his arm as they made their way beneath the canopy of thick trees.

“Thanks again for joining us,” he told her. “Henry’s having a blast.”

“Blast!” Henry shouted, stooping to pick up a stick. He held it like a gun, stopping to fire at a tree before tucking his makeshift pistol in the back of his pants and racing forward.

“Stay close, buddy,” Jason called. “We don’t want you getting too far ahead.”

“I won’t!” he shouted as he tore off down the trail, jumping up to smack a low-hanging branch as he ran.

Jason watched his nephew go, the boy’s bright blue windbreaker flapping like a flag on the trail up ahead. Part of him wanted to yell for Henry to slow down, to watch out for tree stumps and boulders and mosquitoes and anything else that might cause harm.

But part of him was just glad to see the kid enjoying himself. The doctor had said again at the last appointment that physical activity was okay, even encouraged at this stage. They were trying to rebuild his strength, to get him back to the energy levels of a normal five-year-old boy. A scraped knee was a small price to pay for that, and infinitely better than seeing Henry hooked up to needles and tubes in a hospital bed.

“We can’t hover over him 24-7,” Ellie told him last week when Jason balked at the idea of bringing in the nurse babysitter for an hour so they could slip out and watch a band they’d both loved in high school. “He doesn’t have the PICC line anymore, and even the doctor thinks it’s a good idea.”

But Jason worried too much, so he’d sent Ellie alone to the concert while he stayed home watching over Henry as the little boy slept.

Hell, maybe Ellie was right. Maybe he was being too much of a helicopter uncle. Maybe Henry needed a little independence.

Up ahead, the youngster was skipping down the wide pathway, stopping every now and then to pick up a rock or a leaf and stuff it in his pocket.

“The trail is pretty clear for the next mile, and there aren’t any drop-offs or anything,” Jason mumbled, mostly to himself. “He can’t really get into much trouble up there.”

Henry whooped and started singing something that sounded like a Lady Gaga song. He didn’t have the lyrics quite right—something about wanting to poke her face in the chicken casino?—but the tune was recognizable.

“Where on earth did he learn ‘Poker Face’?” Miriam asked.

“Ellie. She does mother/son dance parties with him sometimes. The kid loves it.”

Henry kept singing as he scurried around a bend in the trail, his voice ringing through the treetops as he belted out the lyrics at top volume.

Miriam smiled and squeezed Jason’s hand. “It’s got to feel good to see him so happy and vivacious. After everything he’s been through—”

She stopped, probably not wanting to presume too much about Henry’s health or future, but Jason didn’t mind. It was nice to have someone taking an interest, sharing the burden of worrying about his nephew.

“You’re right,” he said, toeing a rock off the trail so she wouldn’t trip. “It’s been a rough year with him, but it’s starting to feel like maybe there’s some light at the end of the tunnel.”

“You said earlier he’s in partial remission,” she said. “What does that mean, exactly?”

“It means the cancer is responding well to treatment. That we’re keeping it at bay.”

“So it’s still there?”

“Yes, but getting weaker all the time. There aren’t any guarantees, but the pediatric oncologist thinks odds are good Henry will be in complete remission within six weeks or so.”

“That’s great!” she said, and the genuine excitement in her voice felt like a warm balm on his heart. “So that would mean there’s no cancer at all?”

“At least not that they can detect. It usually takes a few years of complete remission for doctors to declare a kid totally cured, but things are definitely looking positive.”

“I’m so glad.” She fell quiet a moment, and Jason wondered what she was thinking. He didn’t have to wonder long. “You mentioned once that you took the job with Urban Trax so you could do more for Henry and Ellie.”

“That was a big part of it.”

“So if Henry turns out to be okay—”

“Am I planning to pack up and leave town?” He squeezed her hand. “You’re afraid you’d miss me?”

She rolled her eyes, but the faint flush in her cheeks told him maybe he wasn’t so far off the mark. “I was just curious about your career plan,” she said. “Whether you want to stick around or to go back to leading adventure tours.”

Jason sighed. “Yeah, I don’t know. The Urban Trax job is a great career move for me. It’s something I’ve always wanted to do, and there are a lot of things I really love about the company. About the job itself.”

“But?”

“But,” he repeated, stalling a little. Did he really want to admit this? He glanced over at her, and those beautiful green eyes told him it was okay to let his guard down. To drop the fucking Superman cape for a minute. “Part of me wonders if I’m just not cut out to be a CEO.”

She frowned. “How do you mean?”

“This whole layoff thing. Maybe the execs are right. Maybe that’s just part of doing business and there’s not a damn thing I can do to prevent it. To save those people’s jobs.”

She seemed to consider that for a moment, tucking a stray curl behind her ear as they made their way around a bend in the trail. “This doesn’t sound like you.”

He raked his fingers through his hair, remembering his last conversation with the accounting director. *This isn’t the time to be sentimental*, Rex insisted. *It’s a matter of dollars and cents.*

Jason wasn’t sure he believed that, but he didn’t know what else to do.

“I feel like I’m running up against a brick wall,” he admitted.

“So put on some crampons, grab your chalk bag, whip out your multi-pitch free-climbing and trad-cragging harness, and climb that son of a bitch.”

Jason barked out a laugh, startled by both her passionate delivery and off-kilter mountaineering jargon. “I see you’ve been reviewing our line of climbing products.”

“I have.” She grinned up at him. “And while I’m not entirely sure what the hell I just said, I do know you’ve got it in you to make a difference. To do the right thing for those employees who are counting on you.”

“Yeah,” he said as the guilt needled him in the gut. “Easier said than done.”

“Have you gotten to know them? The workers whose jobs are on the line, not the douche-bag executives.”

“A little,” he said. “Not as much as I wish I had.”



“Maybe that would help. Seeing what their world is like, and putting faces to the names of the people they’re threatening to lay off.” She shrugged. “If nothing else, it would give you a better understanding of how the company runs.”

“Huh.” He had to admit, she had a great a point. “I guess I’ve been a little preoccupied hobnobbing with the executive team. I figured I was better off working the problem from the top down.”

“A good strategy when removing underwear.” Miriam grinned. “Less effective when saving jobs.”

“Maybe you’re right.” He squeezed her hand, feeling a flutter of hope behind his breastbone. “Maybe the solution isn’t in the boardroom. Maybe there’s another way to do it.”

“Absolutely. There’s no shame in teabagging after a whipper. And sometimes a fist-jam is more effective than dry-tooling.” She smiled up at him. “For the record, I think climbing has the filthiest jargon of all.”

He laughed and looped an arm around her shoulders, then pulled her closer so he could plant a kiss on her forehead. “Thanks. I appreciate your perspective. Even if your grasp of climbing terminology could use a little work.”

“Don’t mention it.”

“Seriously, I don’t know what I would have done without you helping me through all this corporate bullshit these last few weeks.”

“My pleasure. You’ve been a helluva lot more interesting than any of the other Urban Trax stiffs we worked with before you came along.”

“Thanks. That actually means a lot.”

He let go of her shoulders and grabbed her hand again. Her fingers felt good laced through his, and it occurred to him this was one of the nicest hikes he’d ever experienced.

“So what comes next?” she asked.

“How do you mean?”

She shrugged, and he felt her shoulders move under his arm. “Well, it sounds like you’re sticking around for the job. That you might actually like it,” she added. “And it sounds like Henry might be on the road to recovery. Things are going well for you.”

“You’re right,” he said, happy to realize it was true. Even happier to realize she was a part of that.

“I’m just curious what’s next on the horizon. I know your sister is eager not to be so reliant on you, and I’m sure that’s bound to change things for all three of you.”

Jason raised an eyebrow as he ducked under a branch. “Sounds like Ellie might have given you an earful last night.”

“We talked,” she admitted. “I know she feels guilty about how much you’ve done to support her and Henry, and she’s hoping to repay you by becoming a little more independent again.”

“She doesn’t have to repay me anything,” he said, wondering why his sister kept bringing this up. He wanted to help, dammit. “They’re my family. It’s important to me to take care of them.”

“I know,” she said softly as she gave his hand another squeeze. “But sometimes it’s more important to people to know they can take care of themselves.”

He let her words hang there between them a moment, considering them. Did Miriam have a point? Did he need to let go a little, maybe give Ellie and Henry a bit more space? If he did, what would that mean for him?

*A chance at your own life. Maybe a wife, a family, all the things you’ve been denying yourself.*

He looked at Miriam. She smiled up at him, her face cheerful and open and flushed with fresh air and exertion. She tugged a strap on her day pack and kept walking, surging ahead just a little while her fingers stayed laced with his.

“What?” she asked, and Jason realized he was staring. “You’re beautiful.”

“Thanks.” She grinned. “You’re not so bad yourself.”

“And last night was fun.”

“Amazing,” she agreed, her grin turning more salacious. “Gotta love your sense of adventure.”

*Love.*

The second the word left her lips, he knew. He felt it deep in his chest like a white-hot ball of energy.

He was in love with Miriam Ashley.

*Holy shit.*

They walked in silence for a moment while Jason grappled with the realization. How the hell had this happened? He loved being around her, obviously. She was funny and beautiful and smart and kind and all the things he would have looked for in a partner if he’d been looking at all.

He hadn’t. Not one tiny bit. But love had gone and found him anyway, sneaking around his defenses like some sort of cupid ninja. He should feel annoyed, but instead he just felt happy. Giddy, really.

“I think we should date each other,” he blurted.

Miriam stumbled, apparently caught off guard. Jason held on to her hand, not letting her fall.

“Wow,” she said, clearly as stunned by his words as he’d been by the feelings. “We’re sleeping together,” she said slowly, glancing up at him. “We’re holding hands on a hike. Is that the sort of thing you mean by ‘dating’?”

“Kind of,” he said, not entirely sure what he meant. He just knew that he wanted to be with her. A lot. “I guess I mean dating seriously. Exclusively. Like in a real relationship.”

She fell quiet a moment, and Jason realized he was holding his breath. A little tricky, considering they’d reached an incline on the trail. He ordered himself to breathe again, but the tension stayed in his shoulders. What if she wasn’t interested? What if he’d read her wrong? What if—

“Okay.” She turned her face up to grin at him. “Okay, let’s give it a shot.”

“Really?” His heart flooded his chest with something warm and liquid. “Wow, that was easier than I thought.”

She snorted. “It’s hardly easy. God knows I’m nervous about getting involved with a guy who likes to throw himself off mountains—”

“I hardly ever throw myself off mountains.”

“—and go barreling through white-water rapids—”

“I prefer a raft to a barrel.”

“—and cycling down a mountainside with no brakes—”

“Brakes are overrated.” He squeezed her hand and grinned. “It’s a trade-off. You get a little anxiety from my daredevil habits, and I get the knowledge that you’ll always be judging my choice of neckties and utensils.”

She laughed and returned the hand squeeze. “Okay,” she said, sounding a little breathless. It might have been the exertion of the trail, but he didn’t think so. “A relationship. We’re really doing this.” She sounded both bewildered and excited, and the combination left him feeling a little dizzy.

“So you’re my girlfriend.”

She gave a rather unladylike snort, which only made him love her more. “Can we not use that word? It sounds so—middle school.”

“What do you want to be called? My lady friend?

Concubine? Schmoopie?”

“How about just Miriam? ‘I’m in a committed relationship with Miriam.’”

“I’m in a committed relationship with Miriam.” He liked the way that sounded. “Nice.”

“And I’m in a committed relationship with Jason.” She laughed. “God, that sounds cheesy.”

“But nice.”

“Yes. Very nice.”

They fell silent again, fingers intertwined, their footsteps muffled on the sodden trail coated with a thin blanket of pine needles. The scent of damp moss and wet earth filled his lungs to bursting. Or maybe that was his heart in his chest, all warm and solid and throbbing while the birds chirped around them and a creek bubbled in the distance.

God, it felt like a fucking Disney movie.

The hair prickled on the back of his neck. For a second he thought it was the novelty of finding himself in a happy, committed relationship when just a few weeks ago, he'd sworn it was the last thing on earth he was looking for.

Then he thought they were being watched, maybe by an owl or a raccoon or a bobcat.

But the instant he realized what it was, he froze in his tracks.

He dropped Miriam's hand, his ears straining for the sounds of small footsteps or a warbled Lady Gaga melody. For any sign of his nephew.

Nothing.

He took off running, heart slamming hard into his throat. “Henry!” he shouted as he tore down the trail. “*Henry!*”

## CHAPTER 13



Miriam could hear Jason's voice echoing through the trees, a haunting, hollow sound that made goose bumps prickle on her arms.

"Henry!" he shouted, and Miriam shivered.

Jason was out of sight already, his boots pounding a dull thud on the trail up ahead. His voice was thick with terror as he called his nephew's name again.

"Henry!"

She felt her heart thudding thick in her chest, but ordered herself to stay calm. To use her brain, since clearly her wilderness skills and physical prowess weren't her best assets out here.

She kept moving, albeit more slowly. He couldn't have gone too far, could he?

"Henry," she called, softly at first. She swallowed hard and tried again, fighting to keep her voice cheerful and upbeat. "Henry!"

Nothing. Just the echo of Jason's voice in the distance, sounding increasingly frantic. Her footsteps squished on the damp trail, and she concentrated on putting one foot in front of the other. Her gaze swept the edges of the path, surveying the scenery. The brush grew thick here, with dense clusters of pine boughs and large boulders that looked like prehistoric shapes. The smell of damp earth had seemed exotic a few moments ago, but now it just seemed menacing.

“Henry!” she called again, still struggling to keep her voice gentle. “Where are you, buddy?”

Jason’s voice rang out through the trees, sounding distant and desperate. Miriam kept walking, commanding herself to stay calm. Jason had said there were no drop-offs or confusing spots in the trail. Could Henry have backtracked somehow? No, they would have seen him.

She swallowed again, fighting back bitter panic that threatened to bubble up her throat. Taking a shaky breath, she hummed a few bars of the Lady Gaga song Henry had been singing when she’d seen him last. Putting one boot in front of the other, she continued along the trail, ordering herself not to dwell on the fact that she was completely alone in the wilderness.

That was the least of her concerns right now.

Her gaze swept the trail, studying the shapes of the boulders along the fringes. There was one that looked like an overturned Volkswagen and another that looked like a giant beach ball and one off in the distance that looked like a brontosaurus.

*Brontosaurus...*

Miriam froze. She stopped humming and stared at it a moment. Then she stepped off the trail, watching the rock like she expected a little boy to materialize beside it at any moment.

“Henry,” she called, still as upbeat as she could muster. Jason’s voice grew fainter in the distance, but she could still hear the frantic echoes as he called his nephew’s name again and again.

Something pulled Miriam toward that boulder. She took another step toward it, then another and another, heading deeper into the woods.

“Henry,” she tried again, arms prickling with a sensation she couldn’t identify.

The trees were thick here, and she wove through them, skirting a tall shaggy one, then turning sideways to maneuver

around a tree trunk as wide as a wine barrel. She kept walking, not taking her eyes off the boulder.

“Henry,” she called.

A branch cracked, though it might have been under her own foot. She kept going, pulse thudding in her ears, Jason’s voice growing more distant.

She was almost to the boulder now, and the prickling sensation on her arms felt more intense. She’d heard girlfriends mention “a mother’s instinct,” and not having kids of her own, she’d always laughed it off as woo-woo mumbo-jumbo.

But she wasn’t laughing now, and she couldn’t ignore the fact that the phrase kept bouncing around in her head like a Super Ball.

“Henry,” she called again, almost to the boulder.

A thick scruff of trees surrounded it, and she could see that the towering rock face was actually several boulders grouped together with a small opening near the base.

An opening the size of a five-year-old boy...

“Henry.” Her voice sounded louder now. Less shaky.

She crouched down and pushed aside a cluster of brush at the mouth of the hollowed-out space between the rocks. She didn’t see the broken branch until it speared her wrist, sending a knife of pain up her arm. She winced and yanked the injured arm to her side, but didn’t stop.

“Henry,” she called. “If you’re in there, you’re not in trouble. We just want to make sure you’re okay.”

Something squeaked. It might have been a mouse or a chipmunk or some other creepy woodland rodent. The sound should have sent her scurrying back to the trail like the city girl she was, but Miriam kept going. Something told her it wasn’t a mouse.

“Henry?”



She shoved aside another branch, and a flash of bright blue caught her eye. The same shade as Henry's windbreaker. The snuffle confirmed it. As her eyes adjusted to the dimness of the narrow crevice, she spotted him hunkered there against the rock.

"Hey, buddy," she called, relief flooding her nervous system as she squinted at his little body. His glasses tipped askew, but his eyes were wide and blinking, which seemed like a good sign. He didn't look hurt, but what the hell did she know about kids? Not much, but at least she'd found him. That counted for something.

She kept her voice soft and even, knowing she needed to coax him out. "Good to see you in there. You want to come out?"

He didn't say anything, but she thought she saw him shake his head. *Scared*, she thought, knowing the feeling.

But he was a kid. It was up to her to help him.

"This is a cool rock you found," she said as she seated herself on the ground like it was the most natural thing in the world. The damp earth seeped through the seat of her jeans, but she ignored it, her eyes fixed on Henry. She pulled her knees up to her chest and wrapped her arms around them like she was settling in for a tea party, not a care in the world. She could feel her hands shaking and her wrist throbbing, but she commanded herself to stay calm.

From what she could tell, Henry looked okay. "I like how the rock looks like a dinosaur," she said softly, pretending to study it. "Did you notice that?"

Again, the motion inside the crevice. A nod, maybe?

"I can never remember my dinosaurs," she continued, amazed at how breezy she sounded. Her voice wasn't even quivering. "Is it a pterodactyl?"

Silence. Then a soft voice. "No."

"A T. rex?"

Another pause. "No."

“What kind of dinosaur is it?”

She saw him shift a little between the rocks. “I think it looks like a brontosaurus.”

“You think so?” She pretended to consider it a moment, tilting her head back to look up at the boulder. “I’m not sure. I don’t really see it.”

“It is! It’s a brontosaurus.”

“Maybe you’re right,” she said, her voice casual. “Maybe not. I can’t really tell. Why don’t you come out here and show me?”

There was another pause. Then he was crawling out of the hole. His blond hair was caked with moss and dirt, but the rest of him looked okay. Nothing broken, no scrapes or bruises that she could see. He had a small rip in the shoulder of his jacket, but he wasn’t babying the arm or bleeding or anything scary like that. She needed to yell for Jason, but didn’t want to startle Henry. Not until she knew for sure he was safe.

“What did you do to your arm?” he asked as he pointed to her wrist.

Miriam looked down to see the wound was a lot bigger than she’d realized. A big, angry gash dripping blood into the earth around her. She felt woozy, but pulled her sleeve down and forced herself to smile.

“It’s nothing, sweetie. Just a scrape. How are you doing?”

“Okay.” He looked up at her, his blue eyes wide and fearful. “I wasn’t supposed to go off the trail.”

“No,” she agreed, still scanning him for injury. “No, you weren’t. But I’m glad you’re okay.”

“Uncle Jason’s gonna be mad.”

“He might be. But he’s going to be really, really happy you’re okay.”

Henry looked uncertain, and Miriam used the opportunity to lower her knees and shift into a cross-legged position. Seeing his opening, Henry scrambled into her lap and

snuggled close. She wrapped her arms around him, flooded with little-boy warmth and a rush of gratitude that he was okay. She breathed him in, wondering what it would be like to have a kid of her own.

“I need to tell your uncle you’re okay,” she said as she let go of him with one hand to slip her phone out of her pocket. She could still hear Jason’s voice in the distance, calling Henry’s name, but it sounded far off. Maybe farther than her voice could carry if she tried to shout back. Her phone showed two bars, so at least she had a signal. Hopefully, so did he.

“Let me just send him a quick message to let him know you’re all right.”

Henry nodded against her chest and sniffled a little. “He’s gonna yell.”

“Maybe. But yelling never killed anyone.”

She typed out the message with one hand, ignoring the throbbing in her wrist as she kept her arm wrapped tight around Henry.

*Henry safe. We’re just off the trail where you saw me last.*

She stuffed her phone back in her pocket, then wrapped both arms around the little boy. “Everything’s going to be okay,” she assured him, rocking a little to distract herself from the ache in her wrist. “Your Uncle Jason loves you very much, and he’s going to be so happy you’re okay.”

“You sure?”

“Positive. Now tell me about the dinosaur.”

She wasn’t sure how long they sat there like that, with Henry’s warm body snuggled in her lap. He prattled on about dinosaurs, explaining the difference between a brontosaurus and a stegosaurus and some other saurus she’d never heard of. She wasn’t really listening to the words. Just the sound of fear draining from his voice and being replaced by something else. Security. Comfort. A sense of being loved and cherished and safe.

She felt it, too.

Footsteps back on the trail halted Henry's dinosaur lecture, and they both turned to look. She spotted Jason first, the red of his jacket flashing through the trees as his boots pounded on the path.

"Over here," she called, lifting one hand to wave. Pain knifed through her wrist, but she ignored it and kept waving. "Jason! Right here! I've got him, he's fine. Everything's fine."

He charged through the trees like a wild animal, the panic evident in his eyes even from a distance. When he reached them, he was breathless and filthy and paler than she'd ever seen him.

The look on his face sent a shiver down Miriam's spine.

*Everything's not fine. She tightened her hold on Henry. And it's about to get a lot worse.*

\* \* \*

*IT'S ALL YOUR FAULT.*

Those words kept pulsing through Jason's brain as he watched the doctor stitch up Miriam's wrist. Her flesh was pale and her brow creased in pain and it was all Jason's goddamn fault.

She looked up at him and smiled, and his heart nearly split in two. He tightened his hold on Henry, who'd been dozing in his lap since they got to the urgent care clinic. Leave it to a five-year-old to nap through a crisis.

"There you go," the good doc said as he let go of Miriam's wrist. "Just three stitches. Not too bad. Don't go having any more battles with busted tree limbs, you hear?"

Her face stayed white, but she gave a shaky smile and a firm nod. "I'll try to resist the urge." She glanced at Henry, who stirred in Jason's lap.

The boy's blue eyes fluttered open, and he looked at Miriam and smiled. "Usually I get ice cream after I go to the

doctor,” he said, yawning a little as he burrowed against Jason’s chest. “You should ask for ice cream. Or a lollipop.”

“I will.” She gave Henry an encouraging smile. “Sounds like we’ve both been really lucky we have people around who take good care of us.”

She shot an appreciative look at the doctor, who picked up a clipboard and strode out of the room with a quick assurance that he’d be right back.

Jason just sat there feeling like the biggest asshole on the planet. He sure as hell hadn’t done anything to take care of her or Henry, or anyone else for that matter. He’d been selfish. He’d been so caught up in wooing Miriam that he’d lost his own damn nephew.

Henry closed his eyes again and snuggled closer, and Jason fought another wave of self-loathing for having him here in the first place. The poor kid had sat through the trauma of watching Miriam’s stitches—which, of course, was in addition to all the other trauma of the day. But Ellie had insisted on the phone that letting Henry stay while Miriam got fixed up was a good thing.

“He needs to see doctors helping people,” Ellie had assured him. “It’s good for him to know the grown-ups he cares about can get hurt and still be okay and be brave while someone’s taking care of them.”

Miriam was certainly brave. She also deserved a helluva lot more than Jason could give her. So did Henry, for that matter. The little boy felt heavy in his lap, and the burden of caring for him weighed heavier on Jason’s chest.

*It’s all your fault.*

Ellie had insisted otherwise on the phone, but Jason knew it was true. “That’s his new thing lately, running off,” she’d reminded him. “The doctor said it’s part of his quest for independence. Everything’s okay, Jase. It’s not your fault.”

But everything *wasn’t* okay, and it *was* his fault.

He knew what he needed to do. He was crazy about Miriam. More than that, he was in love with her. But there

wasn't room in his life for a relationship right now. There just wasn't. He clearly lacked the bandwidth to protect Henry and Ellie while selfishly starting a relationship of his own. He couldn't do both, and he hated himself for his failure. For thinking he could possibly have it all.

Miriam looked at him then, her smile shattering his stupid heart into a billion shards that bounced and crackled in his chest cavity.

"Hey," she said softly, tucking a curl behind one ear. "You okay? You seem kinda quiet."

"I'm fine. I'm—actually, I'm not fine." He swallowed hard and glanced down at Henry. The boy had fallen asleep again. Thank God for small miracles.

He looked back at Miriam, and the pain socked him in the gut again. He had to do this. For Henry's sake, he needed to break things off with her.

"Look, Miriam. I—I can't do this right now."

Her smile vanished. "You can't do what?"

"I can't be in a relationship. Not with you or with anyone else."

She stared at him, unblinking, as the smile vanished from her beautiful eyes. She didn't say a word, and Jason knew he owed it to her to fill the silence.

"Look, I care about you a lot, but I need to take care of my family," he said. "I owe it to them not to get distracted, not to let them down by being selfish about—"

"There you are!"

They both jumped as Miriam's business partner, Holly, came rushing into the room. Her face creased with concern, and she moved past him to drop into an empty seat beside Miriam. "Are you okay? I already gave them the insurance info out front, so it's all taken care of."

"I'm fine." Miriam stared at Jason for two more beats before turning to Holly and offering a pasted-on smile.

“Thanks for coming. Who’d have thought I’d need my wallet on a hike?”

“It’s no problem, I was in the neighborhood.” Holly turned to Jason. “Thanks for taking care of her.”

The words felt like a knife through his spleen. He didn’t deserve any thanks, especially not on Miriam’s behalf, and he sure as hell hadn’t done enough to protect her. “Miriam’s the one to thank,” he said. “She found Henry when he got lost.”

*She found him, not you. All the more reason you need to cut this off right now.*

Miriam stared at him like she wanted to say something else, but their audience was growing. The doctor walked back into the room, clearly unaware he’d just strolled into an awkward cesspool of heartache and self-flagellation and hurt.

“You’re good to go,” he said to Miriam. “That painkiller we gave you might make you a little woozy, so we’re going to need someone else to drive you home.”

The good doc looked from Miriam to Holly to Jason, then back to Miriam again, probably sensing something was off here. An awkward silence stretched out, and Jason hugged his sleeping nephew tighter.

*I could have lost him. All because I got distracted.*

“I can drive,” Holly offered. “I’m headed that direction anyway, so as long as Jason doesn’t mind—” she trailed off, looking at him with a question in her eyes. “I’m assuming you probably need to take care of your nephew, right?”

He nodded, his throat thick and achy. He couldn’t bring himself to meet Miriam’s eyes, certain he wasn’t strong enough to get up and walk out of the room if he looked at her.

“Yes,” he said softly, squeezing Henry tighter. “I need to take care of my nephew.”

## CHAPTER 14



“*Y*ou are a complete dumbass.” Ellie grabbed hold of Jason’s tie and cinched it a whole lot tighter than it needed to be.

He stepped back, freeing the tie from his sister’s clutches as he turned to straighten it in her hallway mirror. She probably had a point, but she didn’t need to strangle him to prove it.

“Why am I a dumbass?” he muttered. “Because I haven’t mastered the art of the Windsor knot? Sue me, I’m an adventure guide. It’s not like I was born a CEO.”

“No, but you were born an idiot, apparently.” Ellie folded her arms over her chest and shook her head. “I wasn’t talking about the tie, you moron. I was talking about the fact that you haven’t called Miriam for almost two weeks.”

“I called,” he insisted, keeping his focus on the tie so he wouldn’t have to meet his sister’s accusatory gaze. “I called the day after she got hurt to make sure she was okay. I even sent flowers.”

“Right. That’s exactly what every woman wants from the guy she’s in love with. A bunch of generic roses in lieu of conversation or physical contact.”

Jason scowled and turned to face her. “She’s not in love with me,” he insisted, pretty sure it was true. “This just isn’t a good time for a relationship.”

“You are such a jerk.” Ellie shook her head in disgust. “She *is* in love with you, just like you’re in love with her. It’s



fucking obvious to anyone who's seen the two of you together.”

“Which hasn't happened for two weeks, as you just pointed out. Clearly, she's over me.”

Ellie rolled her eyes and shoved at his chest. “I talked to her yesterday, idiot. She's helping me with my website. I could tell the second I brought up your name that she's still hung up on you, though I can't for the life of me figure out why.”

Her words made Jason want to punch himself in the face, but they also sent a warm current shooting through his chest. So Ellie had talked to Miriam? His whole body stung with envy. He hadn't stopped thinking about her for the last two weeks. About her kiss, her touch, the way she lit up the whole damn room when she smiled.

Was it so wrong to be glad she'd been thinking about him, too?

*Yes, it's wrong,* he told himself. *You gave up that right when you said good-bye.*

He looked down at his cuff links, focusing his attention on those so he wouldn't get hung up on Miriam again.

“You could have a relationship, you know,” Ellie said. “If you'd stop trying to be the goddamn white knight all the time and just let someone love you, you might actually be happy.”

“I am happy,” he insisted, not meeting his sister's eyes.

“Not like you were when you were with her. I saw the way you lit up when she was in the room. You could have that forever if you'd stop letting your overprotective macho bullshit run your life.”

“Thanks for the psychoanalysis.” Jason glanced at his watch. He had plenty of time to make it to the board meeting for the big decision, but still. He wanted to get there early, to clear his mind and free himself from the jumble in his head and heart. He'd been preparing for it all week, crunching numbers and meeting with staff and learning what made Urban Trax tick.

It had been a welcome distraction from the deep ache in his gut when he thought about Miriam.

He turned to his sister and took a deep breath. “Do I look okay? Like a real, professional CEO, I mean?”

Ellie gave him a grudging nod, then reached up and straightened the tie again. “You’re fine. You look great. You’ll knock ’em dead in that presentation.”

Jason nodded, hoping she was right while wondering why the words sounded so hollow.

*You know why. It’s not the same without Miriam.*

*Nothing’s the same.*

“Jason,” Ellie said, her voice softer now. “You know I love you. But I think you’re making a big mistake. Don’t you think it’s okay to snatch a little happiness for yourself for a change instead of running yourself ragged making sure everyone else is safe and warm and fed?”

“No.”

She punched him in the arm. Hard.

“Ouch,” he grumbled, brushing his hand over the wrinkle she’d made in the sleeve of his jacket. “Cut it out. The board is going to wonder why I’m covered in bruises.”

“Good. Maybe it’ll distract them from the sight of you with your head wedged up your ass.” She turned and stomped away, then paused at the door. “Good luck with the presentation.”

“Thank you.”

“I know you’ll do great.”

“I hope so.”

“You’re smart and courageous and the best guy I know, and if anyone can save those people’s jobs, it’s you.”

“Thank you,” he said, his throat tight.

“It’s not too late to fix this, you know. This thing with Miriam.”

He nodded but said nothing, remembering the wounded look on Miriam's face when he'd left her there at urgent care. The hollowness in her voice when he'd called to make sure she was okay and they'd spoken like two strangers who'd never known each other outside the boardroom.

*It is too late*, he thought as his sister's words echoed in his ears. *It's much, much too late.*

\* \* \*

MIRIAM GLANCED AT HER WATCH. The readout said ten forty-five, which meant Jason would be stepping into the Urban Trax board meeting in just a few minutes. D-day, as far as the layoffs were concerned. The executive team planned to make a decision today, and from what she'd been hearing from the Urban Trax marketing director, things weren't looking good.

She wondered if Jason was nervous, and whether he'd planned a speech or just intended to wing it. Thinking of him made her feel like she'd swallowed a big lump of Play-Doh, so she settled for pouring herself a cup of jet-black coffee in a mug printed with a unicorn humping a dolphin.

A hand on her shoulder made her look up. Holly stood there studying her, concern etched across her pretty features. "You doing okay?"

Miriam nodded and took a sip of coffee. "Yeah."

"The Urban Trax meeting starts in just a few minutes," Holly said. "I guess their whole executive team will be there."

"Yeah," Miriam said again, and wondered why someone who made her living as a branding expert couldn't come up with a better word. Some marketing consultant she was.

*Like that's the only thing you failed at.*

"I'm sure the meeting will go fine," Holly said. "Our contract with Urban Trax is solid, even if the parameters of our work might change. Their overall spend may not be as high, but we have plenty of other clients. We'll be fine."

“Right,” Miriam said, though she hadn’t been thinking about the contract. She’d been thinking about Jason’s self-blame, the way he shouldered the burden of everyone else’s happiness and health.

Damn him anyway.

“He’s a good guy.” Holly leaned against the counter beside her. “Jason, I mean. Overprotective bullshit aside, I’ve gotta hand it to him. He sure made a difference in you.”

Miriam frowned. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“He got you to stop being such a fraidy-cat.”

“A fraidy-cat?” Miriam rolled her eyes. “What are you, a third-grade teacher?”

Holly smiled. “I am incubating your godchild. Maybe it’s bringing out my inner mommy.”

Miriam sighed. “I’m not a fraidy-cat.” Great. Now *she* sounded like a third-grader.

“You’re right, you aren’t anymore. Not after Jason got his hands on you. He got you playing outside and experiencing the world and throwing yourself headfirst into love again. That’s pretty damn brave.”

“Yeah, and look how well that turned out.”

Still, Holly did have a point. Miriam had spent the last year holed up in her grief, cursing the mountains and rivers and adrenaline highs that had taken her father away. But being with Jason had made her realize something. All that stupid daredevilry and adventure her father had chased like his life depended on it—well, maybe his life *had* depended on it. Maybe that’s what made him feel excited and connected and happy to be alive.

Miriam had certainly felt it these last few weeks. Being outside, breathing fresh air, and feeling the flex of her own muscles, she’d felt closer to her dad than she had since he’d died.

Even if she didn’t have Jason, she still had that.

“Look, hon,” Holly said, resting a hand on her arm. “Maybe it’s not over just yet. With Jason, I mean.”

“It’s over,” Miriam muttered, and wished that weren’t true. But he’d had two weeks to change his mind, to call her up and tell her he’d made a mistake. That there was room enough in his life and his heart for more than just his family.

“Here’s the thing,” Holly said. “Sometimes you’ve just gotta let guys figure things out for themselves. To take a few steps back and realize how shitty their lives are without you.”

“And what if he doesn’t?” She hated how small and sad her voice sounded.

Holly gave her a gentle smile and put an arm around her shoulders. “Well then. You’ve turned into quite the outdoorsy bitch. I hear you’re pretty good with a paddle. We might just have to beat the man to death.”

Miriam laughed in spite of herself, not feeling too comforted, but not feeling a whole lot worse, either.

## CHAPTER 15



“*W*e’re all looking at the same numbers here,” Rex Rutherford grumbled, frowning down at the paperwork in front of them. “As the accounting director for Urban Trax, I think I speak for all of us when I say we’ve got to make a tough call here and trim a little fat.”

Jason stared at the guy, not imagining any context in which Rex Rutherford would speak for him. The man prattled on, and Jason forced himself to let the jerk finish. It was the polite thing to do. The professional thing. Still, he couldn’t help wondering what Rex’s face would look like if someone slammed his necktie in a car door, revved the engine, and dragged him down the street.

Jason glanced down at the red First Impressions notebook he’d been carrying around with him for the last few weeks. He’d jotted copious notes in countless meetings, but the one he kept coming back to was the first line he’d written when Miriam gave him the notepad in the first place.

*Figure out how to beat corporate assholes at their own game.*

He looked up as the door to the conference room swung open and a waiter filed through pushing a bell cart. Across the boardroom table, the chairman gave a nod of approval. “I hope you all don’t mind,” Jack Wainswright said as he gestured the waiter to begin serving, “but since we’re already running an hour over schedule, I took the liberty of ordering lunch for us.”

As the executives pushed aside laptops and spreadsheets, the waiter replaced them with napkins and plates topped with artistic-looking mounds of watercress. Jason watched as the young man set a dinner plate in front of him and pulled off the silver cloche with a flourish. How much had this meal cost? And when the hell had words like “watercress” and “cloche” entered his vocabulary?

*You know damn well when.*

He spread his napkin across his lap and watched for the board chairman to pick up his salad fork before following suit. The greens were delicious, tender and flavorful with a delicate vinaigrette, but the whole thing tasted sour in the back of his throat.

“As I was saying,” Rex continued, stabbing into his own salad with more force than necessary. “These layoffs are unfortunate, but a bit of collateral damage is just part of doing business.”

Jack Wainswright finished chewing his salad and sighed. “It does seem like the layoffs might be the simplest way to go.” The chairman looked pained, and it was clear he didn’t take the decision as lightly as Rex did.

The COO nodded and looked grim, or did a half-assed impression of a guy trying to look grim. It was tough to tell as he chewed his bite of pecan-crusting salmon in a lemon dill sauce. “It’s about being fiscally responsible,” Darrin Johnson added as he forked up another piece of salmon. “Cutting the dead weight, so to speak.”

Jason stared at them as rage pooled hot and acidic in his gut. Okay, it might be more than rage. It was rage mixed with heartache mixed with an overall disgust with corporate culture mixed with maybe a little more heartache. There was probably some watercress in there, too, but he wasn’t upset about the watercress.

“Well,” Jack said, “if no one has anything else to add, I think we should go to a vote and—”

“Actually, I have something to add.”

Jason set his fork down, even though he wasn't aware he'd made up his mind to speak. But everyone was staring at him now, and as he straightened the lapels of his jacket, it occurred to him he had a helluva lot to say. "This is bullshit."

Jack blinked. "I beg your pardon?"

*Be professional, Jason reminded himself. Beat them at their own fucking game. Miriam showed you how to do that.*

Jason cleared his throat and tried again, careful to keep his elbows off the table and his napkin balanced on his lap. "Do you realize that in the last fifteen minutes, you've referred to our employees as 'dead weight,' as 'fat' that needs to be trimmed, and my personal favorite, 'collateral damage'?" He put air quotes around the word, hoping to convey his disdain for the terms. He looked around the room and saw the entire board staring at him.

Several appeared to be considering whether he'd gone off the deep end, but most looked curious. Guarded, but curious.

*Good.*

They'd hired him to be the goddamn CEO, so it was time they got a taste of how he really ran a business. How he *wanted* to run this one. An image flashed in his brain, all those employees showing up tomorrow and learning they wouldn't have jobs next month. That they couldn't buy birthday gifts or health insurance or groceries for their kids. He couldn't imagine.

"How about instead of referring to them like some sort of burden, we think of our employees as human beings," Jason said carefully. "As valuable assets. We have an exceptionally trained workforce here at Urban Trax, and it's about time we start appreciating that. Do you have any idea how expensive it is to retrain new workers when you've fired your existing ones?" He looked around the room, daring someone to answer. "Eight times as much as it costs to just take care of the ones you already have. It's a piss-poor—it's a *poor* business decision is what it is."



They were all still staring at him, but he was seeing more thoughtful looks. More looks of respect. He tried to remember if he'd ever seen that outside the ski slopes and bike trails. It felt really fucking good to see it in the boardroom.

*Miriam showed you how to do this. Keep going.*

The thought of Miriam hit him like a shot of adrenaline, so Jason spoke again, buoyed by the encouraging glances he saw from a few members of the executive team.

“Take Susan Fletcher in product development,” he said, letting his gaze travel around the room from executive to executive, starched suit to stiff blouse. “Did you know that in addition to helping us manufacture bicycle parts for the last fourteen years, Susan also volunteers with Pacific Northwest Trail Development to help build mountain bike trails around the region? Or how about Ted Salport? He’s the manager in our customer service department, but in his free time, he works with the ski patrol team at Mount Hood, looking out for the folks who go hurling themselves off mountaintops using our gear. You want to talk about living our brand? That’s it right there.”

In one corner of the room, the marketing director set down his own fork and cleared his throat. “It’s actually a pretty good PR opportunity,” Pete murmured, almost as though he didn’t expect anyone to hear.

But Jason heard, and he was damn glad to have someone else in his corner. “That’s right,” he said, making Pete blink with surprise. “That’s it exactly. Urban Trax should be rewarding employees, not terminating them. They’re out there on the front line being ambassadors for our products. We *need* them, probably more than they need us.”

Jack Wainswright cleared his throat and pushed aside his salad. “That’s all well and good, Jason, but how are we going to afford it?”

“You could start by cutting my pay.”

A ripple of gasps went around the room like the soundtrack to some weird horror movie. He hadn’t realized he

was going to say it until the words were out of his mouth, but now that they were, he saw the solution.

“As a matter of fact, I propose we cut the pay of every member of the executive team.” He turned to the HR director seated beside him, a severe-looking brunette who ran ultramarathons in her free time. “Kelly, how much did Urban Trax give out in performance bonuses for administrators last quarter?”

“I can find out.” She grabbed her laptop from the counter behind them and pushed aside her plate. Tapping a few buttons on her keyboard, she pulled up a spreadsheet. Her brow furrowed, but she looked determined. Maybe even a little hopeful.

As she turned the monitor to face him, Jason leaned down to look at the figures. “Holy shit,” he said. “Are you kidding me? You want to talk about trimming the fat, here’s where you start.”

Rex frowned. “Jason, let’s be realistic here. To run a major international company, you need a strong executive team that’s compensated commensurate with market value.”

“And you also need loyal employees who know someone has their back,” Jason retorted. “We need people who out there living our corporate values instead of cramming their faces with gourmet meals.”

Jack Wainswright shifted a little in his seat, and he looked embarrassed as he glanced down at the table. Hell, maybe it wasn’t a good idea to piss off the host who’d fed him some damn fine meals in the last couple of weeks, but it was true. Something needed to be said.

“Not that this isn’t a nice treat, Jack,” Jason added, finishing off his last bite of salad in illustration. “But a brown-bag lunch or a can of beans never killed anyone.”

“You make a good point, son.”

The execs on the other side of Kelly had started to murmur quietly among themselves, glancing at figures on her laptop screen and jotting numbers on their notepads.

They looked determined. They looked hopeful. They looked gritty. They looked like motherfucking Urban Trax employees ought to look.

Jason let his gaze travel around the room, making eye contact with everyone before he spoke again. “Urban Trax is about passion. Commitment. Dedication. Safety. We owe that to our customers, and we owe that to our employees.”

The words hung there above the table for a moment. No one said anything. No one was eating anymore, but most of them looked thoughtful. Rex Rutherford wasn’t making eye contact, but Jack Wainswright was. So were Donna Savage and Saul Frost and Bob Dunn and Pete Marshall and Jenny North and a whole bunch of other execs Jason had gotten to know over these last few weeks.

They were all starting to smile.

Jason set down his salad fork and reached for his dinner fork, really fucking grateful to know the difference. Not just in silverware, either. He knew the difference between owning a business and being a leader. Miriam had taught him that.

Among other things.

“I’ve said my piece,” he said, looking across the table to meet Jack Wainswright’s eye. “Now it’s up to you. Who’s ready to vote?”

\* \* \*

“JASON, WAIT UP!”

He turned to see Pete Marshall chasing him down the hall. The young marketing director was breathless and a little frazzled, but grinning like he’d just scored the game-winning touchdown.

Jason could relate.

“Nice work in there,” Pete said as he straightened his tie. “I still can’t believe you got them all to give up their bonuses.”

“I can’t, either,” Jason said, pretty sure he wasn’t supposed to admit that. “But it was the right thing to do.”

“It’ll make for good PR. I can have the First Impressions team leak it out there to the press, how Urban Trax is looking out for its employees.”

“Maybe,” he said as his brain flashed on an image of Miriam. “That’s not why we did it, though.”

“Of course not. But the PR won’t hurt. Sorta like when REI made headlines for giving all their employees the day off on Black Friday.”

“Sure. Why don’t you run it by the First Impressions team? See what they think about it. They’d know better than we would about the pros and cons from the PR side of things.”

“I will,” Pete said. “I’ve been in touch with them a few times over the last week. That idea I brought up in the meeting—the one about employee testimonials? That was all Miriam.”

“Miriam,” Jason said, and the sound of her name sent a pang of longing through him. It didn’t surprise him she’d had the idea. She was smart. And passionate. And funny. And successful. And sexy as hell.

But she was more than that.

Or rather, *he* was more because of her.

Miriam didn’t make him less able to look out for other people. Hell, she made him more of a man. The kind of man who’d spent the last two weeks getting to know the employees of his company. The kind of man who might struggle a little to balance career and family and taking care of all the people he loved, but felt damn determined to do it anyway.

Jesus. What the hell had he been thinking breaking things off with her?

“I’m an idiot.”

“Sir?”

He blinked at Pete. “Uh, sorry. I didn’t mean to say that out loud.”

But he did need to say something out loud. *I'm sorry*, for starters. *I fucked up*, for another. Maybe there was still a way to show Miriam they belonged together. That he could be the kind of guy she deserved.

“Sir, where are you going?” Pete called as Jason began walking toward the door. Walking—hell, he was running, flat-out sprinting if you wanted to get technical.

Being in shape had its advantages.

“I’m not done fixing things today,” he called as he hurled himself against the door. “There’s still one more thing to do.”

## CHAPTER 16



*M*iriam bent forward to wring the mud from her hair, conscious of the fact that it was a futile effort.

Her shirt was covered in mud. Her shorts were covered in mud. Her face was covered in mud. Did a little mud in her hair really matter that much?

What she needed right now was a shower. She scowled at her front door and sighed. Okay, so she couldn't unlock her house at the moment. She'd lost her keys and phone when she'd rolled her new kayak in the pond a few miles south of town. Thank God for the magnetic hide-a-key on her car or she'd be out there still, sitting on a log and wondering what the hell she'd been thinking taking up this silly new pastime.

Before she knew it, she was grinning.

Okay, so it was crazy. A dedicated city girl buying a kayak and teaching herself to paddle with YouTube videos and a lot of trial and error? That sounded nuts.

It was also a lot of fun.

She'd definitely been enjoying herself, even after she'd rolled at the edge of the muddy bank. Her paddle had gotten away from her, so she'd had to drag the kayak through a knee-deep mud bog trying to reach the shore. She might have fallen in once or twice, losing any hope that her white Donna Karan T-shirt would ever be white again.

But she'd gotten the damn paddle back, and she'd even had a little fun doing it. Out there on that pond, she'd thought about her dad a lot. She'd remembered his laughter, the way

his cheeks would glow pink and dimpled after a long bike ride. She remembered the way he used to come in with snow in his beard and light in his eyes and a big hug for his only daughter.

*This is living, baby girl.*

She got it now.

Which still didn't get her into her house.

She sighed and stared at her front door. All this standing around grinning like an idiot wasn't getting her any closer to a shower. She could just knock on a neighbor's door and ask to borrow a phone. Holly had an extra key to her house, so that might work.

But she hadn't checked the windows yet on the other side of the house. She turned and jogged that way, rounding the corner into the backyard as she tried to recall if she'd locked the back door. She always did, but maybe she'd forgotten. Or maybe she'd left the bathroom window cracked. Or maybe—

“Hello there.”

Miriam jumped at the sound of his voice. And at the sight of three vases of flowers and endless platters of food spread out on her picnic table. She froze in her tracks, gaping at Jason standing there in the middle of it all wearing a three-piece suit and a hopeful smile.

“Holy shit!” she gasped.

“Now now,” he said, grinning as he pulled the cork out of a bottle of wine. “Profanity at the dinner table is unprofessional. Of course, I'm not here for professional reasons, so swear all you want.”

Miriam stared, dumbfounded. Her table was covered with a white linen cloth and more plates than she could count, each one topped with a silver cloche. There were polished sterling utensils that looked like the real deal, maybe antique.

“They belonged to my grandparents,” he said, reading her mind. “Ellie helped me get them out of storage. Then she went with me to a wine-tasting class so I could learn to stop slaughtering the names of the varietals and start ordering wine

like a grown-up.” He grinned and picked up a red wine glass. “Can I interest you in a glass of Viña Carmen Cabernet Sauvignon Maipo Valley Alto Gran Reserva? It’s rich and well-spiced with ninety-one points from *Wine Spectator*, but also very affordable at under twenty dollars a bottle. I’m a CEO on a budget, after all.”

“What the—” She stopped, not sure which question she should be asking first. “How did you—” She shook her head. “Wait, how did you and Ellie go to a class together? I thought you wouldn’t ever leave Henry with a sitter?”

“That’s the thing.” He looked down as he poured the wine carefully into two glasses. “It turns out the nurse babysitter is really great, and I was being an overprotective dumbass.” He set the bottle down and looked at her. “As a matter of fact, I was being a dumbass about a lot of things.”

She glanced down at the mud puddle pooling around her feet. Her legs were streaked with mud. Her arms were streaked with mud. Hell, she had mud in her underwear.

And to think she used to worry about running into an ex on a bad hair day.

She looked back up and met his eyes again. “How were you being a dumbass?”

“I thought I couldn’t do it all,” he said. “I couldn’t be a good CEO and a good uncle and a good brother and still have anything left over for a relationship. For you.” He gave her a sheepish look. “I was wrong.”

*I was wrong.* God, what was it about those three words? So much harder to utter than “I love you” or “I want you.” It took a damn big man to say them.

Jason Sanders was a big man. A *really* big man. Still, he *had* given up on her.

“You think I’m just going to nod and smile and everything will go back to the way it was?” she asked.

“Hell, no. I think you’re going to bust my balls over this. You have every right to.”



“You kinda broke my heart.” It sounded a little cheesy when she said it out loud, but it was true, dammit. The memory of him telling her goodbye at urgent care made her chest ache even now.

“I don’t take that lightly,” he said. “But I plan to do my best to piece it all back together. Duct tape works wonders.”

This time, she couldn’t fight the smile. “I’m sorry, too,” she said as she brushed a muddy curl from her eye. “For rushing things. For not giving you space to ease into the idea of a relationship.”

“Please,” he muttered. “You don’t owe me an apology for that. I don’t want any space. I just want to be with you. Smother me all you want, woman.”

Miriam smiled as her heart began to melt in her chest. “You should probably take a rain check on the smothering,” she said, then took a few steps closer to peer at the perfectly set table and the perfectly dressed man standing beside it. “At least until I can break into my house to take a shower. I can’t believe you haven’t commented yet on my appearance.”

“A wise woman once told me it’s not polite to ask a lady personal questions about her age or relationship status,” he said as a blob of mud dripped off the hem of her shirt and splattered the tip of his polished shoe. Jason didn’t flinch. “I figured maybe that extended to asking whether she’s started a career as a professional mud wrestler.”

“Close.” She wiped her hands on her shorts before remembering those were mud-soaked, too. “If your survival skills happen to extend to picking a lock, maybe you can get me into my house?”

“I’m not much of a lock picker, but I met a great locksmith a few weeks ago. If I call him, I can have you inside in a matter of minutes.”

“In that case, maybe I’ll wait and tell you all about this in the shower.”

He quirked an eyebrow at her. “Is that an invitation?”

She smiled and nodded, not sure whether she felt giddier at the prospect of having Jason polished and professional at her dinner table or wet and soapy in her shower. The knowledge that she could have both felt exhilarating.

She gestured toward the table. “I don’t want all this to go to waste. Will dinner keep for a little bit?”

“Not a problem. It’s all reheatable. I made chicken breasts braised in white wine with artichoke hearts and a side of kale and shallots sautéed with lemon juice. I might have burned the kale a little, but if we just—”

“Wait, did you say you *made* it?”

He nodded. “That’s what I’m telling you. I learned to eat and cook nice food. I learned to pronounce and appreciate the wine that goes with it. I learned to let go of some of my overprotective bullshit and trust that my family’s going to be okay without me supervising their every breath. And I learned to beat corporate executives at their own damn game. But you want to know the most important thing I learned?”

“What?” Miriam breathed, almost afraid to ask. Almost certain her heart was going to burst right out of her chest.

“None of that would have been possible without you.”

“Me?”

He nodded. “I love you, Miriam. And I’m a better man when I’m with you. Give me a chance to prove it.”

“You already have.” She took a step closer, closing the gap between them. She reached for his hand and smiled up into those blue, blue eyes. “I love you, too.”

“Awesome.” He grinned, squeezing her hand so hard the mud squished between her fingers. “Now about that shower...”

“Come on,” she said. “Let’s go get dirty.”

## EPILOGUE



Jason spotted the finish line up ahead, but instead of speeding up, he slowed his pace just a little. He wasn't waiting for Miriam. Hell, she was trucking along beside him like she had energy left to burn, which she probably did. The woman was a powerhouse, not just in the boardroom and bedroom, but also in competitive sports.

"There he is!" Miriam grinned and pointed to the edge of the racecourse, barely seeming to notice they were running through ankle-deep mud.

Jason felt himself grinning, too, at the sight of Henry scrambling out onto the course. The boy wore red track shorts and a superman cape, and his little prescription goggles shielded his eyes from flying mud.

Miriam beamed at Henry as he scurried over, and Jason felt his heart surge the way it always did when he watched her interact with his family.

"Hey, buddy!" She high-fived Henry, splattering mud and making him giggle like a maniac. "You ready to do this?"

"Uh-huh." The kid fell into step beside them, stomping extra hard in a puddle as he ran. "Mommy says I'm gonna get mud everywhere. In my ears and in my nose. Probably even on my wiener."

"Probably so," Jason acknowledged as he ruffled his nephew's hair. "That's half the fun of a Tough Mudder."

"Getting dirty has its advantages," Miriam agreed, and Jason had to fight the urge to send her a knowing look.

Henry stomped in another puddle, whooping with joy as he ran. Miriam followed suit, laughing as the mud sloshed up her spectacular calves. Then she jumped with expert precision through a field of mud-covered tires.

Jason's heart felt ready to burst, and it had nothing to do with the fact that they'd just run ten miles through a mud-slick obstacle course. It had everything to do with the woman running beside him, the one brushing a glob of mud off her face as she grabbed hold of his hand, then Henry's.

"Let's go, boys! Almost there!"

With hands linked, the three of them ducked under one of the last obstacles in the course. Jason's lungs worked overtime as he maneuvered through the slippery terrain, laughing as Henry stopped to roll around in an extra-deep puddle.

The little boy was quick to break free on the other side, and he let go of their hands to scurry ahead toward the finish line, where Ellie stood with her arms outstretched and a big grin on her face.

Miriam squeezed Jason's hand. "I still can't believe you got the officials to agree to let him run the last quarter-mile with us."

"As soon as I told them it was his one wish to celebrate being cancer-free, they were all over it." Jason watched with pride as Henry crossed the finish line with his mud-covered legs pumping as fast as they could go.

"Wooohooo!" Ellie shouted as she clicked off a photo on her phone, then dropped to her knees in the mud to wrap her son in a sloppy, wet hug. "I'm so proud of you, baby!"

"I'm not a baby. I'm a Tough Mudder." But the little boy seemed to relish his mother's embrace anyway, and Jason clutched Miriam's hand tighter as the two of them rushed across the finish line together.

They stood panting for a moment while other competitors moved past them, but they were off to the side now, out of the way of traffic. Ellie and Henry stood hugging in the mud while Henry chattered excitedly about the race. Jason took a slug of

water from the bottle he'd stashed in Ellie's day pack, watching as Miriam did likewise. They were sweaty and filthy and breathing hard, and Jason couldn't imagine a moment more perfect for what he had planned.

He set down his water bottle, then reached out and tousled his sister's hair before rumpling Henry's. "Good job, champ!"

The little boy squealed as Jason lifted him up and gave his nephew a fierce hug. He shifted him to one arm and reached down to help his sister to her feet. "You have to get up now."

"Bossy jerk," she muttered without any real venom as she took his hand and let him hoist her up.

Jason set her son back on the ground beside her. "You know it." He turned to Miriam and grinned. "I figure only one Sanders at a time should be on their knees in the mud."

With that, he knelt in front of Miriam and reached for her hand. She gasped as he picked up his water bottle again and used it to rinse off her fingers. He set it down and held out his palm to his sister.

As Ellie placed their grandmother's diamond ring in his hand, he looked up at the beautiful dirt-streaked face of the woman he loved.

"Miriam Elena Ashley," he began as he wriggled the band onto her gritty finger. "Will you make me the happiest guy on earth and marry me?"

Tears pooled in her green eyes, spilled down her cheeks, and made wet rivulets through the mud covering her face. She was breathing hard, and Jason felt pretty sure it wasn't just the exertion of the race.

He felt it, too.

"Say yes, Miriam," Henry urged. "Then you can come over and play anytime and I can teach Phuzeei more tricks and also we can do Legos together."

"That's a pretty good proposal," Ellie added. "I mean, Jason's okay, but Legos? That's a no-brainer."

“Do you guys mind?” Jason said, though he really didn’t mind at all. Having his family be part of this moment was the best thing he could possibly imagine. “I believe the lady still needs to answer for herself.” He looked up at her again and smiled. “So what’ll it be, Miriam? Will you marry me?”

She swiped at the tear streaks on her face and grinned so broadly he couldn’t believe she didn’t have a mouthful of dirt. “Yes,” she choked out, laughing a little as she looked down at the ring and wiggled her fingers. “Oh my God, *yes!*”

She pulled him to his feet and Jason went willingly, then wrapped her in a warm, muddy embrace. He kissed her hard, not caring about the dirt or the sweat or the cheers from the sidelines, or even the fact that Holly seemed to be zooming in on his ass as she filmed the video he’d asked her to capture.

Leave it to Miriam’s best friend to know exactly what sort of footage she’d want from this special moment in her life.

“Come on,” Jason said as he broke the kiss and turned to his sister. “This should be a family affair. Besides, you’re the only one not covered in mud here.”

“Ugh,” Ellie grunted as he pulled her into their grimy little huddle. Henry twined himself around the grown-ups’ legs and giggled.

“Congratulations,” Ellie said. “Since I’m definitely never getting married again, I suppose it’s only fair that I get to be part of your filthy marriage proposal.”

“That’s the spirit.” Jason looked at Miriam, who had a funny gleam in her eye. She grinned, then wrapped a mud-caked arm around her soon-to-be sister-in-law.

“Never say never,” Miriam said, and she gave Jason a wink.

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Well that was sure a dirty scene! Aren’t you tickled Jason and Miriam got their happily-ever-after?

And how about Ellie, vowing never to get hitched again? Call me nuts, but I think she might end up eating those words.

As a matter of fact, I've got a special glimpse of the first scene from the book where she does just that. Keep reading for your exclusive peek at the first chapter of Ellie's story, *The Hook Up*...

## YOUR EXCLUSIVE PEEK AT THE HOOK UP



“Come on, you worm-slurping pile of—”

“Hey, Ty!”

Tyler Hendrix looked up from the handheld boom mike he’d been fighting with and saw Miriam Ashley, co-owner of First Impressions Branding & PR, in the doorway of his office. From her vantage point, she seemed unsurprised by Ty’s colorful string of profanity.

He gave a respectful salute from behind his desk. “Hey, boss.”

Miriam rolled her eyes and ambled into the room, her very pregnant belly preceding her by a good half-mile. “Are you planning to drop the ‘boss’ thing anytime soon?”

Ty grunted in response but set the mike down on his desk. She’d been his boss for more than six years. Even though Ty was now a partner in First Impressions and the head of their new offshoot video studio, he’d probably always see her as the one in charge.

“You’re officially Speak Up’s first guest of the day,” he said as Miriam eased into the chair in front of his desk. “I’d offer you a drink, but all I have is lukewarm beer left over from the open house party.”

“Tempting, but I’ll pass,” she said. “Actually, I just came by to remind you about my sister-in-law. You’re renting her the conference space for some after-hours sales parties?”



“Right, yeah, of course.” Ty said a silent thank you for the reminder. Setting up a brand new company in a brand new space had been hell on his schedule. What was the deal with the sister-in-law again? Tupperware parties or something. It didn’t matter much to him, as long as she paid rent on time and left the room tidy afterward. He picked up the mike again and began wrenching on it. If the damn clip would just—

“I hope you don’t mind, but I told her you’d give her a few tips,” Miriam said.

“Sure,” he muttered. “Don’t buy boom mikes from discount photo supply websites.”

“Tips about *business*,” Miriam clarified. “I told her everything you’ve done to get this place up and running, and she was hoping to pick your brain a little.”

“Sure, no prob.” He stole a covert glance at his watch, trying to remember when his next client was due. An hour, maybe? God, he was so far behind on email and—

“I have to run, but nice job here.” She started to heft herself out of the chair, and Ty jumped up to lend a hand. She waved him off and rested a hand on her belly. “Please. Even if I can’t go more than ten minutes without peeing, I can still launch myself from a chair to run the universe.”

“Peeing and running the universe sounds like the pinnacle of multi-tasking.”

She grinned and ambled toward the door. “The place looks great, Ty. Nice work.”

“Thanks.” He tried to keep his voice even, but the compliment made his chest balloon with pride.

As she vanished out the door, he sat back down and booted up his computer, toggling to the client management software. He scrolled until he found details on his first appointment of the day. L.E. Birmingham was the owner of a company called Pin Action. They manufactured custom bowling balls and other accessories for the avid bowler. Not really Ty’s cup of tea, but he’d done his homework. The guy wanted a full multi-media plan, and Ty already had a spreadsheet full of ideas.

Footsteps in the hallway pulled his attention to the door. He looked up to see a stunning blonde wearing a red dress that hugged every luscious curve. She had legs that went on for miles and hair that slid over her shoulders like a golden curtain. Her eyes were the most mesmerizing shade of blue he'd ever seen, and when she smiled at him, Ty knocked the keyboard onto his lap.

“Are you Ty the video guy?” She gave a tense laugh. “Sorry. I didn’t mean to make a poem out of your name. I’m a little nervous. I’m L.E.”

*This* was L.E. Birmingham? Ty’s voice had stopped working, so he bought himself some time by righting his keyboard and shoving the boom mike to the edge of his desk. That’s what he’d tried for, anyway. He pushed too hard and the mike hit the floor, making them both jump.

Ty stood up. “You’re L.E.”

“In the flesh.”

*Do not think about her flesh. Do not think about her flesh.*

“I’m so sorry,” Ty said. “I wasn’t expecting you quite yet.”

Her cheeks pinkened, and she touched a hand to her chest. “Oh, no. It’s my fault. I’m sorry. I emailed asking if I could swing by early, and I thought—”

“No, it’s fine.” He waved her into the room, annoyed with himself for coming off like a disorganized jackass. “Totally my fault,” he said. “I’ve gotten a little behind on email, but it’s fine. Come on in. Everything’s fine.”

*Jesus, Ty. Say “fine” one more time so she thinks you’re a monosyllabic idiot.*

He cleared his throat and extended his hand. “Sorry, let me start again,” he said. “I’m Ty. Welcome. It’s great to meet you, L.E.”

“Likewise,” she said and took his hand.

Her grip was firm, but her palm felt warm and soft. Ty caught a whiff of something flowery and did a quick reshuffle in the part of his brain that expected the owner of a bowling

ball company to smell like sweaty shoes and beer. Holy shit. He'd pictured a balding guy with a paunch, not a stunning blonde with eyes the color of the ocean.

*You are officially a presumptuous, sexist asshole,* he told himself. *There's one more trait you got from your old man.*

"Thanks for coming by, L.E.," Ty said when he finally gained control of his mouth. "Can I get you something to drink?"

"No, thank you. You're very kind, but if I start chugging water, I'll just have to pee, and then—" She grimaced. "Sorry. I don't usually talk about pee within seconds of meeting someone. Did I mention I'm nervous?"

Ty laughed, utterly charmed. It wasn't the first time he'd had a client confess shyness in the presence of so many video cameras, or even the first time in the last fifteen minutes that someone in his office had talked about peeing.

But it was the first time he'd felt so undone by a client. "No need to be nervous," he assured her. "The cameras aren't on, and I promise I don't bite."

*Not unless you ask me to,* he thought, then wanted to kick himself again. *Get a hold of yourself, Hendrix.*

"Have a seat." He gestured to the chair Miriam had just vacated and tried not to stare at her legs as she settled herself and crossed one lush calf over the other.

L.E. rested her hands in her lap, glancing around the room. "This is a nice space. I hope you don't mind, but I peeked around a little. The restrooms, the conference room—all the décor in this place is amazing."

"That's all Miriam and Holly," he said. "The co-owners of First Impressions. I'm just here to run the new offshoot video studio and visual media lab."

"Speak Up, I know," she said. "I've heard all about it. It's an impressive endeavor, growing the business like that."

"It's a lot of work, but we're up to the task." Ty cleared his throat and commanded himself not to stare at her like some

love-struck teenager. God, L.E. Birmingham would look terrific on camera. His brain started whirling in a hundred new directions, thinking about video marketing strategies and whether she'd be game for being a public spokesperson for the Pin Action brand. What a great angle to add oomph to a fairly dull-sounding product line.

“Let’s talk about your business,” he said. “How long have you been running it?”

“Let’s see...” Her brow furrowed, and she lifted a hand to sweep a few strands of golden hair behind one ear. “I started the company with just a small online presence when Henry was five. That’s my son—he’s six now and in first grade. Anyway, the company sort of took off several months ago, and sales have been going crazy.”

“I heard about that,” he said, ordering himself to stop having lewd thoughts about her. The woman was a mother, for crying out loud, which probably meant she was married. Even if she wasn’t, Ty had a strict policy against dating single moms. No way in hell was he opening that can of worms.

Still, he dared a glance at her ring finger, surprised to see it bare.

*Focus on her face, jackass.*

Ty met her eyes again and cleared his throat. “You’ve got some impressive numbers.”

“Thank you.” Her expression was surprised and pleased all at once. She settled against the back of her chair and relaxed. “I’m very passionate about the business,” she added.

“I can see that.” Ty did his best not to consider what else she might be passionate about. He was a professional, dammit. One who stayed the hell away from single mothers for their own damn good.

He rested his hands on the desk and did his best to focus on bowling balls. Not sea-blue eyes or mile-long legs or beautiful blondes who smelled like flowers. *Bowling balls.*

“Tell me more about the company,” he said.

\* \* \*

ELLIE SANDERS CROSSED her legs and tried to focus on this business meeting instead of on the stupid-hot video guy with brawny arms and eyes so dark he must have ordered them from a catalog to match his jet-black hair. Her new dress itched like crazy, and she wasn't sure whether to play it cool or to dive in and talk about dildos.

Because that's what she needed to do. Her brother's wife had arranged for Ellie to rent the conference room for her after-hours parties, but she'd also urged Ellie to pick Ty's brain.

"He's one of the sharpest visual marketing experts I've worked with," Miriam had told her over dinner. "Super straightforward and no-bullshit, plus he's got tons of experience getting a new business up and running. You'll love him."

The fervor in Miriam's voice had made Ellie nervous. "You're positive he won't mind talking about a sex toy business with a total stranger?"

"Positive," Miriam had assured her. "The guy doesn't faze easily."

So here Ellie was, feeling more than a little awkward. It was the first time in weeks she'd worn anything besides yoga pants, and it was clear she'd gone way overboard in her effort to dress like a professional. But at least she'd made it here, and Ty seemed willing to talk business strategy. She'd only planned to pop in and introduce herself, maybe check out of the space. Miriam must have asked him to give Ellie some special treatment.

Hottie video guy began talking again, so Ellie reminded herself to pay attention. And maybe to start thinking of him as Ty and not "hottie video guy."

"I had to admit I was taken aback when I visited your website," he said.

Ellie clutched the armrests on her chair. “You already visited my website?”

*God, please don't let him be a prude.*

She sat up straight and did her best to look like a smart, capable, professional woman and not a perv.

“It was very eye-opening,” he said. “I had no idea there were so many different styles and colors and options available.”

Ellie smiled and tried not to sag with relief. “We pride ourselves on having something for everyone,” she said. “After all, no two people have the same tastes and preferences and turn-ons, so it's important to offer something to make everyone happy.”

Was it her imagination, or did his eyes widen a little when she mentioned turn-ons? Maybe she should be playing this cool, not getting too explicit about any of Madam Butterfly's products.

“I see what you mean about being passionate about your products,” he said. “I'm betting that really shines through to your customers.”

“I hope so,” she said. “I'm just getting started with the more face-to-face stuff, instead of just online marketing. To be honest, I wasn't sure that's the way to go.”

“I can tell within five minutes of meeting you that you made the right call,” he said. “The personal touch goes a long way in your business.”

“That it does.” Ellie smiled and tried to figure out if he was making a sex-toy joke or just being professional. Hello, awkward.

“I was impressed by some of the new products the company is rolling out,” he continued.

She nodded, amazed he'd done so much homework. Miriam wasn't kidding about how seriously he took his job. Ellie tried to think of something smart to say about Madame Butterfly's new offerings. Something Ty might relate to.

“The new Gentleman’s Choice line will take some guys’ game to a whole new level.” Ugh. She wanted to kick herself. Would he take that as a come-on?

But Ty just smiled and folded his hands on the desk, and Ellie tried not to ogle his biceps. Or his forearms. Or his chest. Or—really, she should just study his pencil holder or something.

“I was noticing that new glow-in-the-dark line,” he said. “There’s some terrific visual marketing appeal there.”

“That’s a great point.” Dammit, she should have brought a notepad or something to write this stuff down.

Ty picked up a letter opener and tapped it a few times on the edge of his desk before setting it down again. “If you’re open to making a few videos, we could do some cool things in the studio with the glow-in-the-dark stuff. Maybe switch off the lights and have you hold one up and move it around a little. It’s not too heavy for that, is it?”

Ellie laughed and shook her head. “No. It’s definitely one of our biggest models, but I can handle it.”

Ugh, did she sound too eager? He was right—the new Glow Bright Joy Stick vibrator was an awesome product, but no way in hell was she waving one around on camera. Showing it at a party was one thing, but video was different. Besides being camera shy, she didn’t want to sit there in the carpool line wondering if the other moms had watched footage of her wielding a giant, glowing penis.

But if an average, slightly-exhausted single mom could embrace her sexuality and talk candidly about adult products, maybe she’d inspire other women to do the same.

“I guess I’m open to considering video,” she said carefully. “Is there a way to, um...keep it subtle?”

“We’d play it however you like,” Ty said, shoving his shirt-sleeves up and distracting Ellie with his arms again. “The important thing is for customers to actually see the products. I also think you’d get a lot of mileage out of how- to videos.”

Ellie swallowed hard. This wasn't what she'd expected, but she should keep an open mind. "What do you mean?"

"Maybe something where you showcase some of the different techniques. Like I was reading up on 'angle of entry' and how not everyone understands the importance of that."

"Oh. Right, yes, it's very important." Ellie forced herself not to frown. He was offering free advice, so it wasn't her place to shut him down. And he'd clearly done his homework if he knew about Madame Butterfly's line of g-spot vibrators angled for maximum pleasure. It was true plenty of women didn't know how that worked. Maybe an educational component would be helpful.

He was still talking, so Ellie told herself to listen instead of fretting about the prospect of starring in some trashy late-night cable TV infomercial. She could politely decline later, right?

"Reading about the angle of entry stuff was actually pretty fascinating," he continued, "I had no idea a four or five-degree shift can have such a huge impact on the strike pocket."

Strike pocket? Huh. Plenty of her customers used cutesie slang terms for their vaginas, but that was a new one on her. Ellie licked her lips. "It certainly makes a difference," she said. "The sensation is totally different when you have it just right."

Ty grinned and flattened his hands on the desk, and Ellie ordered herself not to stare at them. God, how long had it been since she'd been groped by anything that wasn't battery-powered? Much too long if she was breaking out in hives just sitting three feet from an attractive man.

"I was reading up on some of the other industry terminology," Ty continued, and Ellie snapped her gaze back to his face. "Have you ever thought about writing a few educational articles?"

"Articles?" Ellie folded her hands in her lap. "What did you have in mind?"

"Maybe something about whether you're a squeezer or a stroker and how that might impact your overall ball handling."



“Oh.” Ellie flushed, surprised he’d gotten so graphic so quickly. Not that she was complaining. It was refreshing, honestly, to be around a man so candid about sexuality. “I hadn’t thought about doing anything quite that specific. You think there’d be enough readers who’d find it interesting?”

“Definitely. Your customers are hungry for information. They’re looking for something no one else is giving them, so there’s no sense beating around the bush.”

She gave an awkward little laugh, not sure if that was meant to be a naughty euphemism. She was so out of practice. Some men freaked when she talked about sex.

Her brother pretended she sold Tupperware or candles or leggings, though Ellie knew her sister-in-law had introduced him to more than one Madame Butterfly product.

“I love the idea of approaching things from an educational angle,” Ellie said. “Did you have any other suggestions?”

Ty leaned back a little in his chair, and Ellie could have sworn his eyes drop to her cleavage.

*Good, her libido telegraphed. Look all you like, hot stuff.*

Did women even call men “hot stuff” ?

“My father used to clean his balls constantly,” Ty said. The words splashed a little cool water on Ellie’s libido, and she tried not to jerk in surprise.

“What about a tutorial on ball cleaning?” he continued. “Maybe talking about the importance of removing all the oils, making sure there’s nothing stuck in any of the holes.”

“Wow. Um, yes, I guess that is important.” Her cheeks warmed as she processed the fact that he’d headed down this path. What the hell?

But he was the marketing expert and this was just brainstorming, right? Ellie cleared her throat. “Speaking of oils, did you see we’re rolling out several new products in our Kneads and Desires Rubdown Line?”

Ty grinned, and something warm flipped over in Ellie’s gut. “I love all the product names you guys have,” he said.

“The Heavy Hammer, the Big Hitter, the Perfect Pearl—”

“The Boom Boom Pow is my personal favorite,” she said, laughing. “The name, I mean—I haven’t actually tested all the products. There are so many, and they’re adding new ones all the time. I can’t keep track of all the names.”

“I can imagine,” he said. “Going back to the subject of cleaning, you guys have special products for that, right?”

“Definitely,” Ellie said. “We’ve been trying to encourage everyone to buy a bottle of cleaner with every toy purchase.”

“Toys,” he repeated, his expression thoughtful. “I love that. Having a sense of playfulness about this is going to be key to making it a whole lot sexier. And sexy sells.”

“So I’ve heard.” She grinned and wondered if she was flirting. Is this what flirting looked like? She’d have to ask Miriam.

“What if you did some sort of giveaway?” he said. “Like maybe you write some copy about proper cleaning techniques, and then offer a free bottle of cleaner for every hundred dollars spent on new products?”

“That’s brilliant!” Ellie grinned. “Any other ideas?”

Ty leaned back a little and splayed his fingers over the armrests of his chair. “Well, like I said, how-to videos are hot right now. What if you focused on something like how crucial it is to have your fingers measured? I read an article about why you need to be sure they fit properly in the holes.”

“Oh.” Ellie stared at Ty’s fingers for a few beats then frowned. “Well, I don’t think that’s usually a problem, but I guess I’d have to read the article.”

“Or there are a lot of other ways to come at it,” he said. “Like maybe a whole series on proper hole drilling. It’s quite the science, from what I’ve seen.”

“Uh-huh,” Ellie agreed. Her mouth had gone dry, and she wished now that she’d taken him up on the offer of water. “So you’re thinking these posts would be targeted to both male and female customers?”

“Absolutely. Opening your market up to all genders can help diversify your offerings and reach an audience you haven’t penetrated before.”

“Huh.” Crap. This was sounding way more explicit than she’d planned. Still, she wanted to hear him out. Ellie gave him a bright smile. “I appreciate the ideas.”

“Definitely. I’m happy to help brainstorm.” He leaned forward in his chair again, and Ellie dropped her gaze to his chest. God, the man was ripped. What would he look like with his shirt off?

“I need to do a little more research on this one, but what about something on PAP?” he suggested.

“That’s a great idea,” Ellie said, relieved to be off the video track. “Women’s health is extremely important to the company. Maybe we could even do some sort of annual reminder.”

Ty cocked his head. “I didn’t realize that’s something you need to check every year.”

“Well, the American College of Obstetrics and Gynecology changed the recommendations to every three years, but a lot of gynecologists still suggest doing it annually to be safe.”

“Wow.” He looked befuddled. “I no idea the American College of Obstetrics and Gynecology weighed in on bowling.”

Ellie blinked. There was a funny buzzing sound in the back of her brain, and it occurred to her there was something strange about this conversation. “Bowling?”

“I mean, I guess it makes sense,” Ty continued, oblivious to Ellie’s alarm. “From what I’ve read, knowing your Positive Access Point—your PAP, I mean—that’s such a key part of understanding the axis your ball rolls on as it travels down the lane. I can see how getting it checked regularly can help prevent injury to—”

“Ty?”

“Yeah?”

Ellie gripped the armrests again. Her palms had started sweating, and her tongue turned to sandpaper against the roof of her mouth. “What are you talking about?”

Ty frowned. “I’m sorry, am I pronouncing it wrong? I guess I assumed it rhymed with snap, but maybe you spell it out as P-A-P or just—”

“We’re not talking about Pap smears?”

“What?” He blinked, horror flashing across his face. “No! I’m so sorry if I offended you. I just thought—”

“You thought we were talking about...bowling?” Her brain did a slow rewind through the last ten minutes, replaying snippets of their conversation. “Oh, dear Lord.”

“Is there a problem?” He frowned. “You are L.E. Birmingham, right? Owner of Pin Action Bowling Supplies?”

The ground shifted beneath her, and Ellie couldn’t breathe. “I’m Ellie *Sanders*, owner of Madam Butterfly. We sell sexual aids and adult products and—”

“Oh, Jesus.” Ty slid his hands down his face, which had gone unusually pale. He grabbed his laptop and started clicking keys, muttering softly under his breath.

“*Goddamn chode-stroking jackwad...*”

Ellie sat quietly, hands on her lap, while Ty produced the most creative string of expletives she’d ever heard. It made her feel better, knowing she wasn’t the only one who’d talked dirty in this meeting. On purpose, anyway.

When Ty met her eyes again, his expression was grave. “You’re Miriam’s sister-in-law,” he said slowly. “And you emailed me about coming in today.”

She nodded, not sure how their wires had gotten crossed. “That’s right.”

His throat moved as he swallowed hard. “I’m so very sorry, Mrs. Sanders.”

“Ms.,” she said without thinking. “Ms. Sanders. I’m not married. But you can call me Ellie.”

“Ellie,” he repeated. “Not L.E.”

She offered a weak little smile. “I did wonder why you were enunciating it so clearly.”

Ty stared at her, and Ellie tried not to liquefy under that dark-chocolate gaze. At last, one corner of his mouth tilted up in a funny half smile.

“So, I guess I’ll hold off on my spiel about double wood,” he said. “That’s when you leave two pins standing after the first ball, in case you’re wondering.”

Ellie gave an unladylike snort-laugh and buried her face in her hands. “I can’t believe this conversation just happened.”

“I kinda wish I’d gotten it on video,” Ty said. “Again, I’m very sorry.”

Ellie looked up and shook her head. “Nothing to apologize for. I’m sure we’ll both laugh about this very soon.” She grinned. “Like now, maybe.”

Ty grinned back, and a knot released in Ellie’s chest. “Well, then,” he said at last. “Want to start again?”

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Ooof, talk about an awkward first meeting! Wondering where things are headed next for Ellie and Ty? Grab [\*The Hook Up\*](#) now to keep reading!

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



When Tawna Fenske finished her English lit degree at 22, she celebrated by filling a giant trash bag full of romance novels and dragging it everywhere until she'd read them all. Now she's a RITA Award finalist, *USA Today* bestselling author who writes humorous fiction, risqué romance, and heartwarming love stories with a quirky twist. *Publishers Weekly* has praised Tawna's offbeat romances with multiple starred reviews and noted, "There's something wonderfully relaxing about being immersed in a story filled with over-the-top characters in undeniably relatable situations. Heartache and humor go hand in hand."

Tawna lives in Bend, Oregon, with her husband, step-kids, and a menagerie of ill-behaved pets. She loves hiking, snowshoeing, standup paddleboarding, and inventing excuses to sip wine on her back porch. She can peel a banana with her toes and loses an average of twenty pairs of eyeglasses per year. To find out more about Tawna and her books, visit [www.tawnafenske.com](http://www.tawnafenske.com).





## ALSO BY TAWNA FENSKE

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[Ask Me](#) (coming soon!)

### The Ponderosa Resort Romantic Comedy Series

[Studmuffin Santa](#)

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[Mancandy Crush](#) (novella)

[Captain Dreamboat](#)

[Snowbound Squeeze](#) (novella)

[Dr. Hot Stuff](#)

### The Juniper Ridge Romantic Comedy Series

[Show Time](#)

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### The Assassins in Love Series

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### The Where There's Smoke Series

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[The Best Kept Secret](#)

Standalone Romantic Comedies

At the Heart of It

This Time Around

Now That It's You

Let it Breathe

About That Fling

Frisky Business

Believe It or Not

Making Waves

The Front and Center Series

Marine for Hire

Fiancée for Hire

Best Man for Hire

Protector for Hire

The First Impressions Series

The Fix Up

The Hang Up

The Hook Up

The List Series

The List

The Test

The Last

Standalone novellas and other wacky stuff

Going Up (novella)

Eat, Play, Lust (novella)