

Valiant

SHINING KNIGHT PROTECTORS
BOOK 1

MADISON LOVE

Valiant: Shining Knight Protectors Book 1

A Sweet Christian Romantic Suspense

Madison Love

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Excerpt from Honor Bound: Shining Knight Protectors

Book 2

Also By Madison Love

Chapter One

Leanna

The sirens are blaring as the ambulance I'm riding shotgun in barrels toward the waterfront condos that are home to many young executives. With the rapidly rising cost of living, it's far more economical for them to live on the west side of the Hudson and travel by train to work than it is for them to live in the big city. But as more and more people move to Newark, the more it becomes like a smaller version of New York City.

According to the 9-1-1 dispatcher, a call came through where loud wheezing could be heard on the other end of the line, but they couldn't make out any definitive words. Erring on the side of caution, both the police and the fire department were called to respond.

I'm trained to handle various life-threatening situations as an advanced emergency management technician, but I've only been doing this for two years and have yet to "see it all," as my family likes to remind me. They say this to keep me grounded in reality and from getting too cocky since I have yet

to lose someone on my watch. My father told me that it's a feat that's unheard of with the number of calls I've been dispatched to and is nothing short of a miracle.

I remember the words my dad spoke to me on my first day as an EMT, "Leanna, my Dear. It's not a matter of if; it's a matter of when the day will come when you will lose a patient and realize who is truly in control. I love you, Sweetie, but regardless of how many lives you will save, it's never *you*. You are *His* tool, and *He* will use you as *He* sees fit. I can promise that in your line of work, there will come a time—no matter what you do and how hard you try—it won't be enough to save someone. It won't be because you lack the skills but because it's simply not *His* will for you to do so. Please try to remember my words when that day eventually comes. Know that we'll all be here for you when it does." He hugged me tightly and left for work, putting his life on the line like most of my family does.

At 24, I'm the youngest in my firefighting family, and that's by a mere four minutes to my fraternal twin sister, Daphne. She's a fire engineer and one of my roommates. My three older brothers and brother-in-law are firefighters for the city of Newark, and my dad is one of the fire chiefs for the department. My oldest sister, Callie, is an arson investigator who now works in the private sector instead of for the FDNY. Our sister, Isabella—Callie's identical twin—died six years ago while she was deployed overseas and fighting an aircraft fire. My family was born and bred to fight fires and save lives, even if it means giving up our own to do it.

My body is thrumming with adrenaline almost to the point of shaking, which happens every time we get a call. At first, my colleagues thought it was the “jitters” and feared I was too nervous to do my job. They quickly learned that once we arrived at the scene, my tremors stopped, and I was ready to do whatever needed to be done.

“Based on the dispatcher’s call, what do you think we will encounter once we get there?” I ask my partner, Trey. He’s been a family friend since I was a little girl, and I half expected him to be a chief by now with all his experience as a firefighter and a paramedic. He told me once that his calling was to be a paramedic and that God said he should leave the firefighting to my family. I laughed then, but now I’m grateful for his decision since he’s not only my partner but my mentor as well.

“It’s hard to say, with wheezing being our only clue to go on. With that limited information, what do *you* think it could be, Lucky?” he asks in response. The guys at the firehouse have been calling me Lucky for the last year, and I wish I could say it was because of my track record in the field. It’s not. I can thank my best friend, Carter, for that term of endearment after he wrapped up and dropped off a box of Lucky Charms as a gag gift and said I reminded him of a leprechaun with my green eyes and fiery red hair.

I try not to think about Carter and what he’s doing right now. As a protection specialist for Shining Knight, he’s probably playing bodyguard to some beautiful actress or famous pop star, shielding them from a bunch of raving fans. Carter loves

to rescue the damsel in distress. No doubt, whoever the woman is, she's probably falling in love with his handsome good looks and lean, muscular physique. Fortunately, I have become immune to his charming personality the more I have gotten to know him, and it's why we are only friends. *Yeah, right. Keep telling yourself that, Leanna.*

“Leanna?”

I shake my head to dispel my thoughts and glance over at Trey. “Sorry. Based on the wheezing, it could be any number of things. Possibly anaphylaxis due to a severe allergic reaction? It could also be a symptom of asthma, heart failure, chronic obstructive pulmonary disorder, or pneumonia,” I tell him.

“We have one minute until arrival. Break it down for me as quickly as possible,” Trey says like a teacher giving me a final exam.

“The condos are predominantly owned by up-and-comers in their late 20s and early 30s. Because of that, heart failure or COPD is an unlikely cause but not out of the realm of possibility. Pneumonia isn't acute and wouldn't require emergency services unless it is compounding another issue, such as asthma. My educated guess is that it's anaphylaxis or an overdose of some kind.”

“Excellent, Lucky. I would agree with your assessment. I don't see any smoke ahead, which rules out a fire, but it could be a gas leak and the wheezing a result of carbon monoxide poisoning,” he counters.

“It’s possible. It happened to my sister Callie two years ago.” He nods. He had been one of the paramedics who had shown up after Callum, now her husband, had pulled her from the apartment and resuscitated her. “But the condos on the river are all ‘green’ and use solar power and energy-efficient appliances. I think the word ‘gas’ is akin to a four-letter word in the residents’ vocabulary.”

He chuckles. I continue to voice my line of thinking when I see the fire engine in front of us cross the last intersection before our destination. “There haven’t been any reports of gunshots, screams, or domestic disturbances, which would indicate the caller is alone and encountered something unexpected and quick. In addition to an allergic reaction or overdose, choking is another possibility.”

“Good job. Have you considered it might be a prank call? Or a diversion tactic to keep us busy while something more nefarious is underway?” Trey asks.

“Why would you think that? The address checks out with the caller ID registered to the cell phone.”

“And what is the man’s name?” he asks.

I pull up the log and reply, “Joseph King.”

Trey glances at me quickly and arches an eyebrow at me questioningly, making him look like a dark-skinned version of Spock from *Star Trek*. He waits patiently for me to put two and two together.

“You can’t be serious. Joe King, as in *joking*? You know, Trey, it’s entirely plausible that is his real name, and his parents thought it would be funny.” I palm my face and try not to laugh, but a snort still escapes me. Joe’s parents might have the same warped sense of humor that plagues my family. Any one of my brothers would name their kid based on a play on words if given the chance. Luckily, Sebastian is the only one of my brothers who’s married and to a wonderful woman who would never let that happen in a million years.

I know prank calls occur since we’ve responded to several of them, but my gut says this is the real deal. “We’re here. Time to go,” I say as I grab my bag and jump down from the passenger side of the vehicle. I see my brother Sebastian, who recently made Captain, and three others get out of the truck parked just forward of the building. Two firefighters are in full turnout gear with oxygen masks in case of a gas leak. I watch as they ascend to the second-floor landing and disappear, going to clear the area to ensure it’s safe for us to enter.

Trey readies the gurney and meets me at the base of the stairs while we wait for the “all clear.” Instead of the words I’m waiting for, I hear, “Hey there, Pollyanna! It’s been too long since I’ve seen my favorite EMT.” Despite my efforts, I can’t help but cringe when Officer Bryce Jordan comes to stand next to me.

“It’s Leanna,” I tell him and then give him a plastic smile. For someone who is supposed to be good at police work, he has never gotten the hint that I’m not interested.

“But you’re always so sweet and chipper, like a little Polly...” he begins to say but is interrupted by a shout from the landing.

“ALL CLEAR!” yells Winslow, the department’s newest probie.

Trey and I both head upstairs and begin to assess the patient, a young man in his late 20s with sandy blond hair, brown eyes with constricted pupils, and flushed skin covered in what looks like a rash.

“Allergic reaction,” says Trey. “I’ll grab the gurney, and you treat him with the epinephrine.” I do as I’m instructed and send up a small prayer. I pull out my pulse oximeter and place it over Joe’s fingertip to see his oxygen saturation level. When it flashes 92%, I immediately provide him with supplemental oxygen and monitor his breathing. It remains shallow, but it’s there, and that’s a good sign.

“I don’t see any drugs, which I expected from a guy like this,” says Bryce with a hint of disdain.

I cock my head wondering what he means by that comment. I’m about to voice my question when Trey arrives with the gurney. As we get Joe situated for transport, I ask my partner, “Did you manage to find an elevator? I half expected you to bring the stair chair.”

“I did. Winslow and Burton pointed it out to me. It’s located at the end of the hallway, making it easier to get Joe down to the first floor and loaded up.”

I briefly scan his apartment to see what could have caused the allergic reaction, but nothing stands out except a container of Mexican food. The bag and the container look generic and logo-free, hinting that the meal was from the food truck I noticed on the corner. I'm guessing it's the most likely source of the allergen. On our way downstairs, I see Bryce talking with my brother. I look at both of them before asking, "Can you do a final sweep of the patient's living quarters to see if I missed anything?" They both nod, but it's my brother who will take the time to do it.

"I'll do anything for you, Pollyanna," Bryce says. "I'll even take you out for a nice dinner if you let me."

"Not the time, Bryce," Sebastian says, firmly gripping his shoulder. "We all have plenty of work to do. I suggest we get to it." I give my brother a grateful smile as he turns them both toward the condo to do as I had asked.

Trey and I get Joe safely secured for transport, but his response to the epinephrine is slow going and not quite where I think it should be with the amount of time that has lapsed. I prepare a smaller dose and look at my watch. I decide to give it another three minutes before I give him a second injection, and only if he doesn't show signs of improvement. Thankfully, he does.

I see the hospital just up ahead and sigh in relief. I look down at Joe and grin, giving his hand a slight squeeze. "It looks like I won't have to stick you with another needle. You'll be in good hands in no time."

His eyes crack open slightly, and his mouth forms the tiniest of smiles. He returns my squeeze and tries to talk. I can't make out his words through the oxygen mask, but I lean down when he manages to pull it aside.

“Angel” is the only word I can make out before he closes his eyes again. I replace the oxygen mask just before Trey pulls to a stop in front of the entrance to the emergency room. The doors fly open, and coordinated chaos ensues as doctors rush Joe through the double doors. Trey quickly follows the doctors, giving them a quick rundown on everything we did, including the dosage and time of the epinephrine shot. By the time he returns, I have our rig buttoned up and ready to go.

“Good job, Lucky. We might just make a paramedic out of you yet,” Trey teases. Once I obtained my advanced certification, I immediately started working toward my next goal of becoming a paramedic. I have three months left before my test.

“I've been learning from the best. But I've learned a lot from you, too!” I joke back. He groans playfully.

“How's that roommate of yours doing?”

“Daphne's doing great! She'll spend the next six months putting her fire engineering skills to good use and working alongside a structural engineer designing some megacomplex near Medford. She's thrilled about the opportunity, but I think she's more excited about the other engineer. According to Daphne, he's aesthetically pleasing to the eye.”

“That wasn’t the roommate I was talking about, Leanna, and you know it. I’m practically an uncle to you and your siblings and am kept up to date on the Arbaroa family happenings through your mother and father. I know all about Daphne. I was referring to your other roommate, Carter. When will that boy wise up and ask you out on a proper date?”

“We’re just friends, Trey. I thought there might have been something between us when we first met a couple of years ago, but he put me in the friendzone pretty early on. Now, that’s where we’re stuck, and I’ve come to like it there. I’m not willing to risk what we have.”

“No risk, no reward,” he tells me.

“Under normal circumstances, I’d agree with you. But becoming best friends with Carter has been great, and we do nearly everything together anyway since neither of us has time to date anyone with our busy schedules. It’s fun, it’s easy, and there’s no pressure.”

“Let me get this straight. You and Carter don’t have time to date other people, yet you spend all your free time together? No commitment and no kisses? *Hmmm.*”

“It’s not like that,” I begin to tell him, but then I change my mind. “Okay. It *is* like that, but only because neither of us has time for the complications of a relationship. Take now, for example. Carter has been gone for two weeks on assignment and will probably have to turn around and leave again within days of returning home. There aren’t many women willing to put up with that kind of unpredictability,” I say in my defense.

Trey throws his hands up in a placating gesture and grins at me sarcastically, “It’s not like you’re the first person he wants to see when he gets back or the person he talks with for hours when he’s away on one of his trips.”

“Exactly.” I’m not sure how he knows about our phone calls, but I’m assuming the Arbaroa grapevine has something to do with that.

“And that’s most definitely not Carter that I see talking to your brother in front of the bay doors, waiting for your arrival!” he hoots.

My heart skips a beat as I look for Carter’s shoulder-length curly hair, mesmerizing brown eyes with flecks of gold, and a body that rivals any of the younger firefighters I work with. It should, since Carter has been unofficially adopted into the Arbaroa family and works out with the men that comprise it.

Carter and Sebastian step to the side to give me the room to park. When Carter’s eyes lock with mine, the smile he gives me outshines the sun and makes my face heat from its intensity. Trey laughs boisterously, unable to contain himself any longer.

He shakes his head, still laughing, as he exits the vehicle. Before he shuts the door, he gains control of himself and says, “Leanna, the only person you’re fooling with this ‘just friends’ thing you two have going on is you. And trust me, you are no fool.”

Sometimes, I think I’m the biggest fool of them all.

Chapter Two

Carter

It's been a busy two weeks protecting Briar Rose, the most famous member of the Rose family. Honestly, I had no idea who she was when I was first given the assignment, but I was excited to learn that I would be working in Southern California. It was my first solo protection job, and I was expected to guard Gena and Robert's precious baby girl while she participated in a prestigious competition.

I should have known something was up when my partner, Patrick, laughed as the jobs were handed out. He slapped me on the back and said, "Congratulations! You're stepping up in the world. Just make sure not to step in it!" I had no idea what he meant until the file for Briar had been placed on my desk. I had been informed that Briar was a beauty queen and had been receiving death threats if she didn't withdraw from the contest. I didn't know much beyond those minor facts, but I was determined not to let anyone get past me and hurt my client.

When I opened the folder, I was pleasantly surprised by the beautiful creature I would be guarding and couldn't help but

chuckle. She was a pampered princess who was spoiled rotten but absolutely stunning and worthy of a little fanfare. Briar had long, silver-white hair that was flat-ironed daily and trimmed to perfection every week. Her toenails were always painted in a delicate pink, matching her accessories perfectly.

As her protector, I was around her every second of every day for two weeks, and when no one was looking, she would sneak in a few kisses. I cherished every one of them even though I knew I wasn't special to her. She was open with her affections, loved freely, and everyone was considered a friend until proven otherwise.

While I enjoyed spending time with her and relishing her softness, it wasn't all rainbows and sunshine for me. Briar was an absolute slob, and cleaning up after her had become a tiresome affair. I didn't think maid service was part of the "protection" package, but according to my boss and friend, Ben Cooper, I was wrong.

"We do whatever is necessary to get the job done," Ben said. "If that means picking up your client's mess, then so be it."

The competition ended this afternoon along with my contract. No harm came to Briar during the two weeks I was assigned to protect her, and Gena was ecstatic that her baby was safe and sound. Briar had come in second place overall, which pleased everyone, including Robert, who could have cared less about the contest but cared about his wife and her happiness. Maybe Briar Rose can finally indulge in a few decadent treats I left for her to remember me by.

Spending the past two weeks in sunny California felt more like a vacation than work. But I'm ready to be home where I can relax and hang out with my best friend and her family. Thankfully, the competition was held in New York City, making the trip to the house only an Uber ride away.

I thought I would surprise Leanna on my way home by stopping by the station since it's only a few miles from the house that we all rent together. She's not there when I arrive, but Sebastian has just parked the engine and comes over to greet me.

"What brings you by? I thought you were still in L.A. doing the whole bodyguard thing?" he asks before giving me a "bro" hug followed by three succinct pats on the back. I've repeatedly corrected him on his use of the term "bodyguard" and explained that I'm a "protection specialist" since the scope of my duties often extend beyond guarding someone. My job also includes surveillance, private investigation, and undercover work. However, I'm beginning to suspect that Sebastian and his brothers, Brody and Ansel, use the descriptor simply to get a rise out of me. I've learned to ignore it and let it go, refusing to give them the satisfaction of knowing how much it really irks me.

"I was, but I've been staying in Queens for the past two and a half days while the competition has been underway. It ended this afternoon, and my contract was fulfilled the moment I waved to them as they left for the airport."

“Now that the assignment is over, can you tell us who you were protecting? We have a betting pool going on, and whoever guessed closest wins \$180!”

“What’s the grid and buy-in?” I ask.

“It’s a six-by-six grid with a ten-dollar buy-in. Half the pot goes to the winner, the other half to charity.”

“What are the categories?” I had no idea that the department had been betting on my assignments, but I think it’s pretty cool that they use it to raise funds for the local community.

“Actor or actress, musician, athlete, and model,” he tells me. I nod because that covers a broad spectrum of our clientele, even if it isn’t all-inclusive.

“What if my client doesn’t fall into one of those categories? Or what if they do, but you didn’t guess specifically who it is?” I ask, confused about how the pot gets divided up.

Sebastian explains it to me. “If your client doesn’t fall into one of the four categories, then no one wins, and the pot rolls over. The sub-categories are still generic but have two or three parts. For the music category, someone might have to write ‘solo artist’ or ‘band’ along with the genre. The best part is that the charity never loses, and we have a little fun in the process.” He rubs his hands together greedily. “I think I have a good shot at winning this time around since you mentioned a competition.”

I’m about to tell him who my client was when my attention gets diverted by the approaching ambulance and its driver. As

the vehicle comes closer, I can clearly make out Leanna's green eyes, which are wide with shock when she sees me. I smile and wave, happy to see her, and notice how beautiful she looks in her dark blue uniform.

"I'm going to get out of my turnout gear while you stand there and ogle my sister. We can finish this conversation later," Sebastian says with a laugh before heading inside.

"Whatever, man. You know it's not like that between Leanna and me. We're just friends, nothing more. If it was, do you honestly believe your dad would have agreed to let his daughters share a house with me?"

"Oh, don't you think for a second that our father believes you and Leanna are 'just friends.' But he trusts you as if you were his own flesh and blood and knows that you'll keep his youngest daughters safe. Lord knows you have enough security measures installed in your place to give him and Mom peace of mind. Not to mention that if you hurt either one of his 'precious babies,' you'll have to contend with the full force of the Arbaroa family." He says the last part jokingly, but I understand full well that the veiled threat is quite real.

Leanna parks the ambulance, and her partner, Trey, gets out first. I hear him laughing as he leaves her to clean up and replenish the supplies. She told me once that "it's only one of the many joys of being the low man on the totem pole." I explained that the lowest man on the totem pole is often the most important person in indigenous cultures and that she should be proud of her accomplishments. She thanked me and

kissed my cheek before doing her tasks, smiling the entire time. I can still feel the tingle where her lips touched my skin.

“Hey, stranger! Welcome home!” she says, bouncing on her toes excitedly. She slides her delicate arms around my waist and hugs me tightly. My arms instinctually wrap around her shoulders, and I draw her in close, trying not to get lost in the scent of cherries that permeate the air around us.

I fail miserably and close my eyes, briefly reflecting on the moment I first saw Leanna. My friend Callum and I met Sebastian, Brody, and Ansel Arbaroa while indoor rock climbing, and we all hit it off. Sebastian got some ‘vibe’ from God telling him to invite us over to his place for a barbecue after church.

When we stepped out onto his back patio, his older sister, Callie, immediately recognized Callum as the man who had previously stood her up on a blind date. I thought I was going to have to jump to my friend’s defense and pull him from the fire as all the siblings began to circle around him, looking for any sign of weakness. Fortunately, the parents showed up just in time and calmed everyone down enough that Callie and Callum could go off and work out their differences in private. Callie and Callum are married now and have a beautiful daughter, Bella Rae, who recently turned one.

I, on the other hand, couldn’t stop staring at the charming and captivating Irish goddess with green eyes and red hair. The sprinkle of freckles across her nose only added to her appeal. Leanna is the only one of her siblings to resemble their

mother, Elena, while the rest of them look like their father, Nicholas, with dark hair and eyes that are unmistakably Italian.

Leanna and I talked all afternoon and well into the evening, and I could tell she was as enamored with me as I was with her. Unfortunately, I was dating a nurse then and temporarily off the market. As much as Leanna intrigued me, I only date one person at a time, even if it is casual.

When I got home that night, my girlfriend, Everly, gave me the third degree and accused me of not putting enough effort into our relationship. I explained that I had been at a family barbeque with friends, but she didn't seem to care. She broke up with me, and her last words hit their mark. She said, "Carter, you will always put work in front of your friends and your friends in front of me. You keep me at arm's length, never letting me get close. It's no wonder your fiancée walked out on you years ago."

The words stung, and I wanted to throw my phone across the room in anger but simply wished her well and hung up instead. The breakup was for the best since I had started a new job at Shining Knight Protective Services only months earlier and still had a lot to learn in my new role. Training would take up a great deal of my time, and as such, it didn't leave any room for romantic relationships.

If I was going to keep up with my team, I needed to focus all my energy on doing a good job and soaking in as much knowledge as possible.

Shortly after my breakup with Everly, Leanna contacted me, worried about her sister, Callie. Leanna had wanted to hire me when she thought Callie's brakes had been tampered with and asked me to follow her sister around to keep her safe. I had laughed it off at first, but then my friend, Callum, wanted to hire me for the same reason. I took the job to help him out.

Leanna had spent most of her time off from work, keeping me company on my stakeouts. During that time, we had quite a few deep conversations, and the possibility of a relationship between us had come up. I explained to her my need to keep things platonic without delving into the reasons why. She didn't press for more information and took everything in stride but refused to accept anything less than friendship, which I was glad to give. Rather than remaining a casual acquaintance, she has become my best friend and confidant. Now, I don't know what I would do without her in my life, and I never want to find out.

Eventually, I let her go and clear my throat. "It's good to be back, even though it's a lot colder here than in Los Angeles."

"Well, let's get you inside where you can warm up. Do you have time to eat with us?" she asks.

"Possibly. It depends on who's cooking."

"Why does that matter? You either have the time, or you don't." Leanna folds her arms in front of her chest and narrows her gaze at me. With that one look, I know that I have to tread lightly if I don't want my white socks turned pink in the wash.

“Um. Well. If Trey or Sebastian is cooking, then I might have time,” I hedge.

“And if it’s my turn to cook?” she asks with an arched eyebrow.

Sebastian sneaks up behind her and says, “Then he’ll need time to pick up something on the way home. If he eats your food, you may have to give him the Heimlich after he chokes on whatever you make.”

“I can cook,” she says almost petulantly.

“Frozen lasagna and microwave meals do not count, and reheating does not qualify as the ability to cook,” her brother says before giving her a noogie on top of her head. Leanna ducks and bats his hand away while elbowing him in the ribs.

“Ow! That was entirely uncalled for, Lee. I might have to hire Carter to protect me from you!”

“Carter would side with me on this one,” she says to Sebastian. Turning to me, she bats her long lashes and asks, “Wouldn’t you, Carter?” Her tone implies there is clearly a right and a wrong way for me to respond.

Her brother already knows the answer to that question, and so does Trey. He is heading in our direction and overheard everything by the resigned look on his face and the grin tugging at the corner of his mouth.

Instead of answering Leanna’s questions, I place my arm around her shoulders and tell her, “If it’s any consolation, I

think your frozen lasagna is the best I've ever tasted, especially when you add that smokey flavoring."

"We call that 'burnt' in the Arbaroa household," Sebastian says, heading for the kitchen.

Leanna and I follow behind him and Trey, laughing along the way. At least until I hear Trey whisper to Sebastian, "If you didn't know them better, you might think they are married."

Chapter Three

Leanna

With Carter's arm around my shoulders, I can easily feel the moment he tenses after hearing the words leave Trey's mouth, but it's only for a split second and barely noticeable.

At first, it was difficult for me to accept that he wanted to keep our relationship purely platonic since our chemistry was off the charts, and we had instantly clicked when we first met. I over-internalized the situation and assumed he wasn't interested in me because I wasn't pretty enough, smart enough, or old enough for him. After getting to know Carter better, I'm well aware that isn't the case. While I'm unsure of the exact reasons for his decision, I'm certain it had nothing to do with me, specifically since he's been single ever since.

I must admit that my feelings would have been hurt if he had dated anyone since our agreement, but he's been single since he broke up with some nurse a couple of years ago. He didn't go into details; he just shrugged his shoulders and told me she had ended it.

I've never understood why Carter is against the idea of marriage or entering into a serious romantic relationship with a woman, but that's partly because I never pressed the issue. With three brothers, I know full well that no amount of cajoling, bribes, or threats will get them to open up until they're ready to do so. Carter operates in pretty much the same fashion. I hope one day he might trust me enough to explain his hesitancy.

The bottom of my boot connects lightly with Trey's rear end, causing him to stumble forward a little bit. He loses his balance, and Sebastian catches him before he hits the ground. The position they find themselves in looks like they just finished a dance, and my brother dipped his partner at the end.

"Who looks like the married couple now?" I tease.

Trey bats his eyelashes at my brother and puckers his lips. Sebastian pulls him up to the standing position and twirls him. He places his left hand on Trey's waist while Trey's left hand finds my brother's shoulder. With their right hands clasped, they begin two-stepping their way to the kitchen. Carter and I can't help but laugh, especially when the rest of the guys in the firehouse serenade them by singing "Dance of a Lifetime" by Drake Milligan.

Carter drops his arm from around me, slowing his pace and allowing me to enter the room first. He pulls out a chair for me at the long table that will seat nearly a dozen people and follows suit, sitting next to me and stretching out his long,

muscular body. I avert my gaze away from him so I don't get caught staring at his lean, muscular physique.

Sebastian and Trey start pulling out large pots and pans to cook dinner for the rest of the crew. As one of the larger fire stations in Newark, we have a minimum of 17 people per shift. From the looks of it, we will have spaghetti and meatballs with a side of garlic bread—an easy dish that can feed an army of men.

The water for the pasta is barely boiling when everyone starts to pile into the room, talking over one another loud enough that you can't even hear your own thoughts. Chief Larson makes a high-pitched whistle that grabs everyone's attention, effectively quieting the mob.

“What is with all the racket? You've all had Arbaroa's pasta before. I know it's good, but is it worth all the hubbub and noise you're making?” the chief asks with a smirk, knowing full well it's better than what you can get at any restaurant. Sebastian's wife, Marybeth, makes it from scratch for him to bring in and cook al dente.

Winslow and Burton roll in the portable whiteboard, and I hear Rodriguez yell from the back, “Hey, Carter, it's time to settle the bet! At least this time, we get to hear it directly from the horse's mouth and don't have to wait for Leanna to bring us the information!”

“Does this mouth look like it belongs on a horse?” Carter retorts while stroking his dark facial stubble. He points at

Rodriguez, “Think very carefully before you answer that. And remember that I have a gun.”

“Yeah, but do you know how to use it?” Winslow chimes in and begins to chuckle at his joke. He stops when he realizes he’s the only one laughing, and everyone is staring at him wide-eyed.

Chief Larson gives Sebastian a look that says he should handle the situation. My brother walks over to Winslow and says deadpan, “As a probie, you haven’t earned the right to heckle our guests, especially one that can kill you with his thumb. You have to obtain ‘rookie’ status before you’re granted that luxury. Even then, it should be used sparingly. But after that? It’s open season on anyone who walks through those bay doors, Carter included.” The poor guy has no idea that the dressing down is just my brother messing with him. It doesn’t help that no one is correcting his assumption. Instead, they only contribute to it further.

They all nod in unison, confirming my brother’s words, while Trey adds his two cents. “The price for your blunder is doing the dinner dishes. Burton will assist.” Burton begins to protest, but one look from Trey silences him. Dishes aren’t really a punishment. All probies and rookies have to do the dishes when the captain cooks. It’s our firehouse tradition.

Carter turns to me and asks, “How is it that you’ve been my roommate for a year, and only today did I learn you’ve been betting on my job? I would have dropped a few hints to help

you out so you could buy the pizza on movie nights.” He says with a wink.

Trey comes over and places his hand on my shoulder. “Lucky doesn’t bet. She thinks she has an unfair advantage as your roommate.”

I bob my head because what Trey says is true. Carter might not be able to discuss the specifics of his assignments, but I overhear snippets when he’s on the phone with his boss. Mainly, I don’t bet because I want to avoid thinking about him protecting beautiful women in exotic places.

“Okay, Carter. I’m ready to win this! Was your client an actor, model, athlete, or musician?” Sebastian asks.

“She is most definitely not an actor or musician, but she is in show business. If I had to fit my client into one of your boxes, I would classify her as a model.”

“What? You said she was in a competition!” Sebastian says, slightly frustrated but still in good spirits. He knows Carter’s answer just lost him the pot.

“Models compete in beauty pageants, like Miss New Jersey or Miss America!” shouts someone from across the room.

“I bet she was gorgeous!” someone shouts.

“She was. Her long, white hair was so soft and always smelled like peaches,” Carter says.

“Did you get pictures?” Burton asks.

“I did. I promised I wouldn’t post them on social media, but the Rose family had no issues with me taking a few pictures of Briar.”

Even her name is pretty. My stomach turns at the far-off look Carter gets when he describes her, and what appetite I had left is now gone. Unable to stand it anymore, I excuse myself as the guys clamor around him to get a good look at the pictures on his phone. The last straw for me is when I hear Carter say, “I wish I could have brought her home with me.”



Carter knocks on the door to the ladies’ room, my hiding spot for the past half hour. “Are you in there, Leanna? Are you okay?” he asks worriedly.

“Yeah, I’m all right,” I choke out.

“I wanted to let you know that dinner’s ready, and we’re all waiting for you,” he says.

“You guys go ahead and eat. I’m not feeling too hot right now and don’t know how long I’ll be.”

If I don’t get rid of him, Carter will hang out on the other side of the door to keep me company and ensure I’m truly fine. There’s only one surefire way to get him to go away and spend time with the guys, leaving me alone to wallow in my jealousy

and self-pity. “Seriously, Carter. I’m okay. It’s...It’s a woman thing.”

“And that’s my cue to leave.” The sound of his footsteps walking away can be heard through the door. When I’m positive that he’s left, I slip out of the bathroom and head for our gym in the basement to work out my frustrations.

When my brother walks into the room by himself and gives me a sympathetic look, I know that Carter has gone home.

“How upset is he that I didn’t come to dinner?” I ask.

Sebastian sits on the bench beside me, clasping his hands and resting his elbows on his thighs. “He wasn’t mad, just worried about you. He barely ate anything because he kept looking down the hallway, waiting for you to show up. He was here to visit you, not me or the other guys. What happened, Lee? Did he say or do something to hurt you?”

I shake my head, unable to voice my thoughts or answer his questions. A tear I had managed to keep at bay for the past hour finally falls, a clear sign I’m in dire need of a hug. Sebastian wraps around me, and we sit there like that until I dare to say the words I’ve held in for far too long.

“I love him, Sebastian. I have for nearly two years, and being in the friendzone is killing me.”

“I know, Lee. We all see it. But that’s because we’ve known you all your life, and you can’t hide it from your family. You’ve done a great job hiding it from everyone else—

including Carter—which is why I think something happened today to make you break. Care to share?”

“The one reason I’ve been able to do the whole ‘just friends’ thing with Carter is that up until now, he hasn’t been interested in dating anyone else. It was too much for me to handle, listening to him talk about how soft and sweet Briar smelled and wanting to bring her home! My stomach twisted up in knots, and I thought I was going to hurl!”

I expect my brother’s face to soften in understanding and for him to pull me into another hug, but that’s not what happens. Instead, he looks away and puts a fist to his mouth, his shoulders shaking uncontrollably.

“It’s not funny, Bash!” I nearly shout, using my brother’s nickname.

“It kind of is. Did you really go hide in the bathroom and tell him you were having ‘woman’ problems to get him to go away?”

“Well, it worked, didn’t it? And it was the truth in a roundabout way. I’m a woman, and I was having a problem.”

He continues to laugh at me but sees I’m not playing around. His amusement at my predicament is beginning to sting a bit. “Spit it out. I know you want to.”

He inhales deeply and then slowly releases it, the laughter momentarily subsiding. Unfortunately, his grin has yet to dissipate. “You really should have stayed around, Lee. If you had, I’m sure you would have enjoyed the evening and my

pasta rather than the smell of *'eau de toilette'* in the bathroom.”

“That’s not what that term means, Sebastian. It’s a perfume, not toilet stench.” I start to get up and leave, but he grabs my hand to stop me.

“Sit. Please.” I watch as he pulls out his phone and sends a quick text. I don’t see who it’s to, but it doesn’t take but a few seconds for a reply to ding on his phone. Sebastian taps on the picture, and the cutest dog I’ve ever seen fills the screen. He hands me the phone. “Look at this.”

“Why are you showing me a picture of a dog? She’s cute, but I don’t...”

“Meet Briar Rose, Carter’s client!” he hoots, unable to contain his laughter any longer. I’m confused.

“You’re kidding me. His client was a dog? I thought he said he was guarding a model?”

“Carter said ‘if he had to classify his client,’ he didn’t say she *was* a model. Briar is a pure-bred Maltese who competes in dog shows all over the world. The last one was held in Queens, where she won second place despite the death threats against her. That’s why the Rose family hired Carter to watch over her.”

“I’m so stupid,” I say. “I jumped to conclusions, and Carter must think I’m an errant child.”

“He doesn’t think you’re a child, nor are you stupid for thinking he was talking about a woman. We all did until he

showed us the pictures. He told us he wanted to bring Briar home because he thought you and Daphne would adore her. His thoughts were on you, Leanna, and making you happy.” I don’t point out that Carter was also thinking about our other roommate—our sister—Daphne.

“I should text Carter and let him know I’m feeling better, especially since I didn’t get to say goodbye.”

“What you should do is own up to your feelings and tell him the truth. What happened today might have been a misunderstanding, but the next time, it might be for real,” he tells me bluntly.

“We do almost everything together, Bash. He’s become my best friend and knows almost everything about me.”

“Yeah, everything except your feelings for him. And I have to ask, do you know everything about him? I get the distinct feeling Carter is a closed book and doesn’t share much.”

“I don’t know everything about *you*, and *you’re* my brother,” I say defensively.

“Touché. I’m just trying to look out for you, Lee, and I only want to see you happy. I don’t want to see my baby sister get hurt, especially because we all like Carter.”

“I don’t want to get hurt either. It’s why I can’t put myself out there. I’d rather keep what we have and the comfortability that comes with it rather than risk everything and lose him forever.”

Sebastian doesn't say anything more; he only looks at his watch and then at me. "I have to head back upstairs, and you should, too. I saved you a plate of spaghetti."

My stomach growls loudly at the thought of his fresh pasta and Trey's spicy sausage meatballs. My brother tilts his head back and guffaws. "Are you growling at me because you're hungry? Or because you somehow know I invited Carter to our family ski retreat in a few weeks?"

"I forgot all about that! What did he say when you asked him?" I ask excitedly.

"He said something about needing to check his schedule and that he can't make any commitments until he knows for sure."

I nod as I follow my brother back to the dining area. I shouldn't be surprised that Carter didn't give him a straight answer. If there is anyone who knows how to avoid commitment, it's Carter.

Chapter Four

Carter

I didn't like leaving Leanna without saying goodbye, but when it comes to "woman" troubles, I don't have the foggiest clue how to help. Not knowing what else to do, I decided to walk the few miles to our house, hoping to have an epiphany. Nothing came to me.

As I get closer to home, I can see all the lights are on and assume that Daphne is inside. Since I've been away for two weeks, I send her a courtesy text that I'm only a block away. I don't want to inadvertently walk in on her dancing in her underwear to some pop song I've never heard of before. She sends me a thumbs-up emoji and a smiley face, giving me the "all clear."

"Hey, Carter! Welcome home!" she says as soon as I walk through the front door.

"Hi, Daphne. It's good to be back. Give me a quick second to get out of my monkey suit." She'll talk my ear off before I can do anything if I don't stop her right away. I hang up my coat and head upstairs to my room, where I change quickly

into a pair of sweatpants and a T-shirt. I make my way back downstairs to find Daphne putzing around in the kitchen.

“Hungry?” she asks. “I got home about an hour ago and didn’t feel like going to a fast-food joint. I thought I’d cook something healthy for a change.”

“Thanks. I’d love some if you have extra. I stopped by the station but didn’t eat much because I was too worried about Leanna.”

Daphne stops what she’s doing and tilts her head inquisitively, “What’s wrong with my sister? Is she sick or something?”

“I don’t think so. She seemed fine when I stopped by, but she disappeared when I was talking to the guys about my client. When I went to find her, she had locked herself in the bathroom and told me she was having ‘woman problems.’ I don’t have the right body parts even to begin to know how to help with something like that.”

Daphne laughs. “No, you certainly don’t. I wouldn’t worry too much about it, though. It’s something we females have learned to live with and are always prepared for. However, cramps and discomfort can come on pretty quickly. She was where she needed to be. Trust me. She’ll be fine.”

I shrug my shoulders. “If you say so. She didn’t sound good, and I wanted to do something to help.”

Daphne looks at me like I’ve lost my mind, and I can tell she really wants to say something. She’s holding back, and I don’t

know why. She's never done that before.

“Spit it out, Daph. You've never worried about offending my delicate sensibilities before. Why start now?”

She shakes her head at me. After a few more seconds of silence, she caves and says, “You sound like her boyfriend and not her roommate.”

I start to protest, but she holds her hand up to stop me. “I know your stance on relationships, Carter. That's nothing new, and I'm sure you're too stubborn to change your mind. Also, I'm sure you believe that any man would want to help out their roommate in their time of need. I promise you that's not the case.”

“I care about Leanna.”

Daphne's eyes soften in understanding with a twinge of pity.

“And I care about you, too,” I amend, realizing that leaving her out of my previous statement indicates that my feelings for Leanna run deeper than I'm willing to admit.

She chuckles. “I'm sure you do. Somehow, I doubt you'd be as worried about me as you are about my sister.” She turns her back to me so she can stir whatever it is she's cooking. “I'm only going to say one more thing on the subject, and then I'll leave it alone, I promise.”

I don't believe her, so I say nothing.

“You've got your reasons for remaining single, and I won't pry. But you will miss out on something great if you don't get over whatever it is that's preventing you from living your best

life. You can't expect Leanna to wait around for you forever. Now I'm done. Ready to eat?" She gives me a huge smile as if she didn't just tell me to "get over myself" in the nicest way possible.

She doesn't wait for me to respond and dishes up a plate of sautéed chicken and vegetables over rice. "Thank you," I tell her. "Do you want to eat at the table or in the living room? The new season of *Reacher* started, and I know how much you like what's his face."

"Living room it is. I can have a healthy dinner with some eye candy for dessert. Win-win since that deliciousness is calorie-free."

I roll my eyes at Daphne and her penchant for men with big muscles, but even I can appreciate the hard work and dedication that goes into staying fit. According to most women, I have what they call a "swimmer's build," with lean muscles and a tapered waist. That wasn't always the case. It wasn't until I joined the Army that I filled out a bit. Even then, I was somewhat scrawny when I left after my four years were up.

I wasn't in special ops or doing any of the really cool jobs. I joined the Army right out of high school to earn a steady paycheck and get my degree. I took the first job available to me, and that was in logistics. I was excited at first, especially when I thought I would be home and get to marry the love of my life. To my disappointment, I was deployed more than I was stateside.

I was crushed when I came home from my first deployment and found out that my high school sweetheart and fiancée, Melissa, had packed up all her stuff and left. Having left nothing but a “Dear John” letter for me on our coffee table—I felt like no matter how hard I tried, I was a disappointment to the women in my life. Rather than wallow in self-pity, I focused on taking care of my dad...and myself.

Melissa’s ghosting was the final straw for me, and I vowed never to put my heart on the line again. Since then, I’ve only casually dated women, never getting too serious with any of them. When a woman begins to believe we’re anything more, I pull away and let them break up with me. It gives them a semblance of vindication when I could care less. Everly was the last woman I dated, and I was relieved when she called it quits.

Two years ago, we had been together only a little over a month when my Pops visited me. Everly showed up uninvited at my apartment and made herself at home. Of course, my dad was thrilled I had a woman in my life and thought I was finally moving on from my heartbreak over Melissa leaving. He told Everly all kinds of stories from my past, including the one story I have never shared with anyone. She threw it in my face when we parted ways, and it only reminded me of my failures.

“Where did you go?” Daphne asks, snapping me from my thoughts. “You’ve barely touched your food, and the show is half over.”

“I was just thinking.”

“If you had been thinking any harder, you might have hurt yourself. Wanna talk about it?”

“Nope.”

“Okie dokie.” In Daphne fashion, she drops the subject and returns her gaze to the television show while I finish my meal. The food is delicious, and I devour every bite despite it now being cold. I’m half-tempted to lick my plate but refrain...just barely.

“How is it that you and Leanna are twins but yet nothing alike?” I ask.

“Because we’re fraternal twins, silly.”

“I know that. But I figure there must be some similarities between the two of you since you shared the same womb. But you guys are like night and day. You can cook while Leanna burns water. You like to shop and get your nails done, while your sister likes rock climbing and paintballing.”

“Hey! I like paintball, too! Don’t forget that I participate in our family’s annual paintball challenge every December!”

“Once a year does not mean you love the sport. But seriously, you two are polar opposites in every way.” Her face scrunches up as if I had insulted her. “In a good way, Daphne. I mean it. You each have your own strengths and admirable qualities. You balance each other out.”

“I know what you mean. Leanna is just like our mom in both looks and disposition. I take after our dad as if I’m his ‘mini-

me.’ My parents’ personalities complement one another for the most part, but when they clash, watch out! Irish versus Italian can get pretty heated, each wanting to get in the last word.”

“Um. I’m aware. I’ve stood on the sidelines and refereed a few arguments between you and your sister.”

“I remember. I also remember that you popped a bag of popcorn and sat on the couch while you watched.” I bob my head because she’s not lying. It was better than going to any boxing match or mixed martial arts competition.

Her phone dings with an incoming text, and I take that as my cue to clear the plates. Once Daphne gets started texting, she can go for hours. The rule in this house is that whoever cooks doesn’t clean, which often leaves Leanna doing most of the dishes when she’s home. This time, it’s my turn. I’m putting the last pan in the dishwasher when Daphne walks in.

“That was quick,” I tell her, surprised.

“That’s because it was Sebastian. He had to keep it short because he’s at work, but he wants to know if you have given any more thought about going on the family ski retreat.”

As much as I would like to go, I can’t afford to give up my vacation time. I use it to return home every few months and fix up the house I grew up in. When my Pops passed away last year, he left the place to me. It’s a dilapidated shack in Iowa that needs to be torn down, but I don’t have the heart to do it. Other than some fond memories, it’s the only thing I have left of my father.

“I appreciate the invite, but I can’t. I have too many obligations that prevent me from going. I hope you guys have fun, and maybe next year, things will be different.”

Daphne frowns, and I can tell she’s disappointed by my answer. She quickly types out something on her phone, and I assume it’s to inform Sebastian of my decision. “Just so you know, my parents are booking an eight-bedroom cabin for the trip, leaving one room available. If the opportunity presents itself and you change your mind, you’re still welcome to come.”

“Thank you,” I tell her, and I genuinely mean it. “I think it’s time for me to head to bed. I have to go to work for a debriefing in the morning before I get the next few days off.”

“Yeah, me too. I don’t have a debriefing, but I do have a long drive for the project I’m working on in Medford. Thankfully, the structural engineer I’m working with is gorgeous enough to make the distance worth it.” She winks before saying goodnight.

As I head upstairs, my thoughts drift back to Leanna. My feelings for her are becoming harder and harder to deny, and if there were one person I could envision forever with, it would be my best friend.

When Melissa left me, I was deeply hurt but managed to survive. If I were to lose Leanna, it would utterly destroy me. I’d rather have our friendship than nothing at all.

Chapter Five

Leanna

When I returned home this morning after my long shift, I had hoped to find Carter awake so I could apologize to him for my odd behavior. I'm not sure if he believed my reasons for locking myself in the bathroom, but it doesn't matter. He knew something wasn't right, and regardless of my excuse, I felt the need to set the matter straight. I didn't get the opportunity because his car was absent from the driveway, and the house was silent when I arrived.

After kicking off my shoes by the front door, I noticed a note on the breakfast bar next to a bottle of Midol. I opened the slip of paper to find it written in Daphne's print.

To my favorite twin,

Carter said you were having woman troubles and feeling under the weather. While I'm pretty sure he's the "trouble" you were having, I thought I'd leave the medication for you in case I'm wrong. Also, if you're looking for Carter, he had to go into the city for a debriefing and should be back this

afternoon. This should give you plenty of time to rest and be your beautiful self by the time he gets back.

It's been a long time since you've asked my advice on anything, but I'm going to give it to you anyway. Please tell Carter how you feel about him, Leanna. Hiding in a bathroom is not the solution to your problems, and it won't get any easier. You're going to make yourself sick (for real) by keeping it bottled up inside. Go big or go home, baby sister!

Love,

Your older and wiser twin

I smiled at my sister's thoughtfulness, knowing she only had my best interest at heart. Despite her sage words of wisdom, I will not be taking her advice on this matter. It's not her that has everything to lose.

I took a quick shower and got ready for bed. I closed my blackout curtains and cozied up under my comforter, falling asleep almost as soon as my head hit the pillow. I don't think I moved an inch until a noise downstairs woke me up.

I grab my phone off my nightstand and check the time, surprised that it reads 8:00 p.m. I must have been tired if I slept nearly 11 hours. On the days that Carter is home, I usually try to take a nap so I can spend most of my free time with him before he heads off on another assignment or I have to work another shift. I guess I forgot to set my alarm due to my fatigue.

When I get downstairs, I see Daphne resting on the couch, her arm draped over her eyes. She sits up when she hears me enter the room. “Good morning, sleepyhead,” she teases.

“Is it good morning or good night?” I ask with a yawn, not quite awake. Not expecting an answer, I shuffle into the kitchen on autopilot and pop a pod into our coffee machine. It’s the longest minute of my life, waiting for my cup to brew.

“Did I miss dinner?” I ask.

“I left you a plate and put it in the refrigerator, figuring you could heat it up whenever you were ready to eat.”

“Thanks. You’re the best!” I hug my sister, showing my appreciation for her kindness. I grab my cup of coffee and walk over to the living room window to peek outside. Carter’s car is still missing from the driveway. I can’t help the frown that appears on my face, feeling let down that he’s not here. Daphne comes over and crowds my space, trying to figure out what I’m looking at.

“You’re invading my comfort bubble!” I snap jokingly, shoving her away from me.

She chuckles. “Girl, we shared a much more crowded living space for nine months. I have squatter’s rights and can get as close to you as I want.” Despite her words, she gives me a little breathing room and takes a seat on the sofa. “Lemme guess, you’re wondering where Carter is.”

I sigh. “I thought he would have been home by now. How long does a debriefing take?”

“He was here when I got home but said he didn’t want to wake you up, figuring you needed the sleep. You missed him by an hour.”

I furrow my brows, wondering where he would have gone on a Friday night. We usually have pizza and a movie marathon if he’s home and I’m off work. The first thought that pops into my mind is that he has a date. When the crease between my eyes becomes even more profound, Daphne throws up her hands in dismay.

“How many times have I told you that if you scrunch your forehead like that, those wrinkles will become permanent?” She gets up and licks her thumb as if she’s going to wipe my scowl away.

“Gross! Don’t you dare touch me with your thumb if you plan on keeping it!”

We both giggle, which does the trick and erases—what I like to call—my “deep thinking” face.

“Carter had his bags packed when I got home. He told me that while he was at the office, a last-minute request came in for additional security at a gala in Baltimore. He needed to leave right away so he could be there by tomorrow morning to scope out the location and meet up with the rest of the team. He should be home in two days.”

Lovely. He’ll return right about when I’m due to start my next shift. Now I’m bummed and don’t know what to do with myself. I look over at my sister and notice her eyes sparkle with mischief. “What?”

“I think you should get out of your pajamas and slip into a cute dress. Let’s go dancing!” she says excitedly. “Maybe we will meet some cute guys!”

I don’t really want to go dancing, but I haven’t spent any quality time with my sister in quite a while. “Fine. I’ll go get dolled up and be your wingman!”

She bounces giddily, “This is going to be so much fun! I can’t wait!” Daphne takes off running for her room, not giving me a chance to change my mind. I slowly trudge up the stairs to get ready, trying my best not to dread the evening’s festivities.

Thirty minutes later, we’re heading out the door wearing cute cocktail dresses. Mine is a green bandage dress with spaghetti straps, fitted waist, and falls to mid-thigh. I’m wearing gold heels and jewelry to accent my ensemble. With my hair up in a fun but messy bun, I look like I’m ready to dance the night away, even though my heart isn’t in it.

Daphne always looks ready to go out, but even more so with the dark burgundy strapless dress she’s wearing paired with cute, silver peep-toe wedges. She grabs my hand and practically drags me from our house to a waiting Uber. As soon as the doors are shut, and she knows she has me trapped, she says, “Now, let’s go find you a man!”



Thankfully, Daphne didn't try to set me up with anyone while we were out, and we simply enjoyed ourselves and spent time on the dance floor. She knew that if she did, I would have called one of our siblings to pick me up and bring me home, effectively ruining the night for her.

The next morning, Daphne wanted to go shopping and invited me to tag along. Loathing the idea of walking around a mall for hours on end, I declined. I would much rather spend the day doing something physical and productive to burn off my pent-up energy and keep my mind off missing my best friend.

Lo and behold, I had the perfect excuse when my brothers asked if I wanted to join them at Norman's Rockwall for some indoor rock climbing. I jumped at the chance, much to my sister's dismay. The activity wore me out enough that I slept through most of the night, feeling refreshed for my 24-hour shift this morning.

The smell of bacon wafts in the air, along with the scent of freshly-brewed coffee. Now alert and hungry, I make my way to the kitchen and stop in my tracks to admire the vision in front of me. Carter is at the stove shirtless and barefoot, wearing nothing but low-slung sweatpants, every muscle in his back clearly defined. It's not the first time I've seen him shirtless, but the sight never gets old and only better as time goes on.

"Take a picture. It will last longer," he teases, somehow aware that I've been standing there and silently ogling him. He

doesn't look at me as he continues to pan-fry the bacon with one hand while simultaneously scrambling eggs with the other.

Click.

At the sound of a camera shutter, he turns around to face me and sees the phone's camera pointed directly at him. "Did you seriously just take a picture of me?" he asks, dumbfounded.

"What can I say? It was a good suggestion." He chuckles while shaking his head in disbelief. I enjoy the way his soft curls bounce when he does it. I want to run my fingers through his hair but manage to control the urge. I don't think it will go over well if I start petting him like he's my dog.

"When did you get home? And how did your event go? Daphne mentioned you had a last-minute job for some gala in Baltimore."

"I did. The gala was for a charity that helps women and children who had been rescued from human trafficking rings. The event had more RSVPs than they had expected and required additional security. Our company was already contracted for the job, and half my team was already there, but Ben and Ethan sent the other half to go down and help."

Carter starts plating our breakfast when he continues, "I don't know how much you know about Ethan and Amelia's story, but the charity is near and dear to their heart. It's run by one of the women Ben and Ethan rescued while saving Amelia from human traffickers. Shining Knight provides security pro bono for this event so that more money can go to the foundation and support the cause."

I nod. Ethan's wife, Amelia, runs a premier matchmaking service in New York City, and we hired her a few years ago to help our oldest sister, Callie, find love. She's been a family friend ever since. She once shared the exciting and almost unbelievable details of her story and how she and Ethan came to be together. After listening to her talk about everything that had happened, I joked that it would make for a good book. I had no idea she would take my suggestion seriously and have a friend write a novel about it. It's titled *Matchmaking the Undercover Agent*, and a copy of the book is sitting on the dresser in my bedroom.

"I'm glad you're back. How long will you be in town for this time?"

He shrugs his shoulders. "You know how it is. We've been pretty busy lately, but there are five teams now, which should give us more time off between jobs. For now, I have one job scheduled tonight at a corporate event in the city and the following two days off before our team meeting on Wednesday."

I smile. As long as he doesn't get called into work for another last-minute job, our schedules will align perfectly for us to hang out. Maybe we can have our Friday movie night on a Tuesday.

I look at the time and realize that I'm going to be late if I don't get a move on. I scarf down my breakfast and guzzle my juice. It's almost 7:30 in the morning, and I have to be at the

station by eight. Finishing my meal in record time, I hop up from my chair and scramble to get ready.

When I enter the kitchen dressed in my uniform, I see that Carter is washing the dishes. “Thank you for breakfast,” I say, giving him a quick peck on the cheek. Grabbing my backpack and keys, I bolt for the door. Instead of saying goodbye, I yell, “And thanks for doing the dishes! I owe you one!”

I’m almost down the steps of our front porch when I hear Carter shout back, “You owe me 27, Leanna! I’ve been keeping count!”

Chapter Six

Carter

Shortly after Leanna left for work this morning, looking ridiculously adorable in her flustered state, I finished cleaning up and got ready for work. The drive to the conference location took two hours because of traffic on the George Washington Bridge. When I finally arrived, I met up with three members of our six-person team. Patrick, Savannah, and Jerry worked together in the FBI, along with Jessie and Roger, who are currently working a protection detail in upstate New York.

All of them, along with my boss, Ethan Knight, were an undercover and tight-knit unit in the Bureau for six years. When Ethan decided to give up his career and start a protection company with his childhood best friend, Ben Cooper, the rest of the team joined him. I've always felt like an outsider among them, even though they have never excluded me or done anything to make me feel that way. It's due to my own personal insecurities and my awareness of the

fact that the only reason I'm even here is because of my friendship with Ben.

I met Ben in basic training 12 years ago, and we became instant friends. Even though our jobs in the military were entirely different and took us our separate ways, we always managed to keep in touch. I left the service as soon as my four years were up to finish school and get my business degree while Ben had gone on to be an Army Ranger. I always envied the excitement of his job, but having grown up in a ramshackle of a house and living on the brink of poverty, a steady paycheck and stability were more in my speed.

Two years after I returned to civilian life, an incident occurred overseas that forced Ben to medically retire from the Army. He ended up at his father's billion-dollar company and asked me if I'd like to be his assistant. For four years, we worked together and climbed the corporate ladder until Ben reached the top and became the CEO of Cooper's Custom Cars. As the operations officer, my COO position was very lucrative, and I never thought in a million years that I would be willing to give it up. That is until Ben left his dad's company and asked if I'd like to join his and Ethan's start-up.

I said "Yes," and that decision changed my life forever. Even though it was supposed to be a lateral move for me, holding the same title at Shining Knight, I was required to thoroughly "understand" the services we would be offering so I could talk knowledgeably to our prospective clients. I had no idea it would mean becoming a private investigator, maintaining proficiency with a gun and other weapons, and learning Krav

Maga and other basic fighting techniques. The only thing is, when I started the training, I was hooked and never wanted to sit behind a desk again.

So here I am, a protection specialist instead of a corporate executive. I have zero regrets about my career choice, especially since Ben kept me at my previous salary. Now, I have the stability I need and the adventure I desire.

“Hey Carter, over here!” shouts Savannah. I see her waving her hand at me from across the grand ballroom where the event will be held. I give her a two-finger salute to indicate that I see her. Savannah is a beautiful woman with long, strawberry-blond hair, large green eyes, and porcelain smooth skin. She’s tall, lean, and fit, giving most models a run for their money. She told me once that she competed in pageants while growing up, the prize money funding her college tuition. After graduation, she vowed she would never compete again. She said it was her mother’s passion, not hers. Savannah is quirky, fun, and incredibly smart—often underestimated, which is perfect for undercover work.

I look at my watch, trying to determine if I’m late. Normally, I’m the first to arrive at a meet-up location, but this time, I’m the last.

“Don’t worry, Rookie. You’re right on time,” Jerry says, using the nickname I abhor. I’ll never tell him that because then he would only use it more often when my goal is for him to use it less. Jerry is a short and stinky guy with blonde hair that’s almost white and green eyes that can pierce you with

one glare. He's the grumpy one of the bunch and rarely smiles. In fact, I don't think I've seen one on him yet.

"What's been done so far?" I ask, ready to get to work. I scan the room, immediately identifying four primary exits that lead to the mezzanine on the other side of the doors.

"Patrick is walking the perimeter right now, looking for hiding spots and vantage points for a shooter," Jerry tells me.

"I'm about to scout out the emergency escape routes," Savannah chimes in.

"Is there someone specific attending that we need to focus our attention toward? I don't recall reading anything about that at our intel brief," I say.

"No. But these guys are a bunch of Wall Street types and hedge fund managers. People tend to get upset when their money disappears and line the pockets of those like the attendees. If any of them have enemies—especially after the recent market slump—there's a possibility there might be some blowback action. I just want to be extra prepared," Jerry explains.

We review key details and talk with the event coordinator, Elise. While we're chatting and finding out if there have been any changes to the itinerary or additional information not previously disclosed, a new arrival grabs my attention. I smile as Leanna's sister, Callie, walks in with her partner, Brando. She's Shining Knight's lead arson investigator, and Brando is her newly-acquired, bomb-sniffing German Shepherd.

She walks up and introduces herself to Elise. “I’m Callie, the arson specialist. My dog, Brando, is trained to detect bombs and other components that can be mixed to make bombs. We’re just going to take a quick stroll and secure the location from that particular threat.”

Elise’s eyes widen. “I had no idea something like that was even a possibility. When we hired Shining Knight, I thought I was getting a couple of rent-a-cops to make the participants feel safe.”

Patrick saunters towards us, wearing a crisp, dark, tailored suit that’s our standard uniform for a job like this. “We don’t want you to just *feel* safe, Ma’am. We want you to *be* safe. Shining Knight at your service,” he says in his deep, superhero voice. Patrick gives her a megawatt smile and bows with a flourish.

Elise giggles and blushes at Patrick’s display, and I have to turn my back to hide my laughter at his flirting attempts. He’s tall with a muscular physique that always has the ladies swooning. He has brown hair that looks red in the sun, rugged features, and light blue eyes. I’ve overheard Jessie and Savannah describe his eye color as aquamarine and his body like a Viking.

The women often flock around my teammate, slipping their phone numbers into his pocket despite his lack of interest. He may flirt, but I have never seen him go out with anyone or accept any of their advances. I once asked Patrick why he

doesn't date, and he deflected by saying, "Ask me again when the pot can no longer call the kettle black."

"Point taken," I had said, letting the matter drop.

The empty ballroom transforms into a lavish dining experience during the next few hours. Over 50 tables are set—each seating ten people—decorated with black tablecloths topped with red and white carnations in crystal vase centerpieces. The overhead chandeliers are dimmed just enough to create a relaxed atmosphere but not so much that our vision is diminished.

I hear Jerry's voice through my earpiece, "Carter, you'll be standing in the corner of the northeast quadrant of the room, between the two potted trees."

"Roger," I acknowledge, while I immediately proceed to the specified location.

"His name is Jerry," Savannah teases. "Roger is busy with another gig upstate."

"That joke never gets old, does it?" I ask.

"Never," declares Patrick while Jerry grumbles, "After the second time I heard it more than a decade ago and in the 27,312 times since."

"Don't be such a curmudgeon, Jerry," Savannah jokes.

"And don't be lazy!" Jerry retorts, annoyed. "Let's stop dawdling and get to work, people!" I hear him clap twice from across the room in a "chop-chop" fashion.

I settle into my position and stand statuesque for the next three hours, my eyes continually scanning the crowd. There are a lot of people here, especially if you include the catering staff and servers who arrived, bringing the number of occupants in the room to around 650. We focus on our respective quadrant and notify the others if someone looks suspicious.

This event is one of the rare times when we don't have a team member roaming about as part of the crowd. Elise said she wanted us to be "out of sight, out of mind" so the guests didn't feel uncomfortable.

"Carter, do you know anyone here?" Savannah asks quietly through our comms.

"Not that I'm aware of, why?"

"A woman in my area keeps glancing your way, and I don't just mean in your general direction. She is staring at you like she's trying to figure out if she knows you."

"It's possible. My degree is in business, and I've been to several events like this in the past with Ben. Maybe she recognizes me from one of those. Does she look upset or threatening in any way?"

"No, she doesn't. But she's not one of the guests, Carter. She's one of the servers. I just wanted to warn you in case she comes over. You might be a target."

"Rog...Thank you for the heads up," I tell her, changing my response at the last minute. The last thing I want to do is get

into the whole “Roger” thing again.

I guess the woman Savannah had been watching decided I wasn't who she thought I was because no one had approached me by the night's end.

Elise is chatting with Jerry, shaking his hand, and smiling broadly at him. I expect to see him return the smile, but he doesn't, keeping his frown firmly in place. When he notices all of us staring at him, he says, “Show's over! Go home, get some rest, and enjoy your day off. I'll see you all at 10:00 a.m. sharp on Wednesday for our team meeting.”

“One day, Jerry, a woman will appear out of nowhere and turn your world upside down and your frown along with it. I hope to get a front-row seat so I can watch the fireworks!” Savannah's cackle can be heard loud and clear over comms, forcing us all to wince.

“You and me both,” I mumble. Patrick's guffaw and Jerry's scowl made it readily apparent that I had voiced my thoughts for everyone to hear. Jerry narrows his eyes at me before turning on his heel and walking away without another word.

“Wait for me, Jer! I'll walk with you!” Savannah shouts. I don't think he hears her at first because he keeps going, but then he stops and waits for her to catch up. Patrick comes and stands next to me, still entertained by the situation.

“You ready to go? The last of the guests have left, and we're officially done with the contract. All that remains is for the staff to clean up.”

“Yeah. It’s been a long couple of weeks, and a few days of some R&R sound great,” I tell him.

“I think Ben and Ethan plan to give us a full week off and allow some of the newer teams to step up and get more experience. We’ll get the final word on Wednesday.”

A week off would be nice. It would give me that chance to catch up with my friends and maybe go hiking with Leanna if she’s up for it.

Patrick and I walk across the sky bridge that connects the conference center to the parking garage. Patrick’s ride is parked about seven cars closer to the elevator than mine, but he doesn’t get in it when we both realize someone is standing by my vehicle, waiting for me.

“That’s the server that Savannah was warning you about. She’s the one who kept checking you out all night,” he whispers out of the corner of his mouth. “She doesn’t look like she could hurt a fly. Do you think she’s dangerous?”

“As dangerous as they come. She’ll destroy you in a nanosecond if you give her the chance,” I tell him, my voice low. His posture changes from casual to alert instantly as he reaches for the gun in his holster. I place my hand on his arm to stop him. “It’s okay. I meant it figuratively.”

Understanding dawns on my friend, and he says, “I’ll give you a backup if you need it. Just say the word.”

“Thank you, but I’ve got this. I’ll see you Wednesday.” I wait for him to leave before I cover the remaining few feet to

my truck and address the woman. “How did you know which vehicle was mine?”

She laughs the same tinkling laugh I remember growing up. “Come on, Carter, you’ve always been a Ford guy ever since you fixed up the Ranger your dad gave you for your 16th birthday. There aren’t many cars left in the garage with the guest pass in the dashboard, and only three are a Ford. Two of them are sedans, and the other a truck. It wasn’t hard to guess that the F-350 was yours.”

I grunt in displeasure, especially with how easily she figured me out. My job requires me to blend in, not stand apart.

“Oh, don’t be like that. I know you better than anybody. Or at least I used to,” she says flirtatiously.

I don’t have time to play games with her and just want to get home and spend time with my best friend. “What do you want, Melissa? You took everything of mine when you left. Now I have nothing left to give.”

Chapter Seven

Leanna

I arrive at the station this morning with one minute to spare. I'm the type of person who prefers to be early rather than late, always feeling like I'm a step behind if I'm the last to show up.

"Cutting it kind of close, aren't you?" Trey asks. "We started taking bets on whether or not you were going to make it on time."

"You guys and your incessant need to bet on everything!" I stow my gear and then beeline it to the kitchen to grab a cup of coffee. "Who won, anyway?" I ask while pouring myself a cup of the heavenly brew.

"Depends on which bet you're talking about?" he chuckles.

"There's more than one? What else is there?" My face scrunches in confusion because no matter how hard I try, I can't think of anything going on right now that is worth losing money over.

“Who sent you the flowers, of course,” he says, as if it was a no-brainer.

“Someone sent me flowers? Who?” I ask. It’s not my birthday or an anniversary of any kind, and there isn’t a special occasion coming up that would warrant flowers. Valentine’s Day was last week, and I don’t have a boyfriend, so I can rule out that as an option. I’m completely flummoxed.

“Wanna get in on the bet and guess before you open the card and do the big reveal for us all?” my brother asks as he walks into the room. “Nice of you to join us, by the way. I was starting to get worried.”

“That’s so sw...” I begin to say when Trey interrupts me.

“She arrived at 7:59 this morning, which means you get the pot! You finally win one, Bash!” Clearly, my sibling was more worried about whether or not he would win the prize pool than about my well-being. My brother takes half the money and puts it into the jar for charity and then puts the other half into the jar for the coffee and donut fund. *Okay. I don’t feel quite so bad about him betting on me if it’s for a good cause.*

Thirty burly men are waiting for me in the engine bay, hoping to find out who the flowers are from. This whole thing would have been embarrassing enough if it had happened later on my shift, but I get the added bonus of having two shifts place bets since the flower delivery occurred at shift change. *Yeah, me!*

Callie’s husband, Callum, sidles up next to me and whispers, “My money is on Carter. I’ve got my fingers crossed that he

finally figured things out. You know that Callie and I have been rooting for both of you since the beginning.” I nod and lean my head against his shoulder in silent acceptance.

“I guess the flowers could be from Carter. He thought I was sick last week and then had to leave for Baltimore. Maybe they’re ‘Get Well’ flowers that arrived a little late.” Even as the words leave my mouth, I know they aren’t true. Carter would have said something this morning. Making breakfast for me is his way of taking care of me. Sending flowers? Not so much. Carter’s ‘love language’ is acts of kindness, not giving gifts.

“Open the card!” someone yells.

I reach for the small envelope attached to the beautiful bouquet of wildflowers and read it out loud.

Beautiful Angel,

My life belongs to you, and I want to give you whatever your heart desires.

Love,

Your knight in shining armor

I feel Callum’s arms slide around my shoulders in support and give a little squeeze, a broad grin etched on his face.

My brother is linked arm and arm with Trey, dancing some kind of hoedown while a few other guys are doing their versions of a touchdown dance. The other half of the firefighters are groaning in disappointment. “What? Why is everyone so excited?”

“Isn’t it obvious? The note is signed, ‘Your knight in shining armor.’ Carter works for Shining Knight Protection Services.”

I shake my head. I don’t want to get my hopes up, but my gut says that Carter didn’t send the flowers. “It’s purely a coincidence. I’m sure of it. And it’s not like I can call him and ask, ‘Hey, did you finally realize you’re madly in love with me and send me flowers to show me?’ I saw him less than an hour ago, and he said nothing.” Callum types away on his phone, holding up a finger for me to wait momentarily.

A text message arrives, and he reads it quickly, pocketing his cell afterward. “Callie says you should take the flowers home and thank Carter for them when you see him next. He will either confirm or deny. She says if he confirms, that’s great news, and about time that boy got his butt in gear. If he denies it, then it might make him jealous enough that he steps up.” He laughs at his wife, but I seriously consider her idea. It could work.

“That’s not a bad idea, but I don’t want the flowers getting destroyed by any of the heathens I have to work with today. Would you be willing to drop them off at my place on your way home? You have a key and can let yourself in since Carter should have already left for work by the time you get there.”

Callum agrees to help me out after announcing to everyone that the jury is still out on who sent the flowers. When he leaves, taking the beautiful bouquet with him, I’m left wondering who could have sent them. Is it possible that Carter is ready to move our friendship to the next level? Or do I have

a secret admirer? If the latter is true, I hope it doesn't stay a secret for long. I've never been one for surprises.



The first half of my shift went smoothly, especially once the shift change was over and the place emptied out. We had a few calls after that, but it was surprisingly slow. I helped with some minor maintenance on the ambulance and a quick hose down to keep it looking pristine. After that, I managed to get in a bit of rack time. When working 24-hour shifts, it's essential to nap when you can.

A little after midnight, the lights and horns started going off in our bunk room, indicating it was a paramedic call only. Trey and I are on our way in less than two minutes, heading fast toward the assisted living facility a mile and a half from the station. There's not a lot of traffic at this hour, for which I'm grateful.

"It's an alert from one of the medical emergency transponders that most of the residents wear. The man's name is Halbert Jenkins. Age 82. According to the nursing staff who are with him right now, he's suffering from a myocardial infarction."

I start going through my mental checklist of the items in my bag I'll need, along with the defibrillator paddles. "Has the patient lost consciousness?" I ask. It takes Trey a few seconds

to answer since he is in the back and busy prepping the IV fluids we'll need while on the phone with the dispatcher.

“Yes,” he says matter of fact.

A nurse is waiting at the front doors to grant us entrance into the complex. Exiting the vehicle quickly, we roll the gurney with our bag and kit to room 132. Surprisingly, this is the first time I haven't felt the jitters during a life-threatening event. Maybe I'm finally getting my adrenaline rushes under control.

“This way,” the nurse says as we hurry after her.

We race down the hall until we reach the open room where several people are milling about. They scatter as soon as they see us, giving us the room we need to perform our duties. One of the nurses is still performing CPR while tears stream down her cheeks.

“Please move,” I say, kind but firm. As soon as she complies, Trey and I get to work. After a few hits with the paddles, I'm able to restart his heart. Time is of the essence, and we need to get him out of here, stat. His pulse is still weak, and his breathing is shallow.

“We're going to do everything we can for you, Mr. Jenkins,” I say as we push him down the hallway.

“You better!” says a middle-aged man heading in our direction and blocking our departure.

“How about you start by moving out of the way so we can get this man to the hospital?” says Trey, exasperated. The man

squeezes in the door frame of another resident, giving us barely enough room to squeeze by.

“That’s my father! I’m coming with you!” he demands from behind us as we load Mr. Jenkins into the ambulance. I start hooking up the IV lines while Trey has to forcibly push Halbert’s son far enough away so he can close the doors.

“We are going to the West River Memorial ER. You can meet us there. You will NOT be riding along in the ambulance.”

Halbert’s son looks me straight in the eye, “My father better be alive when I get there, or you’ll pay the price!” He turns and stomps away, presumably to get in his car to follow us.

Trey and I talk the entire ride, discussing Mr. Jenkins’ vitals. When my patient flatlines less than a mile from the hospital, I ready the paddles to shock him again. Unfortunately, by the time the ambulance doors open and Mr. Jenkins is rushed inside, I have yet to restart his heart.

“I’ll be right back,” Trey informs me. “Are you going to be okay here for a minute, Baby girl?” I nod, numb to everything around me and lost in my thoughts. Trey waits for another few seconds to ensure that I’m fine and rushes into the emergency room to confer with the nurses and pass along any pertinent information. This is the first time I’ve lost a patient and the first time I didn’t get the tingles. Was that God’s way of warning me that there wasn’t anything I could do?

Remembering the words my father had said to me on my first day as an EMT, “...there will come a time—no matter

what you do and how hard you try—it won't be enough to save someone. It won't be because you lack the skills but because it's simply not *His* will for you to do so." The words bring me a modicum of comfort but don't take away the sting of loss and failure. I wonder if I had done anything different, would Mr. Jenkins still be with us?

While I'm standing by the ambulance in a daze, tears streaming unbidden down my cheeks, Halbert's son shows up. He takes one look at the expression on my face and already knows the answer to his question before he asks it.

"Did you let my father die?" he questions, seething. Pointing a finger in my face, he continues to criticize me. "You had one job and couldn't even do that!" He steps into my personal space and leans in to whisper one word, his tone venomous.

"Karma."

Before he can say anything else, he's yanked back by Trey, and I let out a breath I didn't realize I had been holding.

"That's enough! I'm truly sorry for your loss, sir, but that does not give you the right to talk to my EMT in a threatening manner. We did everything possible for your father, and Leanna is not to blame."

"Leanna, huh? I guess we'll see what the lawyers say. By the time I'm through with you..."

"Get in the vehicle, Leanna," Trey says, interrupting the man's threat. I do as I'm told, walking backward to maintain eye contact until I'm safely locked inside. Our gazes stay

connected in the sideview mirror until Trey pulls out of the circular drive. A shiver runs down my spine, and another tear falls down my cheek.

Shortly after we arrive back at the station, my parents show up. Trey and my brother had spoken to them about all that had transpired. As Captain, Sebastian has the authority to send me home, but I choose to stay. Every fiber of my being wants to go to my family home, get in my footie pajamas, and have my parents comfort me. But I need the respect of my team more, and staying would go a long way in accomplishing that. As a woman working in a man's world, sometimes I feel like I have to hide the softer side of myself to be accepted. This is one of those moments.

Sebastian, my parents, and Trey join me in the kitchen, where we pray for God's comfort and peace, not only for me but for the family of Mr. Halbert Jenkins. My family was visibly upset when they learned of the threat Halbert's son had made against me, but they also know people say things in anger or despair they don't really mean. Hopefully, that's the case in this situation.

"Make sure you keep a close eye on my girl," my father says. Trey and Sebastian nod in unison, and I feel the noose tightening around my neck. They aren't going to let me out of their sight until they're sure there's nothing to worry about.

"I'll keep a close eye on her as well, Mr. Arbaroa," says a voice behind me. I turn around to see Carter standing there

looking ready for a fight, his chest heaving as if he's run from the city to get here. "Of that, you can be certain."

Chapter Eight

Carter

Melissa didn't have a chance to say much at our encounter in the parking garage because I had received a text from Trey telling me that Leanna had lost her first patient and needed a friend. I immediately clicked the key fob for my truck and explained to her that I needed to go.

Melissa touched my arm to stop me. "I owe you an apology, and I'd like the opportunity to explain if you'll let me," she said, sounding as sweet as I remember and equally as sincere.

"It's been a long time, and it's in the past. Don't worry about it," I told her, trying to play it off. I just wanted to get home and away from there.

"Carter Zane Andrews! I will stand in front of your truck until you give me a chance to explain. Otherwise, you'll be forced to run me over."

"I see you are as manipulative as ever," I said, slamming my door and walking back over to her. "This is not the time nor the place to have this discussion, and I have somewhere urgent

I need to be. If you really want to apologize and explain, you can meet me at a coffee shop on Wednesday in Newark at 7:30 a.m. The place is called #JavaGoodTime and is on the corner of Fourth and Main. Be there or not, I don't care."

"How do I know you'll show up?" she asked.

My face heated in annoyance at having my integrity challenged, requiring me to take three deep breaths to calm down enough before saying, "I am not the one who broke promises. I didn't then, and I don't now. If that's not good enough for you, then don't bother with an apology. It's not needed."

"Fine. I'll see you on Wednesday." Out of the corner of my eye, I barely noticed the cute smile and flirty pose she tried to flash me, but my attention was wholly focused on someone else—someone far more important to me.

As soon as Melissa was clear of my truck, I pulled out of the parking space and sped away. On the drive home, a call came through from Sebastian.

"How is she?" was the first thing I asked when the call connected.

"She's trying to be tough. I was going to send her home, but she insisted on staying here at the station. I hoped that when our parents showed up, she would cave and decide to go with them. None of the guys here would judge her for losing a patient and having an emotional reaction. I'm positive that's why she's trying to put up a good front."

I didn't necessarily agree with him. While neither of *us* would judge her, it doesn't mean that everyone else feels the same way. There are a few arrogant guys who would razz her about it. "I'm on my way and should be there in less than half an hour."

"You aren't leaving work early, are you? I didn't mean to take you away from an event," Sebastian says apologetically.

"Nah, we had already wrapped up, and the timing couldn't have been more perfect. Tell me what happened."

He did. He told me about the emergency call, the loss incurred, and the threats that followed. I typed the name Halbert Jenkins into my computer system, and his basic information populated quickly. I scrolled through the information on my dashboard screen that is linked to my computer system.

"Halbert Jenkins has one son. The son's name is Mark Jenkins, age 56. His wife is deceased, and he has two children, Amanda and Braydon. He's a lawyer—disbarred eight years ago—currently employed with an insurance company in their Human Resources department."

"You got all that from typing his name? I need to download whatever search engine you use because that was like Google on steroids!"

I chuckled at my friend's ability to find humor in any situation. "It does come in handy to have the best toys at my disposal."

“Thanks for the update. I’ll pass the information on, and we’ll see you when you get here.” He hung up, and I put the pedal to the metal. This wasn’t a crisis situation by most people’s standards. But then again, no one outside of Leanna’s family knows her like I do. The only tears I’ve ever seen her shed were from laughter, not distress. For her to cry openly and have tear stains on her cheeks means this is a code 1 best-friend emergency.

It felt like forever had passed by the time I pulled up to the station, when, in fact, I arrived in record time. The firehouse was eerily quiet since almost everyone was upstairs and asleep at the early hour. I followed the voices echoing from down the hall and stopped when I overheard the family praying. I bowed my head along with them. When they were done, I resumed my trek in silence to avoid interrupting.

I entered the room after Leanna’s father, Nicholas, told the men around the table, “Make sure you keep a close eye on my girl.” Sebastian and Trey both bobbed their heads in agreement.

The Arbaroa family isn’t alone in their need to see Leanna safe from harm, so I spoke up and said, “I’ll keep a close eye on her as well, Mr. Arbaroa.” Leanna jumped at the sound of my voice and turned to face me. When our eyes locked, I continued, “Of that, you can be certain.”



Leanna didn't leave her shift to go home, but with only a few hours remaining, it wasn't a difficult decision for me to stay with her and keep her company. I was far too wound up to sleep anyway. Daphne texted me before she left for work this morning after noticing that my truck wasn't in the drive. I gave her the bullet points of the events that had transpired and told her to keep a lookout for anyone suspicious.

"It's probably too early for any type of retribution from Mark Jenkins, but it's better to err on the side of caution. That means setting the alarms, even if you're home." I'm grateful that Daphne doesn't argue with me. However, her next statement raised my hackles.

"It's nice to see you finally admit your feelings for Leanna. The flowers were a nice touch, especially since you know that wildflowers are her favorite. They smell wonderful."

"What are you talking about, Daphne? What flowers?"

Silence on the other end reigned for nearly a minute before she said, "You know what? Never mind. Forget I said anything, okay?"

"Daphne, please explain!"

"Gotta run! It's a long drive to work, and I should get on the road before traffic becomes unbearable. Toodles!" She hung up without saying anything else. I continued to stare at my phone like it would give me the answers to the world's problems or at least tell me what just happened.

Thankfully, not many of the firefighters knew about what happened to Leanna and Trey since they had all been racked out. It's always a blessing when it's a slow night for emergency services, but it was fortuitous for everyone involved that last night was exceptionally slow. We managed to leave at her shift change without Leanna receiving any looks of sympathy, but it didn't mean it was the same for me.

Once everyone managed to get over their shock that I hadn't been the one to send the flowers and that she had a secret admirer, their looks turned into ones of pity.

I see the bouquet the moment we enter the house, sitting prominently on our coffee table. Leanna looks at the flowers, then at me. That's when I realize that she had also entertained the idea that the flowers might be from me.

"Why did everyone think I sent you those?" I ask, pointing to the monstrosity sitting in the place where I normally rest my feet.

Leanna doesn't answer my question, only hands me the card and says, "I'm going to bed. Thanks for being there for me, Carter."

I take the small envelope from her delicate fingers, watching silently as she heads upstairs, shoulders slumped in exhaustion. After hearing her door close, I open up the card and read its contents. I understand now why everyone thought I might have sent them with the whole "Your knight in shining armor" bit, but anyone who knows me should also know that sending flowers isn't my style. I would rather take a woman

on a beautiful hike and declare my feelings outright, not hide behind a note and play mind games with her.

With everyone thinking that Leanna and I belong together and are headed for the altar, it might be time for me to start backing away and putting some distance between us. The only reason why I haven't done so thus far is because Leanna isn't the one putting on the pressure. It's everyone else.

I'll be keeping an eye out for not only this Mark Jenkins character but also whoever is sending anonymous gifts. Flowers are innocent enough, but I've seen how quickly things can escalate when an admirer doesn't get the attention that they seek. Stalkers and overly zealous fans are the reason why Shining Knight was established in the first place.

If anyone is going to be her "Shining Knight," it's going to be me.

Chapter Nine

Leanna

The following two days flew by, Carter never straying too far from my side. Like any best friend, he helped occupy my mind by keeping me busy with physical activity. We slept through most of the first day since we were exhausted from having been up for more than 24 hours straight, but we did end up doing a movie marathon later that night.

During one particular movie, a character dies on the way to the hospital, and the paramedics try everything they can to save him. The scene hit a little too close to home, and I wept until the credits rolled. Carter held me through it all, never complaining once. Not even when I left a snail trail of snot on his shirt from my ugly crying. My tears dried up quickly when he stood up and removed the offending article, walking upstairs to throw it in the hamper. Imagine my disappointment when he came back downstairs wearing a clean shirt.

After a nap, Carter and I went to Norman's Rockwall for an intense climb on one of the expert-level walls, followed by greasy burgers at the diner across the street. Despite our

fatigue, we drove an hour west of Newark and explored a quaint Amish town in Pennsylvania. I bought seven types of homemade jam and a large jar of apple butter that I didn't need. Carter bought four handmade Adirondack chairs for the backyard.

Tired didn't begin to describe our state of being by the time we got home from our adventure. Neither of us had the energy to cook, so we ate cold, leftover pizza from the night before. It was my turn to clean up, which is why I made sure that we used paper plates this time.

Before turning in for the night, I slipped my arms around Carter's waist and gave him a hearty squeeze. "Thank you for everything," I said. "Not just for keeping me safe from potential threats and my runaway thoughts, but for being my friend and always there for me."

I begin to pull away but feel his arms tighten and hold me firmly in place. When I look up at him, and our eyes lock, I see something in his gaze I had always hoped for but never expected. Desire.

My eyes slowly close as he leans forward, the anticipation building in my gut.

Bang!

Instead of our lips touching, Carter spins around and places himself between me and the threat coming through the front door. He reaches for the gun in the concealed holster at the small of his back but stops when Daphne falls while coming through the front door. We both rush over to help her.

“Are you alright?” I scream, watching her body shake. As soon as I turn her over to check for any injury, I realize she’s laughing.

“I’m so sorry. I didn’t mean to make such an entrance,” she says, sitting up. She gathers up her papers and belongings that were scattered when she fell. “The key sometimes gets stuck, but my hands were full when the door gave way. I couldn’t stop myself from falling.”

I help pick everything up while Carter gives Daphne a hand and gets her to her feet. “I’ll have the lock oiled by the time you both get home from work,” he says. “But if you guys are good, I’m going to head to bed.” We both nod, but Carter avoids looking at me as he turns to leave. “Goodnight,” he yells from the top of the stairs.

“What was that all about? I didn’t interrupt anything, did I?” my sister asks in a whisper.

“Nothing. I thought we might have had a moment, but evidently, I was wrong.” I wave my hand in the direction of his disappearing act.

Daphne knows better than to pry, so she leaves it alone and changes the subject. “You look like you are ready to fall asleep standing up. Why don’t you go to bed, too? You have a long shift tomorrow and should be well-rested for it. But if you decide you need to call off work, I might be tempted to do the same so we could play hooky.”

“I didn’t ask for time off. You know me better than that. But you’re right. I need sleep, pronto. Besides, we leave for our ski

trip next week and have five full days together to hang out and get ourselves into trouble,” I tell her with a wink.

“I’m going to hold you to that, Leanna. I plan to get us into all the best kinds of it!” Daphne says, clapping her hands excitedly. I blow her a kiss and go to my room.

I kick off my slippers and crawl into bed, staring at my ceiling and trying to find random patterns within the paint strokes. It sounds like a weird thing to do, but it’s surprisingly relaxing, and it’s my version of counting sheep. Unfortunately, no matter how long I lay there and stare, I can’t get Carter and the “almost kiss” out of my head.

Was I so deliriously tired that I dreamed the whole thing? Did I misread a different emotion from Carter, projecting my own desires instead? All I can definitively say is that I would have welcomed the kiss while Carter was content to run from it.



The following day, I woke up to an empty house. Daphne had left early since her commute is well over an hour, upwards of two depending on traffic. On several occasions, I’ve suggested that she rent a room down south for the next six months while working on the project. She can always come home on the weekends to spend time with her family. The

money she would pay for rent would easily be offset by what she spends on gas and tolls. The last time we spoke about it, she said she would consider it.

As for Carter, I expected to see him either making breakfast or coming back from a run. Looking out the window, I see that his truck is not in its usual parking spot. I don't give it much thought, figuring he might have gone to the gym for a strength training workout.

By the time I'm ready for work, I have plenty of time left to stop and get pastries and coffee for the guys at the station. I call #JavaGoodTime and order a coffee traveler and two dozen muffins in various flavors. They thank me for my order and tell me that it will be ready for pick up in half an hour.

It's about a 30-minute walk to the coffee shop and only a block past the station. Rather than driving, I bundle up to make the trek and enjoy the invigoratingly brisk air. The burn of the cold in my lungs makes me feel alive. It's the only proof I have that I'm still breathing when the world stops spinning, and I see Carter through the window, sitting at a table with a petite little blonde.

My heart hurts when I see them laugh over something, and the woman runs her finger up his arm in an overly familiar way. The only saving grace to the situation is that Carter quickly loses his smile and pulls his arm away from her when she does it. However, he doesn't leave, nor does he cross his arms over his chest in his typical "closed-off" position.

Instead, he leans back and places his arm over the back of the empty chair, a sign of openness regarding body language.

I'm not one to shy away from awkward encounters, so I pull myself together and walk inside. I stand in line and pretend I don't see Carter because, let's face it, I don't go looking for awkward encounters either. With my back turned, I can only hear snippets of their conversation.

"You were my first love...hurt deeply...now that you're back," Carter says to the woman.

"It's been a long...both so young...You asked me to marry you," she responds. Her last words cause me to choke on my saliva, and the person behind me starts patting my back as if that will help.

"I'm... *gasp*...fine...*gasp*...thank you." I smile at the gentleman who had been trying to be a good Samaritan when my gaze connects with Carter's. His eyes beg for a chance to explain, so I walk over and introduce myself like I would with any of his friends.

"Hi, I'm Leanna, Carter's roommate," I hold my hand out in greeting. The woman arches an eyebrow at Carter before she smiles at me and shakes it.

"I'm Melissa. His fiancée," she says.

"Ex," Carter quickly chimes in. "Melissa *was* my fiancée, and now she'll be leaving," he says, visibly upset.

Trying to hide my hurt from him keeping such a monumental secret from me, I put up my hands and take a step back in

retreat. With a smile firmly in place, I tell them, “Oh, you don’t have to go on my account. I’m just picking up coffee and muffins for everyone at the fire station. It should be ready any minute, and then Hi-Ho! Hi-Ho! it’s off to work I go!” I swing my arms while marching in place to punctuate my statement. Carter smirks at my antics, but Melissa looks at me like I’m the dirt beneath her shoe.

“Leanna! Your order is up!” yells Barry, the Barista.

“Welp. You two have fun catching up! I didn’t mean to interrupt your date!”

I smile at them both before heading over to the pick-up counter to grab my order. It’s all I can do to keep the tears at bay.

“Can I give you a hand with that, Pollyanna?” asks a voice I recognize. I see Officer Bryce Jordan standing behind me wearing blue jeans, a white T-shirt, and a flannel button-up worn openly. His ordinarily dark, slicked-back hair hangs loose and carefree, looking tousled as if he just got out of bed. Many men have tried to pull off the look, but Bryce succeeds.

Still sitting at the table while Melissa talks animatedly to him, Carter feels the weight of my stare and looks over at me. His eyes darken when he sees Bryce standing to my right and far too close for comfort. Taking a step back to get some space, I turn to Bryce and smile. “Thank you, that would be wonderful.”

Bryce carries the coffee traveler and all the condiments that go with it while I carry the two boxes of muffins down the

block. When we arrive, I show him to the kitchen, where we work together and get everything set up quickly.

“Thanks for the help, Bryce. Please make yourself a cup of coffee and grab a muffin as my way of saying thank you.”

Bryce steps in front of me to block my escape. “How about going on a date with me instead?”

I shake my head. “You know the answer to that, Bryce. It’s the same as the last ten times you asked.”

He steps back, giving me a huge smile that shows his perfectly straight teeth, “Mark my words, Pollyanna. One day, you’ll agree to go out with me.” He points his finger at me like a gun and winks.

If there is one thing that can be said about Bryce Jordan, it’s that he’s persistent. Under normal circumstances, he’s a nice guy who deserves a chance—if only my heart didn’t belong to someone else.

Chapter Ten

Carter

Against my better judgment, I agreed to meet with Melissa at the local coffee shop this morning at 7:30. Like always, I arrived at least ten minutes early. Some might say I'm a glutton for punishment, but in reality, I need the closure she might be able to provide.

“Hey, Barry. Can I get my usual, except a large this time?”

“Sure thing, Carter. One large, black coffee straight up! Scone or no scone today?” he asks.

As much as I would love to grab some breakfast, I don't want Melissa to get the wrong idea and think this is some kind of date. I would much rather get this over with and be on my way. My 10:00 a.m. meeting across the bridge provides the perfect excuse when it comes time for me to leave, ensuring that our time together will be limited.

“Just the coffee this morning. Thanks.” Once I have it in hand, I find a table near the front window. Typically, I prefer privacy and sit at the back of the café in one of the booths, but

not this time. Melissa has always worried about what the neighbors would think or how she would be perceived by strangers that don't matter. Being in the spotlight will guarantee that she's on her best behavior.

I've just sat down when Melissa walks in carrying her jacket and wearing yoga pants, an off-the-shoulder purple sweater, and black shoes that look like something a ballerina would wear. Her shoulder-length blonde hair is curled and hanging loose around her face. Her cupid bow lips are glossed to perfection, and her long lashes frame her chocolate-brown eyes.

I'm sure most men would find Melissa and her pixie-like features attractive, but all I see is fakeness. Fake lashes. Fake nails. Lips that look like they've been stung by a bee and swollen to three times their normal size. Gone is the natural beauty I remember from our youth, replaced by a woman trying to be something she's not.

Leanna, on the other hand, is absolutely gorgeous with no make-up on. What you see is what you get with her, no false pretenses and nothing fake. I've always appreciated that about her, and it's one of the many reasons why we get along so well. Until recently, things between us have been open, comfortable, and easy. Although we had a wonderful time together the last two days, our connection felt tenuous and slightly stilted, as if her guard was up or hiding something. Figuring she was trying to put up a brave front after suffering her first loss, I didn't push her to talk about it.

“Do I have time to order something?” Melissa asks, her head cocked to one side and a hand on her hip in what I assume is a flirtatious pose.

I make a show of looking at my watch, then say, “Sure, but just so you know, I have to leave around eight for a meeting in the city.”

She sighs. “You’re only giving me half an hour?”

“I surprised myself by giving you that much. I can’t imagine you need that much time to apologize.”

“Don’t be rude, Carter. That’s never been your style.”

“You’re right. Sorry.” No matter how upset I get, I always try to say kind words in return or wrap them up under the guise of humor and sarcasm.

“Give me two minutes to order.” Not waiting for a response, she walks up to the counter and smiles at Barry. Barry returns the gesture and looks “happy as a clam” to be helping her out.

I twiddle my thumbs around the coffee in my hands when she sits opposite me. “Thank you, Carter, for agreeing to this. When I saw you at the dining event the other night, I knew fate had brought us together. I’ve wanted to apologize to you for so long but didn’t know how to find you or if I should even try.”

“As I recall, you didn’t leave me much of an option. It was either agree to meet with you or run you over with my truck,” I say, giving her my trademark smirk so she knows I’m not upset...*anymore*.

“I’m sure it was a tough choice,” she teases.

“You mean between the possibility of jail time or having this conversation? Yeah, it really was.” We both laugh at my joke, the tension between us now broken. She puts her hand on my arm and then lightly strokes it with her fingernail. It’s an unwelcome gesture, and my smile abruptly dissipates. I pull my arm from her reach and place it on the back of the chair beside me.

The place begins to fill up with the next rush of customers getting their morning caffeine fix before starting their workday. I’ll need to leave soon, so I gesture for Melissa to begin the discussion since this little *tête-à-tête* was her idea.

“Have it your way, Carter,” she harumphs. She takes a sip from her hot tea, drawing out the moment. “I tried to find you last year when I returned home to Iowa, but my parents said I had just missed you by a few weeks. Sorry about your Pops passing away, by the way.”

“Thank you,” I tell her, feeling choked up inside at her mention of my father. He was my best friend growing up, and I miss him terribly.

Realizing I’m not going to say anything else, she continues, “When I asked my parents about you, they said you moved away and became a corporate executive. Imagine my surprise when I saw you working as a bodyguard.”

“Protection Specialist,” I mumble.

She waves her hand dismissively, “Whatever your title, according to my parents, your dad kept your life pretty hush-hush. They couldn’t tell me much other than that you come back every couple of months to work on the house, never staying more than a few days.”

I bob my head, confirming her words. “I asked my father to keep my private life private, which explains your parents’ lack of knowledge regarding my whereabouts and my profession.”

After an uncomfortable silence stretches between us, she finally says, “I want to apologize for leaving the way I did, Carter.”

“But not for *leaving*,” I retort bluntly. “The note you left me said, ‘I don’t want to be trapped in a small-town life, living with regrets, and stuck with no way out.’ You were my first love, Melissa. It hurt deeply when you didn’t give me the courtesy of ending our relationship in person—and leaving nothing but that note. You wrote the same words to me that my mother said to my father when she left. How do you think that made me feel, Mel? I deserved better than that, as your friend and as your fiancé.”

“You did. And I owe you an explanation. Do you remember the one night we spent together before you deployed on your first tour?” I dip my chin once in acknowledgment. While we had both agreed to wait until we were married before getting physical, the night before I left, we gave in to our temptation.

“When you were gone, there was a small moment in time when I thought I was pregnant, and it scared me. I was afraid

that we would end up like everyone else and get stuck in that Podunk town. We were both so young, with so much living to do. When you asked me to marry you, I hoped it would be different for us, for *me*. But you were off on your adventures while I was still back home, waiting. I couldn't do it anymore."

I'm trying to wrap my head around everything Melissa just said when we both become distracted by a woman in line who begins to choke. When the man helping her steps aside, I have a clear view of Leanna and her wide-eyed gaze. I don't know how much she overheard, but her hurt and confused expression says that whatever it was, it was enough. I try to silently convey with my eyes that I'll answer any questions she has later.

As any best friend would, she gives me a subtle nod and plasters a smile on her face before walking over to us. It's bright and shows all her pearly whites, but it's also as fake as Melissa's lashes and not like Leanna at all. When she introduces herself to Melissa as my roommate and not as my friend, I know something is very wrong in our world.

It goes downhill from there, especially when Melissa introduces herself as my fiancée. I quickly correct her statement and insinuate that our conversation is over, but Leanna objects and explains that she's only there to pick up an order to go. She starts singing "Hi-Ho" and acting like one of the seven dwarfs from *Snow White*. Unlike Melissa, Leanna doesn't care what people think and has no problems being silly in public. I adore that about her.

When Barry calls out Leanna's name, and she leaves to collect her purchase, I turn to Melissa with a displeased expression. "Introducing yourself as my fiancée was inappropriate and uncalled for," I tell her.

"My apologies. It was a slip of the tongue. But what does it matter in the long run? Lillianna said she was your roommate, not your girlfriend. Though I suspect she wants to be."

"Her name is Leanna, and we're just..." I start to say but stop when I follow Melissa's gaze over to where Leanna is standing. I tense up when I see Bryce Jordan standing far too close to her for my liking. He seems like a nice enough guy, but according to Leanna, Bryce keeps asking her out even though she always declines.

A low growl escapes when I see Leanna smile warmly at Bryce, a smile that's usually meant for me. He returns the smile as he reaches for the coffee traveler and condiment bag to help her out. She picks up the two boxes of muffins and leaves with him following close behind.

"You were saying?" Melissa asks, laughing. "It looks like I was wrong. She and that handsome hunk of a man look awfully cozy and quite cute together."

My body is begging me to follow my friend and save her from the overbearing Bryce, but the woman across from me is preventing that from happening.

"Thank you for the apology and the explanation. If there's nothing else, then I really should be going."

“There’s just one more thing. Leaving you was the worst decision I ever made, and if I could go back and have a do-over, I would take it and do everything differently. We grew up together, and you know me better than anyone else, Carter. I want a second chance and to make things right between us.”

I shake my head. There’s no coming back from all the hurt and betrayal that stemmed from Melissa’s abandonment of me and our relationship. “I can’t. If forgiveness is what you want or need, then you have it. But I’ve moved on, and there’s no going backward for me.”

“I refuse to accept that. You loved me once enough to want to marry me. You can love me like that again. I just have to prove to you I’m worth it.”

Since I’m unwilling to argue with her, I get up from the table and put on my coat. She joins me, slinging her purse over her shoulder and standing on her tiptoes to plant a goodbye kiss on my lips. I turn my face so it lands on my cheek instead.

“If it’s any consolation, I never stopped loving you, Carter.”

As the door closes behind her, I mumble to myself, “Just not enough.”

My love has never been enough for a woman to stay—certainly not enough for my mom or my fiancée, the two most important women in my life. If I say those three words to Leanna, I’m afraid she’ll disappear like everyone else.

When Leanna began to pull away from our hug last night, I came close to declaring my feelings for her and showing her

how I felt. Holding her tight to me, I was unable to let her go and too scared that I was going to lose her somehow.

Watching her smile sweetly at Bryce after seeing me with Melissa, I have the feeling that it might already be too late.

Chapter Eleven

Leanna

Callum comes into the breakroom and snags the mandarin orange cream cheese muffin from the box on the counter. He separates the top of the muffin from the bottom and hands it to me while I return the favor by doing the same with the blueberry muffin in my possession. He enjoys the spongy texture of the bottom, while I prefer the cake-like chewiness of the top.

“Was that Officer Jordan I saw leaving here a minute ago?” he asks, taking a bite.

“It was. I ran into him at #JavaGoodTime, and he offered to help bring the goodies back to the station since I had walked to work this morning. I don’t know if I would have taken him up on the offer if I had my car.”

“Take who up on what offer?” asks my brother as he saunters into the room.

“Bryce Jordan,” Callum and I say in unison.

Sebastian sneers at the mention of the name. “When will that guy get a clue that you are emotionally unavailable?”

“Hey! I *resemble* that remark!” I respond light-heartedly but also acknowledging the truth of his statement.

“Let me guess, he asked you out yet again,” Sebastian says as if the answer is a foregone conclusion.

Before I can answer, Trey joins us, having overheard our conversation. “Wait. Don’t answer that, Leanna!” He pulls out his wallet and slaps a bill on the table. “Quick wager. Ten bucks says he asked her out, and she said “No.”

Callum raises his hands in surrender and steps back. “I’m not a sucker. There’s no way I’m taking that bet. The odds are stacked too much in your favor, Trey.”

I expect my brother to do the same, but he stares me down, trying to “read” me. I don’t give anything away, returning his gaze and turning it into a staring contest. I see Callum and Trey put money on the table. When Sebastian blinks first, Callum fist pumps the air in victory.

“Easiest five dollars I’ve ever made,” he says with a smile, putting the winnings into the charity jar.

Trey turns to my brother. “Are you in?”

“Are we betting on whether or not Bryce asked her out, her answer, or both?” my brother questions, making sure he’s on the same page.

“Her answer. I agree with Callum on this one. It’s a sucker’s bet on whether or not he asked the question. He *always* asks

her out every time he sees her,” Trey admits.

“And Leanna *always* gives him the same answer,” Callum adds.

“Hmmm. I don’t know. Did you see the smile on his face when he walked out of here? He looked like the cat that got the cream.” He places his bill on the table next to Trey’s. When all three of them look to me for my answer, I can’t help but chuckle and shake my head.

“I did not agree to go out with him. But maybe I should have.” Trey whoops and hollers over his win until he hears the resignation in my tone.

“Aww. What’s the matter, Lee?” Trey asks, pulling me into a hug.

I tell them all about seeing Carter and Melissa at the coffee shop and some snippets of the conversation I overheard.

“I think you’re jumping to conclusions just like when you thought Briar was a supermodel instead of a dog!” my brother says, outing me.

“Bash! That was a conversation meant to stay between you and me!”

“We’re all family here, Lee. You know it won’t leave this room!” he defends.

“I didn’t think it would leave the gym where we had the conversation either, but here we are in the kitchen!”

I don't really mind that he said anything in front of Callum and Trey because they're family to me and always have my back, but it doesn't mean I can't razz him about it.

"She thought Briar was a model?" Callum asks. At the same time, Trey says, "Well, *that* explains a lot!"

"In all fairness, Carter did make it sound like his client was a woman and not a cute little Maltese show dog," Sebastian says.

I pour myself a cup of coffee while they continue to gossip around the water cooler. Their conversation must have come back full circle because out of nowhere, Trey asks me, "Were things really so bad this morning that you would agree to a date with Bryce?"

I sigh in exasperation. "No, I wouldn't agree to go out with Bryce under any circumstance. He's a nice guy but too pushy for me. Can you imagine if I were to go on a date with him, even once? He'd never leave me alone after that.

"All my comment means is that maybe it's time for me to start dating. Carter and I agreed to be just friends, and I need to respect the boundaries he's set. He's never promised me anything more, regardless of whether or not that's what I want."

They look at me with pity, and I hate it.

"What? Why are you looking at me like that?" I ask them.

Callum is the one who speaks up. "Have you told him what you want, Leanna? We men are very simple creatures. We

don't do well at the mind-reading thing. If you tell us you're 'fine,' we will believe you even though it's the complete opposite of what you mean. If you tell Carter you're okay with being friends, then he'll take you at your word."

"What if I tell him I want more than friendship, and he says, '*Adiós amiga!*' I don't think I could handle it if things change between us or he gives me the boot."

Trey, the oldest and wisest among the men in the room, tells it to me straight. "Leanna, things will change whether you want them to or not. It's inevitable. If your friendship is as strong as you think it is, it should be able to withstand an open and honest conversation. Tell Carter how you feel about him, and if he's unwilling to move forward, then your friendship will need to take a back seat to any romantic relationships you pursue. It does not necessarily mean you'll lose his friendship, but the friendship *will* change.

"Trust me, there will come a time when both you and Carter crave a level of intimacy that belongs in a marriage and is beyond what a friendship can provide. But it requires trust and communication, neither of which you are exhibiting by keeping your feelings a secret."

"Ouch! Tell me what you really think," I say, trying to make light of the situation.

"He's telling you to 'fish or cut bait. Drive or get out of the car. Make a sandwich or get out of the kitchen,'" Sebastian says matter of fact.

"Thanks. I get it."

“Good. So, what will you do about it?” he asks.

“I have an idea!” Callum chimes in.

I gesture for him to tell all.

“Normally, I’m not one for playing games, but I think it might be a necessary evil in this situation. I know a little of Carter’s story, but before you ask, it’s not mine to tell. Based on the little knowledge of his situation, it’s enough that I can say with relative assurance that you should go on a date with someone else. Carter needs a nudge in the right direction and to see that you aren’t going to wait around for him forever. If you need help finding a date, I know a good matchmaker if you’re interested,” he winks.

I can’t help but laugh. Amelia, the matchmaker who brought Callum and my sister Callie together, would jump at the opportunity to set me up if I gave her the chance. Carter told me once that he used her services in the past but stopped after one date. He said he’s better ‘friend’ material than ‘boyfriend’ material. I didn’t think much of the self-deprecating comment at the time.

Trey throws a large bill down on the table. “I’ll put a hundred dollars in the charity jar if you go out with the next person that asks you out, Bryce excluded.”

“I don’t carry hundreds on me like Trey the Baller here, but I’ll match the donation.” Callum writes an IOU for \$100 and sets it on top of Trey’s cash.

“Count me in!” exclaims Sebastian. He turns to me and says, “It doesn’t have to be a forever date, Leanna. It can be as simple as going for coffee and having a good conversation.”

“Fine, but only because it’s for a good cause.”



Who knew I’d have a date by the time lunch rolled around? I certainly didn’t, but yet that’s precisely what happens. Trey and I are returning from a call when I find my brother standing in the middle of the open bay door with his arms crossed and feet spread a few feet apart. If he wasn’t wearing a smug look, I might think we were in trouble.

After rolling down my window, I hang my head out and yell, “Move it or lose it!”

“You wouldn’t dare! You love me too much!”

I place one foot on the brake and the other on the gas, pressing lightly at the same time to rev the engine without lurching forward. It startles Sebastian enough that he moves out of the way quickly. I pull our rig into the spot and hop out, laughing at his shocked expression.

“I should write you up for misuse of department equipment and attempted assault on your superior,” he says deadpan.

I slide my arm around his waist and give it a little squeeze. “You wouldn’t dare! You love *me* too much!” I tease. “Not to

mention I have enough dirt on you to keep me safe from retribution until I'm 80."

"I can't argue with you there. Brody, Ansel, and I would have been in a lot more trouble if you and Daphne hadn't covered for us, Callie and Isabella, too."

Coming from a large family with seven children, it was hard for my parents to keep track of who was where and what each of us was supposed to be doing at any given point in time. All of us siblings looked after one another, but we also had each other's backs.

"What put that Cheshire-like grin on your face?" Trey asks, joining us.

"I believe the charity jar is about to become \$300 fatter." My brother points to the lounge area in our building and then uses a feminine Southern drawl to tell us, "Leanna has a suitor waitin' for her in the parlor."

I scrunch my nose in confusion, not knowing who it could be. I look at my watch, wondering if Carter had enough time to return from his meeting in the city. It's doable, but it would be a stretch.

"It's not Carter if that's what you're wondering."

"I thought you guys said that men weren't mind readers!" I exclaim.

"Even a broken clock is right twice a day. But don't give your brother too much credit. You're as easy to read as a

children's storybook." Trey laughs at his own joke before heading to the lounge area, my brother following him.

Sebastian looks over his shoulder at me, "Are you coming?"

"I'm not sure. Who is it?"

"The answer to who sent you the flowers! Come on. Let's meet the man of the hour."

I shake my head but trail behind them anyway. When I enter the lounge, a very handsome man who looks vaguely familiar stands up when he sees me. *Hmm. Standing when a lady enters a room means that he has manners. I like it!*

The gentleman in question holds a smaller version of what was delivered last week. When I look up at him, I notice he's really tall and must be close to 6' 5" by my best estimation. Considering I'm 5' 10" barefoot and only come to his chin, it's easy math. His sandy blonde hair and brown eyes stand out against the dark blue button-up shirt and khakis he's wearing on his lean frame.

"Hi," he says, handing me the flowers. He nervously wipes his hand on his pants before squaring his shoulders and clearing his throat. "My name is Joe." He offers his hand, and I take it, grateful that it's dry.

"I'm Leanna. Um. Thank you for the flowers. Are you the one that sent the bouquet last week?"

He nods. "I was trying to show my appreciation for your good deeds with a romantic gesture. When I told a friend of mine what I had done, she said it was 'creepy' and that I

should ‘man up’ and introduce myself. So, here I am, doing just that. But I don’t regret what I wrote on the note when I said, ‘My life belongs to you.’ You saved my life, and I owe you the same.”

My brother and Trey both step in front of me protectively, but it’s Sebastian who pipes up. “You know that a ‘life debt’ isn’t a real thing, right? No one expects you to follow Leanna around until an opportunity presents itself for you to save her. Trust me, her life isn’t some romantic suspense novel with danger and intrigue around every corner.”

Now thoroughly embarrassed by my brother’s words and behavior, I do a quick introduction before kicking them out of the room.

“Joe, this yahoo is my oldest brother, Sebastian. The man beside him is my partner and a family friend, Trey.” I begin herding the two of them toward the exit and try to salvage something of this conversation with Joe.

“There is no way we are going to leave you alone with a man you’ve never met before,” my brother says adamantly.

“Yes, you are. You can eavesdrop from the other side of the door, but at least give us the illusion of having a private conversation.”

“She’s got a point,” Trey says, pulling my brother out of the room. “The acoustics are pretty good out in the hallway.”

Turning back to Joe, I say, “I’m so sorry for all of that. Where were we?”

“I was declaring my undying love for you through inappropriate and anonymous gestures while dedicating my life to your happiness and safety,” he says with a wink.

It finally dawns on me who the man is, and a snort escapes me at the ridiculousness of the situation. “All Joe King aside, there’s no need for all that when breakfast will do. There’s a great little café just down the street, and I get off at eight in the morning.”

He chuckles at my play on his name. “I’ll be here with bells on.”

Chapter Twelve

Carter

On the drive into the city, I debate whether or not I should turn around and go to Leanna to explain everything. I want to erase the hurt look from her face after she learned that I had been holding back a significant part of my past. If only she knew that I keep my shame and failure hidden from everyone, not just her.

I can count on one hand the number of people who know that I had once been engaged. My boss, Ben, knows because he was my closest friend at the time of Melissa's abrupt departure and the one person that I had to confide in. Although Ben never shared my story with his sister, Amelia, she is also well aware of what happened because she needed to know my background as a matchmaker. Although I only used her services once, she is forever bound to secrecy by "client-matchmaker" privileges. My other boss, Ethan, knows because he had uncovered it in a deep-dive background check before agreeing to hire me at Shining Knight. And lastly, there is my

friend, Callum, who only knows that I loved and lost, but none of the details.

Ultimately, my sense of duty wins out, and I continue onward, arriving at the Shining Knight corporate offices with nearly 20 minutes to spare. I'm pouring myself a cup of coffee when Ben walks into the breakroom. With one glance, he knows without asking that something is bothering me.

"Do you want to talk about it?" he asks. Without waiting for an answer, he shuts the door and engages the lock to give us some privacy.

I arch an eyebrow in his direction, "Don't we have a meeting in ten minutes?"

He waves his hand around. "Ethan and I were just going to tell you all that the remainder of the week will be dedicated to training on your own time. With the recent addition of a fifth team, we can start giving you more time off between jobs. You've all earned it. Unless a last-minute job comes across our desk, there isn't anything on the books for your team for almost a week. The newer guys need a chance to work together and develop their team dynamics.

"The reason Ethan and I established this company was so that we can do what we love and still devote time to our families. We want you all to have the same opportunity."

"That's an admirable goal, but not all of us have families to go home to every night. You have Claire, and Ethan has Amelia, but no one on Team Alpha is married or in a relationship. We're all single with nothing to tie us down."

“And that won’t change if we fail to create an environment that fosters a work-life balance.” Ben walks over to the coffee pot and pours himself a mug. He leans against the counter and takes a sip before asking, “So, are you going to tell me what’s bothering you? And don’t you dare say everything is ‘fine.’ We’ve worked together every day for six years, and I know all of your ‘tells.’ Like now—when your earlobes turn pink—it means your mind is somewhere else, and your body is itching to follow.”

I sigh. “You’re right. It’s been an interesting morning.” I tell him everything that happened from when Melissa recognized me at the conference center and then cornered me in the parking lot to the moment he cornered me here in the break room.

“What do you plan to do about the ‘Melissa’ situation?” he asks, concerned about my well-being.

“Nothing. It took me a long time to get past what she did, but I eventually got over it. Melissa may want a second chance and even think she’s entitled to it, but that doesn’t mean she’ll get one. I’ve already been down that road with her once, and it was enough.”

“Good for you. And for what it’s worth, I agree with your decision. So then, what are you going to do about Leanna?”

“I don’t know. I should at least tell her about Melissa and who she was to me. You didn’t see Leanna’s face, Ben. She looked so hurt when she saw us together.”

“I’m sure you can understand why, Carter. You claim she’s your best friend and would do anything for her, yet you’ve hidden a very important part of yourself. She’s only gotten to know *half* of you while you’ve gotten to know *all* of her. It’s an uneven trade, and I’m sure she feels cheated. Wouldn’t you if the roles were reversed?”

“I see your point,” I tell him.

“Okay, then I’ll ask again. What are you going to do about Leanna? Will you trust her enough to remain your friend after telling her about your past? Or will you continue to assume that she has the same quality of character your mother and Melissa had? Because if that’s what you think, then why are you friends with someone like that?”

I start to answer his barrage of questions, but he puts up his hand to stop me. “You don’t have to answer them, Carter. I just wanted to give you some food for thought. If friendship is all you can give Leanna right now, then so be it. But let her know why and accept the consequences.”

“What kind of consequences are you referring to? Because I can’t lose her, Ben.”

He gives me a look of sympathy and places a hand on my shoulder, “You might. Although I don’t think that’s going to be the case. Leanna values your friendship too much to walk away, but you’ll have to stand by and watch if she decides to date other men. You can’t have it both ways.” Ben slaps me on the back before unlocking the door to leave.

“Thanks for the advice, Ben. It wasn’t easy to hear, but it was necessary.”

“I’ve been in your shoes, Carter, remember? I was holding on so tightly to my past and to my failures that I almost missed out on my future and God’s plan for me. I nearly lost Claire to a madman because of my unwillingness to let go of my fear. Don’t make the same mistake.”

I mull over my friend’s words long after he leaves and on the hour-long drive back home. Once I’m across the bridge, a sudden urge to see Leanna washes over me. I turn right where I should have turned left and see the station up ahead. Pulling into a parking spot across the street, I see that the bay doors are open and the ambulance is parked inside. Good, that means Leanna’s inside.

I walk inside and see several of the firefighters milling about, but I don’t see any sign of Leanna. A few of the guys wave when they see me, and I give them a quick uptilt of the chin in acknowledgment. It doesn’t take long before I find Sebastian and Trey standing in the hallway on opposite sides of the doorway.

Trey sees me first, and his eyes widen in shock. He walks over to me quickly, drawing Sebastian’s attention in the process. Sebastian looks through the open door and then to me, his mouth forming an “O.”

“What are you doing here?” Bash asks in a whisper.

“I need to talk to Leanna, and why are we whispering?”

I hear a distinct snort and giggle emanate from the room, followed by Leanna saying, “All joking aside, there’s no need for all that when breakfast will do. There’s a great little café just down the street, and I get off at eight in the morning.”

A man’s voice I don’t recognize says, “I’ll be here with bells on.”

I cast my eyes downward as if that will hide me from Leanna’s view when she and the mystery man join us in the hallway.

“Oh, Carter. Hey! What are you doing here? I thought you had a meeting in the city?”

“I did, but it was a short one. I just wanted to stop by and talk to you for a minute before I leave town. But I can see that you’re...um...busy.”

“Give me just a minute while I escort Joe out.” Leanna walks down the hall, Joe following her.

I look at Bash and Trey, “Who is that guy? And how does he know Leanna?”

“His name is Joe King, and he’s a patient that Leanna and I rushed to the emergency room last week. The man had nearly died due to anaphylaxis,” Trey explains.

“Apparently, the taco truck he normally orders from changed their recipe and started using peanuts in their mole sauce. At least, that’s what he told me while waiting for these guys to return. He’s the mystery man who sent her the flowers last week.”

“Her knight in shining armor? The guy that wants to give her whatever she desires?” I ask, my voice rising in pitch.

Sebastian leans in and lowers his voice so it doesn't carry down the hall, “What did you expect, Carter? You told her that you want to keep your relationship platonic, and she has respected your boundaries. But after meeting your ex-fiancée this morning and realizing how much of your life you held back, I'm sure it's the first time she felt like your roommate and not your best friend. That was a pretty big bombshell for her.”

Trey slings his arm around me and whispers conspiratorially, “It's not too late to change your mind and go after the girl if that's what you really want. If it's not, then you have to be all right with Leanna dating and let her go. It's your call.”

I feel like I've been knocked out with a heavy dose of reality, one hit after the other. First, there was Ben's advice to me, and now this. It's too much, and I need to leave.

When Leanna asked why I had stopped by, I told her I wanted to talk. But instead of explaining to her what she saw this morning, I panicked and took the coward's way out, implying that I was leaving. Now, I plan to make that a reality, even if it's only for a few days. I need the time to get my head on straight and figure out what I'm going to do.

I remove Trey's arm from my shoulder and turn to leave. Since Leanna has yet to return as promised, I expect to see her talking with Joe when I get outside. However, it's Bryce Jordan who has her attention, not Joe. I walk up to Leanna to

tell her that I'm heading home while giving her an opportunity to escape his advances should she need it.

"Officer Jordan, fancy meeting you here!"

"Today, it's just Bryce. I'm off duty until Friday," he says, avoiding eye contact with me and keeping his focus wholly on Leanna. "I'm trying to convince this beautiful lady to let me take her to breakfast in the morning."

"Good luck with that," I tell him. "I think she already has a date with Joe, right?"

"Carter," she warns.

"Who's Joe?" Bryce asks.

She shrugs, "Just a guy we took to the hospital last week. He wanted to thank me for saving his life by buying me breakfast."

"I see. So you have to save me from near death before you'll agree to share a meal?" he teases.

"Something like that." She gives him a quick wink before turning to me. "You said you needed to talk to me privately?"

I see her eyes widen ever so slightly and take the cue for what it is. It's a plea to help extricate her from the conversation. "Yeah. Bryce doesn't mind me stealing you away for a few minutes."

"Nah, I have plenty of errands I still need to get done. Groceries won't buy themselves, and my refrigerator is empty. I'll catch you later, Pollyanna. You, too, Carter."

We both wait for him to be out of hearing distance when she thanks me for the rescue.

“Look, Leanna. I’m sorry you found out about my past the way you did, but there’s much more to the story than the small bit you were exposed to this morning. I owe you an explanation, one I should have told you a long time ago. If you want, I promise we can sit down and talk as soon as I get back, and I’ll answer any questions you might have.”

“Do you have another assignment?”

“No. Our team is on standby, but I need to use the free time to go home and take care of a few things. I’ll only be gone a few days at most.” I take her hand and pull her to me, drawing her into my embrace. I savor the feel of her arms around me as I inhale her sweet cherry scent. Before I leave, I place a lingering kiss on her cheek. Maybe by the time I return, I’ll have the courage to place it on her lips.

Chapter Thirteen

Leanna

When Carter gets in his truck and makes a U-turn in the middle of the road, I flash him a smile and give him a quick wave goodbye. While I stand there and watch until his taillights disappear, an ominous feeling followed by a cold shiver suddenly comes upon me. Unable to shake it and becoming instantly chilled, I cross my arms and begin to head indoors where it's warmer.

I stop when I see a shock of color and quick movement out of the corner of my eye. Yet, when I glance in that direction, I don't notice anything or anyone out of the ordinary. I tried to shrug it off, but for the rest of my shift, it felt like I was being watched.

It's a quarter till eight and not too much longer before it's time for me to go home. Only I can't do that because I agreed to go on a date with Joe. I don't know what I was thinking since it's honestly the last thing I want to do right now. I'd much rather lay my head on a pillow and sleep for the next two days.

“Are you ready for your hot date, Kiddo?” Trey asks, leaning his head into the room.

“Not really. I’m exhausted and need a hot shower more than I need food or company. But seeing that I didn’t get Joe’s number, I have no way to cancel or reschedule.”

“Well, it’s too late for that anyway. He’s in the lounge waiting for you.”

I look at my watch and note the time. “He’s early!”

“Relax, Leanna. He’s talking with your brothers and having a cup of coffee. We have ten minutes before our shift ends, and we still need to do our shift change briefing. They’ll keep him occupied while we finish up.”

“Did you say brothers? As in plural? And you left Joe alone with them?”

“Of course I did. It’s his first test! If he can hold his own against them, then he stands a chance against you!” His booming laugh echoes off the walls as he walks down the hall, where I begrudgingly trail behind.

When my duties are complete, I hurry toward the lounge area to save Joe once again. Only this time, it’s from my brothers instead of a rogue peanut. I slow down to eavesdrop when I hear Brody and Ansel talking with my date. Trey stands behind me quietly to catch the tail end of the conversation as well.

“Do you like rock climbing or paintball?” Ansel asks. He’s the youngest of my three brothers, although he’s two years

older than me. It doesn't surprise me that it's Ansel who asks the question, especially with his love of extreme sports.

“Um. I've never tried either one. I'm more of a *Halo* or *Call of Duty* kind of guy.”

“I can get behind that. PC or console?” Brody questions. He's the brother who would have gone into professional gaming and streaming his plays if he hadn't decided to become a firefighter.

“That depends. If I'm by myself, I'll play on the PC. If I have friends over, it's the console all the way.” I hear the slapping noise of a high-five and figure Joe must have answered the question to Brody's satisfaction.

“Don't get my brother started on gaming, or we'll never make it to the gym. Back to my question. If you've never tried rock climbing or paintball, what outdoor activities *have you* tried?” Based on Ansel's tone, I can tell that Joe's answer matters to him. It matters to me as well.

“I've gone tubing down a river with my friends before. Does that count?” he asks, laughing.

No one joins him.

When it comes to the Arbaroa family, we take two things seriously other than God and family: Firefighting and Paintball. Indoor rock climbing almost makes the cut, but it falls a little short, with only a two-thirds participation rate.

“I think it's time for you to go in and rescue that boy,” Trey whispers.

“Yeah. I guess he failed the first test,” I whisper back.

“Nah. It’s more like a C-minus. He scored brownie points with Brody with his love of gaming.” I can’t help but chuckle.

Squaring my shoulders back, I take a deep breath to prepare myself for whatever I might face. All three heads turn in my direction when I enter the room, but I notice Joe’s look of utter relief first. With the tension thick enough to cut with a knife, I have to wonder what happened or what was said before I started listening in.

They all stand to greet me, and my brothers walk over to hug me. Brody edges Ansel out of the way and leans in, whispering, “We’ll talk later.” When we separate, I subtly dip my chin in agreement.

Ansel shoves Brody out of the way playfully, but his expression is far too severe for my liking. When he hugs me, he quietly tells me, “Not the one,” and leaves it at that. Stepping back, he says loud enough for everyone to hear, “There’s a family dinner at Sebastian’s tonight to discuss the details for next week’s ski retreat. It’s the only night between now and then that all of us can be there, so don’t miss it, Lee. It’s important.”

“There is?” Sebastian says from the doorway, having changed out of his uniform and into gym clothes.

“Yep,” is Ansel’s response. He fist-bumps Bash before walking out. “Let’s hit the gym! Those damsels in distress want big, burly men to carry them to safety, not boys with chicken legs and skinny arms.” Knowing my brother’s kind

heart, I'm almost positive he didn't mean any offense to Joe, whose loose-fitting clothes are most likely hiding such a physique.

Brody laughs but provides his own reasons for needing to work out. "I just want to be in the calendar next year. Hashtag goals, right?"

After my brothers leave and Trey is nowhere in sight, I turn to Joe and give him the biggest smile I can muster. "Sorry about all that. My brothers can be a handful."

Joe's smile tightens, but he doesn't respond to my statement. Instead, he holds out his arm like a gentleman and asks, "Ready?"

Yes. No. Maybe. "Absolutely."



Joe and I walk the block to #JavaGoodTime for coffee and a breakfast sandwich. When I ask which car is his, he points to a black Astin Martin Vantage. "Oh wow! That's a beauty," I say, impressed.

"Thanks. It was a gift to myself when I made my first million. But when I hit the ten-million-dollar mark, I'm going to get myself a Cooper Custom Car."

“Oh! My roommate, Carter, was the COO for that company before his friend Ben Cooper started Shining Knight Protection Services. That’s where he works now.”

Joe’s eyes widen in surprise. “Do you think your friend can use his connections and get me on the waiting list sooner rather than later? The last time I checked, it was at least two years before even getting a consult and design session.”

I lift my shoulders. “Carter’s not the type to ask special favors of anyone. He doesn’t like the feeling of owing anybody anything. But I’ll introduce you and let you have that conversation with him. Who knows, I might be wrong.”

“Cool. Thanks.”

Joe spends most of the morning talking about himself, his cars, and gaming. The reason why he can afford the Aston Martin is because he designs and develops gaming apps, particularly of the casino variety. He’s living off royalties while he works on the next project.

For a guy who sent a note about giving me whatever I desire, he sure seems more interested in himself than anything I might want or need. At this point, I’d settle for him asking about my day. It doesn’t happen.

Bored, I watch as people come and go, even giving a little wave to Bryce when he comes in for his morning coffee and danish. He waves back but doesn’t stop by the table and chit-chat like usual, opting to sit alone at the back of the café and play on his phone. Typically, I would appreciate the courtesy

and the lack of intrusion, but anything that might end this date early would be a welcome reprieve.

I want to take back that last thought when I look up and find Melissa standing beside our table. She looks at me, then at Joe, then back at me again. She introduces herself to my date before returning her focus to me, but not before I notice a spark of interest in Joe's eyes. Internally, I sigh while outwardly, I smile.

"Hi, Leighla. What a surprise to see you here," she says as if she isn't the anomaly in this scenario.

"It's Leanna, and you shouldn't be. I'm here often and work a block away at the fire station. I thought Carter would have mentioned that to you yesterday," I tell her, exhaustion tinging my voice.

"No. He was pretty tight-lipped about you. Carter's always been that way when it comes to the people he cares about. I thought that maybe you and he..." She lets the implication that Carter still cares about her hang in the air, trying to get a rise out of me. Unfortunately, in my sleep-deprived state, I play directly into her hands anyway.

"Carter and I are just friends," I say, interrupting her. Waving my hand between Joe and me, I continue, "Otherwise, I wouldn't be sitting here on a date with Joe."

"Oh, that's great news!" she exclaims with false sincerity.

"Why is that?" I'm not sure if I want to hear her answer.

She places her hand on the table and leans down, bringing her face level with mine. Speaking low enough so only I can hear her, she tells me, “Because I plan to win him back. And just so you know, I play for keeps.”

Chapter Fourteen

Leanna

I was surprised when Joe asked me for a second date after driving me home this morning. On the short ride back, the conversation between us had been sporadic at best. Most of it was me giving him directions to my house. He was gentlemanly enough to walk me to my door but didn't ask to come inside. It might have had something to do with the big, black F-350 parked in the driveway.

My heart fluttered, and my lips turned up at the thought of getting to see Carter before he left on his trip. Unfortunately, Joe thought the smile on my face was for him.

"I had a nice time and would like to do it again soon. Maybe dinner next Friday?" he asked.

"I can't next week. I'll be up in the Catskills for our annual family ski retreat. With the blizzards that rolled through the Northeast in January, there's tons of powder this year." I bounced on my toes and rubbed my hands together, excited at the prospect of getting to do some snowboarding.

“What a coincidence. I’ll be in that area for a three-day conference at the Windam Mountain Ski Lodge and Expo Center.”

“We rent a cabin up there every year, only a few miles from the main lodge. Wait! I didn’t think you liked to ski or do outdoorsy stuff!”

He laughed. “I don’t! But the conference is more about product marketing and networking for me, not skiing or snowboarding. There will be time for those kinds of activities if that’s what you’re into, but I plan to spend my time either trying out the latest games before they hit the mainstream market or in the spa getting a top-notch massage.”

“Snowboarding’s definitely what I’m into. I plan to spend as much time on the slopes with my family as possible since that’s the purpose of the trip. But if our paths happen to cross, we might be able to meet up in town for a friendly meal.”

Joe agreed. When he asked for my number, I gave him the one to my secondary line. It’s a special number I give out when I don’t want someone to have my personal line that’s meant only for family. Carter helped Daphne and I set one up as an additional measure to keep us safe. Carter knows that if I ever dial him from this alternate number, he would need to track me because I’m in serious trouble.

As soon as Joe left, I hurried inside to talk to Carter before he departed for his trip. Yet when I entered, the house was eerily quiet. I searched for a note in all the usual places but found nothing. It wasn’t until I was about to crawl under my

covers and finally get some much-needed sleep that I saw it. A small, folded card and a chocolate mint rested on top of my pillow. The note only had three words, but it was enough to give me a shred of hope.

I'll miss you.

The sun had already set by the time my alarm had gone off, giving me less than an hour to get ready for dinner at Sebastian and Marybeth's house. I always love going over there because I get to spend time with my favorite nephew, Marcus, who recently turned nine. I called and asked Marybeth about the impromptu dinner, and she assured me that everything was fine but that I should hurry up.

"The testosterone-to-estrogen ratio is currently unbalanced, and you're needed to help even out the scales," she told me.

"Mom and Dad can help rein everyone in for you when they get there. They've always been good at keeping the peace."

"Oh, honey, your parents aren't coming tonight. They have Marcus for some grandparent bonding time. This is a siblings-only event, and you're the guest of honor. It will just be you, me, and everyone under the age of 35, except for Callie and Callum. They couldn't make it because little Bella Rae has a cold."

I locked up the house and then unlocked my car, a cute little Subaru Impreza with all-wheel drive. It didn't take me long to figure out that it wouldn't be an "all-wheel" night. "What you really mean is that this is an intervention. But I'm going to

have to disappoint you. I can't make it, at least not anytime soon. I have a flat tire. Ugh."

"I'll send one of the guys to help," she offered.

"How about a ride since the meeting to discuss my life is so important to you all. As far as fixing the flat, I'll take care of that tomorrow when it's daylight. It will be safer than fixing it while hidden in darkness."

"Alright. Brody said he'll be there in ten minutes."

The rest of the night wasn't so bad; it was just a lot of opinion-sharing about Joe. The part of the conversation I had missed while Brody and Ansel talked to him revealed that Joe has a penchant for getting whatever new shiny toy strikes his fancy. My brothers seem to think he views me much the same way—an object that he wants.

I assured my family that I didn't have any desire to date Joe going forward and that we had very little in common. But that doesn't mean I couldn't be friends with him. I told them about the date and about our uninvited guest.

Daphne, who had shown up halfway through dinner, asked, "Did she really say she is going to play for keeps?" referring to Melissa.

"Yeppers. It's not so much *what* Melissa said but *how* she said it. When she got into my personal space, it felt more like a threat." My family doesn't take kindly to threats, so I was taken aback when Daphne spoke her next words.

“Well, there’s no doubt she’s going to win,” my sister said bluntly.

I narrowed my eyes at her.

“Don’t look at me like that, Leanna! She’s going to win because you aren’t even playing the game! Right now, you’re nothing but a spectator with season tickets, watching and hollering from the sidelines! You can’t win if you don’t play. You’re like one of those people hoping to win the lottery, but don’t bother buying a ticket!”

When no one else said anything, I looked each of them in the eye. “Do you all agree with her?” Slowly, one by one, they all nodded in affirmation.

Marybeth came over and gave me a side hug. “I wouldn’t have put it quite like that, but Daphne’s not wrong. Leanna, you need to make a choice soon, or there isn’t going to be one left to make.”



The last thing I feel like doing when I wake up this morning is fixing my flat tire. Usually, I wouldn’t procrastinate, but today, I want to wait until the sun is higher in the sky and my body is fully caffeinated before I get started on *that* fun task.

Not wanting to waste too much of my day off, I eventually muster up the energy to do what needs to be done and start changing my tire. Once I have it removed, it’s clear to see

what caused the flat—a large nail. I pull it out with pliers and frown at what I see. It's nearly three inches long and perfectly straight, having punctured through the steel cords inside. Normally, a nail this size would bend when it hits the radial bands.

Staring at the nail, I can't help but wonder if it was one of those "one-in-a-million" chance happenings or if someone did this on purpose. Immediately, I think of Mark Jenkins and his threat that karma would get me. The other day, I felt like I was being watched. Could Mark have been following me and waiting for an opportunity to do such a thing? It seems petty, but the timing fits.

The same feeling of being watched happens again when I raise the trunk of my car to pull out my spare. I look over my shoulder but don't see anyone. Feeling silly, I quickly finish up and head back inside, setting the alarm. I pull the curtains back just a fraction and watch to see if anyone is scoping out the place, but after five minutes, there's still no sign of anyone out of place. I laugh at my paranoia and spend the next few hours binge-watching *Chopped* and eating delivery from *Condividi Sempre*. I might not be able to cook, but a girl can dream.

I must have dozed off because I'm startled awake when Daphne gets home from work and immediately starts talking a mile a minute.

"I think it's time for me to seriously consider getting a temporary place in Medford, as you had suggested. The number of accidents on the I-95 was insane! I didn't think...

Oh! Were you sleeping?" She looks at her phone to check the time.

"I must have been tired from doing a whole lot of nothing today. Other than changing a tire, I mostly vegetated. Why on earth are you holding a vase full of wilted flowers?"

"Oh. These were on the porch. They have seen better days, haven't they?" She grabs the card tucked in the nearly dead bouquet, and her lips turn down as she flips it over. "There's no name on it. Want me to open it?"

"Sure. Maybe they're for you."

"I haven't had time to meet a man, not even one that buys the bargain flowers on clearance," she says, almost despondently. She opens the card and grimaces. Instead of reading it to me, she throws the flowers and the card in the trash.

"What did it say?"

"Nothing worth repeating." She plops down beside me and looks straight ahead, saying nothing. I stare at her for nearly three minutes before she cracks.

"Gah! Fine! You win! The note said, 'All good things must come to an end.' Do you have any idea who would have sent that?"

"Yes. No. I don't know?" I tell her my theory about the nail and the feeling of being watched.

"You might be right about that Mark guy, but have you considered the possibility that it could be Melissa? Maybe

scaring you is one of her ways of ‘playing for keeps?’”

“I hadn’t thought of that. But how would either one of them know where I live?” I begin to bite on my thumbnail nervously, at least until she slaps it away.

“What about Joe? Didn’t he drive you home the other day? He knows where you live and has a history of sending flowers anonymously.”

I shake my head. “Why would he send a note like that? I can’t think of one good reason since we left things on good terms.”

“Who knows? Maybe he thinks Carter is an obstacle and is standing in the way of you falling for him. You saved his life, and now he’s totally obsessed with you. What’s that called? The Nightingale Effect?”

“You’re too much!” I tell her, throwing one of the couch pillows at her head. She laughs but doesn’t argue.

“I’m going to head to bed. I have to get up early to stop by the tire shop and have them put on a full-size one before I go to work. That means being there as soon as they open at six.”

“Nighty night!” she shouts as I shuffle up the stairs.

I arrive at the station the next day with a cup of java and a brand-spanking new tire. Feeling like I accomplished more today than I did yesterday, I’m all smiles when I enter the firehouse. That is until I see the brooding looks on Sebastian’s, Callum’s, and Trey’s faces.

“Whatever it is, I didn’t do it!” I tell them.

“No, you surely didn’t,” my brother says, with his hands firmly on his hips and wearing a glower. “What you should have done was call us the moment you thought something was wrong. We had to hear from Daphne about the flowers and the ominous note attached.”

“We should tell Carter about this,” Callum suggests.

“NO! I don’t want to bother him with something that’s most likely nothing. I can handle this.” I debated whether to call Carter and tell him what was happening but ultimately decided against it. He clearly wanted space, and I intend to give it to him.

Trey purses his lips. “I don’t like it, but it’s Leanna’s life and her decision. We have to respect that.”

“Thank you. Now let’s get to work.” I say, clapping my hands once for effect. Callum comes over and quickly hugs me since his shift is over.

“Be careful. When people aren’t in their right mind, they can become dangerous. I strongly suggest rethinking your stance on talking to Carter about this. I don’t want to see what happened to Callie happen to you because some small detail is missed.”

“I’ll think about it, I promise.” Our oldest sister, Callie, had been stalked and attacked two years ago, and we almost lost her. Thankfully, she survived the encounter, but just barely. If it hadn’t been for Callum and Carter, the outcome might have been very different.

It doesn't take long before the emergency calls start coming in, and they continue non-stop. Every time Trey and I get a breather, "Nagging Nancy" starts blaring at us again. We're on our eighth call, and exhaustion is beginning to weigh heavily on us both.

"This better not be another prank call!" I say, frustrated.

"I'm not holding my breath. It would be the third one in a row. Are you getting any tingles this time?"

"Nope. Not a one." The previous two prank calls were nothing but heaving breathing on a burner phone, forcing the dispatcher to use cell towers to ping a general area. This time, a voice on the other end of the line yelled, "Send help to the corner of 6th and Knackers Ave," before hanging up.

I see a police car and Engine 12 parked in the lot of an abandoned strip mall when we arrive. We pull in behind them and get out, greeting Officer Jordan and the team of firefighters from the station my brother Brody works with. It's not a surprise when it's Brody who walks up to us with a grim smile.

"Hey, Lee. Bad news. Nothing is going on here, and it looks like a prank call. Officer Jordan was the first to arrive on the scene and scoped out the place, finding nothing but a burner phone lying on the ground. What is with kids these days? Don't they realize that prank calls prevent us from being in a position to help people who really need it?"

"It's disturbing, to say the least. This is the third one in a row we've responded to tonight. I'll do another quick sweep and

then call it in. You guys go on and get back. No sense in us all being out here.”

He gives me a brotherly hug before they depart. Officer Jordan walks up to us next, shaking his head. “I’ve called it in, so you don’t have to do another walk.”

“Thanks.” He gives me a single nod before striding back toward his cruiser. That’s when our radios squawk with another emergency, and my fingers begin to tingle. At least I know this one is real.

Sirens blaring, we take off to transport a pregnant woman to the hospital. Her husband is deployed, and her parents are currently driving up from Florida.

“I guess they’re a day late and a dollar short. You know? My parents are going to be so bummed if they miss the birth. I know that Parker is. That’s my husband.” She continues to talk to me the entire ride while I help her through the labor pains. Patients like this always brighten my day.

Rolling into the fire station half an hour before our shift ends, I’m happy but tired. I’m barely out of the vehicle when Sebastian stomps towards us and says, “We need to talk.”

“Can it wait? I need caffeine first.”

“You’re going to need more than caffeine, Leanna. You’re going to need four new tires.

Chapter Fifteen

Carter

I don't know why I expected Leanna to call or even text, but she didn't, and I felt a pang of disappointment at the fact. Since returning to my hometown, I've missed her fiercely, as if a piece of me was missing. The sound of her voice would have dulled the ache in my heart, but knowing her, she was giving me the space I needed to figure everything out. Although I'm frequently gone on various assignments, this is the first time I've felt this innate sense of loss. I don't like it, but I'm unsure what to do.

For the past several days, I've been spending my free time fixing up my father's old house. It's a tiny, two-bedroom abode that had put a roof over our heads, and occasionally there was food on the table. It's the only thing I have left that belonged to my father, and I want to preserve his legacy. Yet, at the same time, not all the memories are good ones, and I want to get rid of the place. Like right now.

I'm standing in the very same spot I did as a child when I watched my mother pack her bags. I had no idea it would be

the last time I would ever see her. My father was in town, picking up the few meager groceries we could afford, when she turned to me and said, “Goodbye, Carter.” That’s it. There was no “I love you” or explanation for her departure, just a kiss on the cheek before she walked out the front door, never looking back. It wasn’t until I was a teenager that I found a note hidden in my father’s sock drawer that I finally understood.

Dear Richard,

When I married you, this was not the life you had promised me. Our hopes and dreams have fallen by the wayside, and our plans to leave this place are all but gone now. I wanted to travel, to experience life, and leave this tiny town in the middle of nowhere. You promised to give me all those things, yet nothing has changed.

Being a mother was never something I wanted, and it’s time for me to put my needs first. I fear that if I don’t leave now, I’ll forever be stuck in a life I don’t want. For ten years, I have lived every day wishing things were different, and now they will be.

Goodbye,

Margaret

The one woman who was supposed to love me unconditionally never loved me at all. My presence made her feel trapped, and she thought leaving was the only way to find happiness. Years later, when Melissa left for much of the same

reason, it only solidified my belief that I would never be enough for any woman. That is until I met Leanna.

From the moment I met Leanna at a Sunday barbeque two years ago, I knew she was something special. I had no idea at the time how much she would come to mean to me, and I never expected to fall in love. I thought that keeping our relationship platonic was the best thing to protect my heart, but Leanna stole it a long time ago like a thief in the night. I don't know when it happened, but I do know that I need to let her know how I feel.

Leanna is not only my best friend, but also the person I want to see every morning when I wake up and every night before I go to sleep. The roommate situation has given me what I want, but now I want more.

When she agreed to go on a date with Joe, the fear of losing her to someone else suddenly became a very real possibility. I won't lose her, not like that, and not because I let fear dictate my actions. Now, I just need to figure out a way to tell her without ruining what we've built between us.

Sitting on the front porch with my head resting against the door and my feet straight out in front of me, I close my eyes and imagine a future with Leanna. I smile when I picture two kids running around our yard, playing laser tag, and laughing joyously. My daydreaming is interrupted when my cell phone rings. I pull it out of my pocket and notice the caller ID says SKPS.

“Andrews,” I answer, using my last name.

“Hey Carter, it’s Ben. I know you were planning on returning from your trip tomorrow, but I need you to get here as soon as possible. We have a meeting with a client in six hours, and the job starts as soon as the meeting is over. I rented a charter for you that leaves in an hour from Denison Municipal. Can you get there in time?”

Thankfully, I have been living out of my suitcase, and with a quick zip of my bags and lockup of the house, I can be on my way in minutes. I look at my watch and sigh. “That’s going to be cutting it close. If you’re willing to go through all this trouble, this must be a fairly prominent client.”

“Not prominent, but important. You’ll be working with Patrick and Savannah on this job, but I’ve assigned you as the team lead since you were specifically requested for this assignment.”

“I’m on my way.” I swap the call over to the hands-free device when I get in the car. “What do you want me to do about my rental vehicle?”

“I’ll take care of that for you. A driver will be waiting for you at JFK airport and bringing you straight here. No time to waste,” Ben tells me with a sense of urgency.

“Copy all.” With that, Ben hangs up, and I speed toward the airport.

I spend the half-hour drive trying to figure out the best way to declare my love for Leanna, unsure if I should ask her out on a date or just lay my cards on the table when I get home. I guess it doesn’t matter since it looks like it will have to wait.

First, I have a job to do.



Five and a half hours later, I'm riding up the elevator to the top floor of our office building, heading toward the conference room where I'll meet with Ben, Ethan, and the client. On my way, I'm stopped in the hallway by Amelia.

"Hey, Carter. Good luck with your assignment. Something tells me you're going to need it," she says with a wink.

If it wasn't for her wink, I might be concerned. Regardless, I am curious and hope she'll give me the inside scoop.

"What am I going to be walking into? Do you know who the client is?" I ask.

"I do, and you won't be walking into anything you can't handle. This assignment is perfect for you, and the client couldn't be in better hands."

"So, you aren't going to tell me who it is?" I ask, chuckling.

"What's the fun in that? I'll escort you in just so I can see your face," she says, looping her arm in mine and grinning broadly.

"Now I'm scared," I joke.

"There's nothing to be scared about...I don't think," she says hesitantly. Then, squaring her shoulders, she adds, "In fact, I have a really good feeling about this one."

“Are you doing your matchmaking thing again?” I tease.

“When am I not? You might have decided not to be my client anymore, but that doesn’t mean I’m not keeping my eye out for potential matches. However, I don’t believe you need my services. My gut says you already found your match, and you know as well as anybody that my gut is never wrong.”

I give her a warm smile. “That’s true.” When I don’t elaborate, she turns, stops us in front of the conference room doors, and stares me straight in the eyes. Once she sees what she’s looking for, she says, “Good. It’s about time.”

Amelia opens the door and announces our presence by shouting, “Look who I found loitering in the hallway?”

I roll my eyes at her lack of professionalism, but I can understand why when I see all the faces staring back at me. This isn’t just a client; it’s the entire Arbaroa family. I scan the room, my breath hitching when my eyes lock with Leanna’s.

“What’s going on?” I ask, wondering if this is some kind of setup or another one of Amelia’s matchmaking schemes. When I glance over in Amelia’s direction, she shakes her head, silently answering my unasked question. Apparently, she has nothing to do with this.

“Please, have a seat,” Ethan says. I do as he says, taking the only seat available on the opposite side of Leanna.

“Thank you for getting here on such short notice. As you can see,” he says, gesturing to everyone, “there was a reason I called you. While you were back home, a string of events

occurred that warrants additional protection for one of the members of the Arbaroa family. They requested that you be the added protection.”

“We couldn’t think of anyone we trusted more to protect Leanna than you, Carter. You’re more than just a roommate and a friend. You’re family to us,” Nicholas says. As the patriarch, his words and trust mean a lot to me.

“Leanna, would you like to explain what has happened to warrant a protection detail?” Ethan asks.

“I don’t think I need one, but everyone else seems to disagree. A few punctured tires and dead flowers do not mean my life is being threatened,” she says, not meeting my eyes.

“Oh, it’s more than that!” Daphne loudly exclaims. Turning to me, she says, “As you know, Leanna has been subtly threatened by Mark Jenkins and your ex-fiancée, Melissa.” My eyes widen at the last part.

“Melissa threatened you?” I ask, directing my question at Leanna.

“Not exactly. She just wants you back and said she was ‘playing for keeps.’”

Melissa has always been tenacious, going after what she wants. Unfortunately, she usually wants what she can’t have; in this case, that’s me. Regardless, I can’t imagine Melissa doing anything nefarious to reach her goals—at least not the Melissa I once knew.

Not ruling anything out, I wave my hand for the conversation to continue. This time, it's Sebastian who speaks up. "Leanna is making light of the situation. Her rear tire had a three-inch nail that was driven in like a stake, causing it to go flat. It could have been an accident, but as soon as she had it fixed, all four were slashed while parked in the lot by the fire station."

"Then there were the dead flowers left on our porch and the note that read 'all good things must come to an end,'" Daphne says, truly worried for her sister.

"And if that wasn't bad enough, Brody and I had to go and clean red paint off your door this morning that was meant to look like blood," Ansel utters.

"Did anyone look at the security feeds for the house or the parking lot? That might give us a better idea of who might be behind this. And did anyone contact the police to file a report?" I ask.

"Yeah, we did. Whoever did the stuff at your house was wearing all black and a ski mask, not to mention it was dark outside each time. Other than it *looking* like a man, there was nothing we could see that would identify them. Maybe when you watch the feed, you might see something we missed," says my friend Callum.

"What about in the parking lot?"

Sebastian shakes his head. "The lot isn't monitored by cameras, although it should be. As far as the police are concerned, Officer Jordan responded to our call, and we filed a

report with him. He doesn't think it's anything to get too worried about, but we disagree. It's our sister's life that's being messed with."

"Oh! Don't forget about that Joe guy! He has a history of sending Leanna flowers and might not have appreciated the brush-off she gave him. He also knows where we live since he brought her home." Daphne adds.

"I didn't brush him off...*per se*. He's a nice enough guy, and friendly outings are okay," Leanna defends.

I notice Brody and Ansel scowl at the mention of Joe. I'm sure mine looks similar.

"You mean friends like you and Carter?" Callie asks ever so sweetly. The glint in her eye when she poses the question is anything but. Rather, it looks mischievous and cunning. Their mom, Elena, bursts out in laughter, and Leanna turns and glares at her.

"What? That was the funniest thing I've heard today!" Elena declares. "But it's a great segway for what we are about to ask of Carter." At this, Leanna's face turns red with shame and embarrassment.

"You don't need to do that, Mom. We'll be gone on the ski trip, and all this will blow over. You'll see."

"That's what we thought when we went to Vegas and Callie was being stalked. You may not want to admit it, Leanna. But this kind of trouble can follow you wherever you go." Callum grabs his wife's hand and squeezes it lovingly.

“Callum’s right. That’s why we have a plan to get to the bottom of this,” Ethan says. My boss glances at his wife, Amelia, and gives her an almost imperceptible smile. It’s her beaming one in return that has me nervous. I take back my previous assessment. Maybe she is involved in all of this.

“Carter, you will go on the ski trip and provide round-the-clock protection for Leanna. Nick and Elena have assured me a room will be available for you so that you’re never too far away. Also, you’ll be placing minicams around the house and outside, similar to the hospital job you did when you first started with us. Unlike the ones at your home, these cameras are designed for obscurity. You’ll have your laptop to access data at any time, but the feeds will upload to a server here as a backup,” Ethan continues to detail the type of equipment that will be used, not for my benefit, but for that of the family.

Ben stands up, leans forward on the table, and directs his comment at me. “For this assignment, you will pose as Leanna’s boyfriend.”

Leanna begins to object, and frustration mars her features. Ben holds up his hand to stop her. “You need a reason to always be together. If you are being targeted because of jealousy, either from Joe or Melissa, then playing the happy couple might get them to back off peacefully without any of this escalating further. If it’s Mark Jenkins coming after you for revenge, then I want someone licensed to carry a weapon with you day and night. It’s going to happen this way or not at all.”

Leanna looks like she's on the verge of tears despite the rest of the room having slightly upturned lips. I keep my face blank but am nearly biting at the bit to start this assignment. If I needed a way to show Leanna how I feel about her without risking our friendship in the process, this might be the ticket. I just wish Leanna looked as excited about the prospect of fake dating me as I am her, even though none of it would be fake for me. Instead, she seems like she wants to hurl.

I'm sure Leanna feels like everything is spiraling out of control, and I want to give a piece of that back, so I say the only thing that comes to mind.

"I'll do it, but the choice belongs to Leanna."

Chapter Sixteen

Leanna

I was grateful that Carter gave me the choice, giving me some semblance of control even though I knew I would do whatever I could to give my family a sense of peace. My hesitancy in agreeing to “fake date” Carter isn’t because I don’t want to. I just know that there is no way I can pretend. I’m afraid he’ll see through me and run away faster than I can blink.

After the meeting ends, the ladies in the room pull me aside for a private conversation. Mom, Callie, Daphne, and I follow Amelia into a separate conference room while the guys talk security and logistics.

As soon as the doors close, my mother pulls me into a hug and simply holds me while I get myself together. Overwhelmed by everything that’s been happening lately, I inadvertently let a few tears fall. I always try to be strong when faced with adversity, but sometimes, the bottle has to be uncorked. The past few days, after holding everything in, I’ve been shaken up and feel like I’m ready to explode. The

motherly hug lets the pressure slowly release so that doesn't happen.

"I'm okay," I tell her, stepping back and seeing all the faces staring at me with sympathy, especially Callie, who has been down this road before. She walks over and puts her arm around my shoulders.

"Tell me what's really bothering you about this whole thing, Layleebug," she demands lightly, using a nickname she hasn't said since I was seven.

I shrug my shoulders, not entirely sure. "I don't know. I thought I was handling everything just fine."

"Is it because of Carter?" Amelia asks. "Is it the 'fake relationship' arrangement that has you worried? Because honestly, it's a good thing."

"I want to believe you, but..."

"No buts about it!" Daphne states emphatically. "The way I see it, this is the perfect opportunity for Carter to see how great a relationship with the world's best sister is without the risk! The same could be said in reverse, too. You can see if you and Carter are compatible romantically and not just as friends."

"Hey! I'm your sister, too!" Callie shouts playfully.

Daphne looks chagrined and tries to back-peddle. "You're the best oldest sister. Leanna is the best youngest sister. It's all a matter of perspective."

Callie smirks. "I can accept that."

Amelia laughs, then turns to me, “If you truly aren’t okay with the arrangement, I can go talk to my brother and husband, and we’ll figure something else out. But Daphne is right. This is a chance for you to explore the possibility of a romantic connection without the added pressure of *actually* being in a relationship. If things don’t work out, you both can go back to pretending to be ‘just friends.’”

“Look how a fake engagement turned out for me! I have a husband and a beautiful daughter out of the deal. Maybe you can get your ‘happily ever after’ as well,” Callie says excitedly.

Amelia giggles. “I’d like to think I played a small part in that. I knew the two of you would be perfect for one another, even if you got together in a very different way than I had anticipated.” Turning to me, she says, “I have the same feeling about you and Carter.”

“I think it’s time we head back to the conference room and make sure we are all on the same page,” says my mother, already heading for the door. We all trail behind. Just before we exit, Amelia leaves me with a parting thought.

“And think, you finally get to kiss Carter. No way to make it look real without a little smooching.” I blush as I imagine what kissing Carter will be like. Everyone laughs at my reddened cheeks, knowing exactly where my mind has gone.

Once we return to the main conference room, I notice that pizza has been delivered and another guest has arrived. I

finally get to meet Claire, Ben's wife, who is six months pregnant and glowing.

"You must be the lovely Leanna. Carter talks about you all the time and has nothing but great things to say," the petite blonde tells me with genuine affection. Her silver eyes sparkle, and her smile is bright.

"It's nice to put a face to the name. Carter thinks very highly of you. He said it took an 'extraordinary woman to tame the beast.'" Her tinkling laugh in response makes me feel like someone sprinkled fairy dust in the room.

"Ben can be intimidating with his size and stoic demeanor. But don't let that fool you. Underneath all the seriousness is a man who is as loyal, dedicated, and as loving as they come. He will move heaven and earth for those he cares about." When she talks about her husband, you can feel her love for him.

We chat for a few more minutes before Patrick and Savannah waltz over to greet me. I know both of them well, but I have a soft spot for the Henry Cavill lookalike. If his hair was darker and his eyes were brown, they might be mistaken for brothers. He's almost as pretty to look at as is Carter.

I've gotten to know Carter's entire team, and we've had a few poker nights over the past few years, but poor Patrick has never won a single game. Savannah, on the other hand, rarely loses. Together, the two look like a beautiful celebrity couple, yet I know they aren't anything more than friends. Patrick has never dated a single woman that I am aware of, but we girls have always speculated that there's a woman out there who

holds the key to his heart. Maybe one day we will get to meet her.

“Hi, Leanna. I hear we will be protecting you on this assignment,” Savannah says. Claire says her goodbyes so the three of us can talk shop.

“That’s the rumor.”

“Carter will be with you and your primary security detail, but Patrick and I will pose as a newlywed couple on our honeymoon, always in the background and keeping a lookout. We call that three-sixty security. We will be the eyes in the back of Carter’s head, seeing what he can’t. If you see us around, you’ll need to pretend we aren’t even there and that you don’t know us. The rest of your family has been given the same instructions. If there is a social gathering or event for the guests, then we can cross paths and mingle, but it should remain inconspicuous.”

“Is there anything else I should know? Or do you need anything from me?”

Savannah shakes her head. “Nope. Enjoy yourself and act as if everything is normal. We don’t want to tip anyone off that you have a security detail. Regarding the suspects, we have dossiers on all three individuals. The only one that stands out as a real threat is Mark Jenkins. He’s been charged twice with assault and once for vandalism of private property. Nothing stuck because the charges were dropped, and the matter was settled out of court. They were acts of retribution against

senior members of the law firm he was fired from shortly after he was disbarred.”

My arms break out in gooseflesh at the thought that Mark Jenkins might have decided to take revenge on me for the loss of his father. “You mentioned vandalism. What did he do?”

“Red paint on their cars and slashed tires, for starters. I think he’s the one we need to watch out for since the same thing happened to you,” Patrick tells me. He’s always been a straight shooter.

“What about Melissa and Joe?” I ask, just as Carter comes to stand beside me. He hands me a slice of chicken and artichoke pizza, my favorite. I take it from him, grateful for his thoughtfulness. It’s a typical Carter move, knowing what I need before I do.

“Joe was raised in foster homes, never staying in one place for very long. There were a few fights between him and other foster kids, but nothing that ever got out of hand. He was arrested once for drunken disorderly after a night of celebrating making his first million. Melissa, on the other hand, has had two restraining orders filed against her for stalking. There were never any physical altercations or vandalism reported, but she would harass the women that the men she was interested in were engaged to. Surprisingly, it was the men who filed the restraining order on behalf of their fiancées. Would you like to know the name of the men?” Savannah had directed her last question more to Carter than to me.

We both nod in unison, though unsure why it matters.

“Take a guess. I’ll give you three, but I don’t think you’ll need it,” she says.

“Carter,” I state, watching his face pale as it dawns on him what I said.

“You got it in one.” Savannah’s smile looks more worried than pleasant. “I still think Mark is our most likely suspect because of the vandalism and threats. But it’s not out of the realm of possibility that Melissa may very well be the culprit. Joe is last on my list, but who knows? It’s the quiet ones that often surprise you.”

“Joe is the only one I’m aware of who has an idea where we will be,” I tell them in full disclosure. “Granted, it came up in conversation before all this stuff started happening, so I had no reason to think anything of it then. He’s supposed to attend a three-day conference at the Windam Mountain Ski Lodge and Expo Center.”

“I’ll go verify the information.” Patrick waves before turning on his heel to do just that.

“We should be going. I still have to pack since we’ll be leaving early tomorrow,” Carter informs me. Savannah takes that as her cue to leave.

“You don’t think we should talk about the elephant in the room?” I question.

“I do. Just not here. We’ll talk about it when we get home and have a little more privacy. Daphne will be staying with

your parents tonight for that very reason.”

Before I can say anything, Ben walks up to us. “Carter, the equipment has been loaded into Nick and Elena’s SUV, so it doesn’t look odd for you to bring a large pelican case. It will be less obvious when offloaded with the rest of the bags. Call me if you need anything or additional support. Good luck and Godspeed.” Ben slaps Carter on the back and heads over to his wife.

We all leave and go our separate ways now that the meeting is finally over. Carter and I ride with Daphne since Carter’s truck is at the house, and mine is in the shop getting four new tires. Once we’re home, Carter takes my hand as we head up the stairs.

“May as well start now. You never know who could be watching,” he says as I give him a barely-there smile.

Having left the car idling, Daphne quickly grabs her luggage and we help her load it into the trunk. She gets in the driver’s seat, shuts the door, and rolls down her window. She doesn’t look over her shoulder, but she looks around with her eyes, making sure the coast is clear before she tells us what’s on her mind.

“Now that you two are in a...um...a relationship, don’t do anything I wouldn’t do.” She cackles as she pulls out of the spot, driving away before either of us can say anything to her.

We both stand there in silence until I cross my arms over my chest and ask, “Are you ready to have the talk?”

Chapter Seventeen

Carter

The first thing I do when we get inside the house is set the alarm and ensure all the cameras are working. I need to go through the feed and see if there's anything that might help me identify who is perpetrating these acts against Leanna, but that can wait until later.

"Cocoa?" I don't wait for her answer because she only ever gives me one. She's always down for anything with chocolate. It doesn't take long for me to have all the ingredients set out on the counter and the milk slowly warming in the pan.

"Are you buttering me up for some bad news, or are you making cocoa as an avoidance technique?"

"You know me better than that, Leanna."

"I know. That's why I'm asking the question. You don't like to share freely and have an innate ability to deflect without anyone realizing it until it's too late to circle back. But I'm on to you, Mister!" she teases.

I chuckle. “No. I thought it would be nice to have something warm to sip on while we talk, preferably something that won’t keep us up half the night. We have an early day tomorrow and should be well rested.” I stir the milk so that it doesn’t burn while slowly adding in the chocolate pieces.

When the chocolatey concoction is ready, I pour it into two large mugs. I add marshmallows for her and whipped cream for me. She giggles when the whipped cream sticks to the top of my lip.

She takes a long sip and then sighs, part in contentment for the delicious beverage and part in resignation. “Thank you. As always, this is really good. I’m going to miss this when this situation is over.”

“And why would you have to miss it? Are you planning on going somewhere?” I ask. If this works out as I hope, then she won’t need to go anywhere.

“Carter. Let’s be honest here. Pretending to be in a relationship will change the dynamics of our friendship. Even you have to admit that.” I bob my head in agreement but wait for her to continue. “I treasure what we have right now. I don’t want to lose that.”

“I understand. I don’t want to lose that either.”

“Good, then we’re in agreement that we shouldn’t do this,” she says, almost disappointed.

“Leanna, you’ve never been one to put words in my mouth. Please don’t do it now. I never said that I didn’t want to do

this. Your safety and well-being are my primary concerns. I'm okay with our friendship changing if it means you're around to be friends with." I intend to make sure our friendship changes, but into something more, not something less.

I set my mug down on the counter and walk around the island so that we are standing face to face with nothing separating us. "When I said that the choice is yours, I meant it. If this isn't something you're willing to do, then we won't do it. I'll talk to Ben and figure out another way."

She stares at me for a long moment, then lowers her gaze. "No. I'll do it. But I'm scared, Carter."

I tilt her chin up so her gaze meets mine. I don't want her to shy away from answering my next question. "What are you scared of?"

"I'm scared I'll give us away. I had exactly one boyfriend back in high school who broke up with me after our first kiss. I guess I wasn't worth the trouble of sticking around since I wasn't willing to do what he wanted. After that, I was too focused on my goals to give dating much thought. I have no idea how to act or what's expected," she whispers.

Her cheeks blush a beautiful shade of pink, embarrassed by her innocence. If only she knew that it makes me cherish her even more.

"There's not much more to it than what we already do. We spend most of our free time together, laughing, watching movies, going for coffee, and those kinds of things."

“What does the ‘not much more’ entail?” she asks shyly.

I step a little closer and reach for her hand. “It might require some handholding,” I tell her, rubbing light circles with my thumb. “Is that okay?”

She dips her chin once and murmurs, “Yes.”

I pull her hand to my lips and kiss the top lightly. “We might have to show affection with small things like this,” I tell her in a husky tone. I proceed to kiss each knuckle slowly and tenderly. She doesn’t say anything in response, but her breathing accelerates.

I lower her hand, pull her body towards me so it’s flush with mine, and lean in and whisper, “I might have to do something like this...” I nibble on her ear, then nuzzle her neck, leaving a small trail of feather-light kisses. “Are you all right with that?”

“Uh-huh.” I try not to smirk when her legs start to wobble, and I have to hold her up. I can only imagine what her response will be when I kiss her the way she deserves to be kissed. But I plan to do that when I know her feelings for me mirror my own for her. Until then, quick pecks will have to do.

I slowly let go, ensuring she’s steady on her feet before I finally step back. I take great pleasure in seeing her slight smile and closed eyes, knowing she enjoyed the moment as much as I did.

“If you can handle us doing that until we catch the culprit, then I think we can make this fake relationship work,” I tell

her. I notice her tiny smile disappears when I use the word “fake,” and it gives me a glimmer of hope that things aren’t as one-sided as I thought.

“I’m thoroughly drained and running on fumes at this point. I haven’t been to sleep in nearly 36 hours. Are you okay with talking more on the drive tomorrow? I know you still have to pack, but you need to try and get some sleep, too.” She waits for me to nod before she trudges up the stairs. I can practically feel the weight of her exhaustion from where I’m standing.

When Leanna reaches the top landing, she calls my name. “Carter?”

“Yeah?”

“Just so you know, I missed you too.”



After Leanna went to bed, I combed through the footage from our security camera. Callum was right. The person in question not only wore all black and a ski mask to hide their features but somehow managed to avoid tripping the motion-sensing light on the front porch. Whoever it is, I have to give them some credit; they knew what they were doing.

That done, I move on to my next objective—laundry. It was close to midnight by the time I repacked my bags with the proper winter gear for the slopes and pulled out my snowboard from the garage. Leanna and Daphne’s equipment was set

against the wall, ready to be loaded as well. At least they made it easy for me, and I had everything in the truck and tied down before going to sleep.

With our scheduled departure time set for six in the morning, I had set my alarm for five. When it goes off, I rush down the stairs and push the start button to the coffee pot while also popping in a pod for a quick cup to drink now. Half an hour later, Leanna comes downstairs freshly showered and looking beautiful. I pour her a cup and slide it over to where she's sitting on a barstool at the breakfast bar.

"You're my hero," she says, inhaling the scent of coffee. "Nothing beats waking up to this smell."

"I know we are having breakfast at Sebastian's house with the whole family before we travel up North, but I thought you might want a bagel to tide you over until we arrive. I know how you can get if you don't get carbs first thing in the morning," I tease.

She looks around the room and notices her bags missing. "What happened to my luggage?"

"I put it in the truck last night along with all our gear. But we should do a last-minute walkthrough to make sure nothing got missed."

After eating our morning snack, Leanna goes through the house to check and see if we need any last-minute items. By the time she's finished, the dishes are done, and I'm standing by the door holding her coat out for her.

“Such a gentleman. But you know you don’t have to do that kind of thing when no one’s looking, Carter.”

“We have to stay in character the entire time, Leanna. Think of it as undercover work. You said you thought it would be fun to be a spy. Now’s your chance!”

I can tell by her laugh that she doesn’t believe me.

“Seriously, Lee, this is your life at stake. Right now, it’s only been slashed tires and dead flowers, but a stalker’s behavior often escalates when they aren’t getting their desired outcome. We must stick with the plan until we know what that outcome is. That means you’ll have to be comfortable with not only me showing affection toward you but the other way around as well.”

“I’ll try.”

She opens the door and marches toward the truck like a woman on a mission. I set the security system and lock up behind us, following close behind. Once we’re buckled in and I’ve pulled out of the driveway, I ask, “Is it really going to be that hard for you to pretend to love me? Because you get to sample all of this for an entire week,” I joke, gesturing from my head to my toes.

Leanna shoves me playfully but doesn’t answer my question. With her silence, my doubts and fears reemerge. Maybe I truly am unlovable. *No! I can’t think like that again!*

When I was back home in Iowa, I had time to reflect and pray about my ability to be loved and whether or not I was

worthy of it. I didn't hear any voice boom from the heavens or whispers in the wind, but I did get an answer. I had come across my father's well-worn Bible and begun flipping through the pages, noticing all the underlined passages and the notes in the margins. A particular verse caught my eye, probably because it was highlighted and stood out from the rest of his scribbles.

“As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Abide in my love.” John 15:9 ESV

The passage reminded me of my own father, who loved me beyond a shadow of a doubt, sacrificing everything for me when I was growing up. I had been so focused on what I didn't have at the time that I hadn't appreciated what I did have until it was too late. After my moment of clarity, I had a good cry, followed by an overwhelming sense of peace that wrapped around me like a hug. Right then, I knew I was worthy, and my fear of loving Leanna and her not loving me back had vanished.

Chapter Eighteen

Leanna

Breakfast at Sebastian's house was a crazy affair. With 14 people gathered around the table and chattering loudly over one another, it was hard to make heads or tails of anything that was being said. Eleven adults and three children running around to clean up the mess, grabbing the bags, and loading the vehicles for our vacation reminded me of the movie "Home Alone."

"Where's Kevin?" I yelled, referencing the holiday flick. All of the adults laughed at my joke, but it wouldn't have been nearly as funny if our mother hadn't done a head count to ensure everyone was accounted for.

Brody and Ansel rode with Sebastian and Marybeth, while the older children rode with Grandpa and Grandma. Daphne hitched a ride with Callie, Callum, and little Bella Rae. Daphne loves to dote on the baby in our group. That left Carter and me to ride up alone.

For the first half hour, Carter and I listened to music, singing along at the top of our lungs. Most of that time was spent

laughing because neither of us could hold a tune. We were having a good time until a call came through and interrupted the song.

“It’s Patrick,” Carter informs me after checking the caller ID.

“Hey, Patrick. Are you guys on your way?”

“We are, but I wanted to give you a heads up about something new we learned regarding Mark Jenkins,” Patrick says.

“Go ahead. Leanna’s here with me, and you’re on speaker.”

“West River Memorial Hospital filed a report against Mark Jenkins last week. He was disturbing the peace, ranting and raving about the quality of care in the city and how everyone in the medical profession was inept. His outbursts were getting so out of control that they called the cops to escort him off the premises. In the report that was filed, Mark Jenkins had mentioned that...wait, let me read it verbatim for you. Ah, here it is. ‘The EMTs are worthless, especially the females. Leanna let my father die, and now she needs to pay.’”

Carter grabs my hand and holds it, giving me a reassuring squeeze. “Did they arrest him?”

I hear Patrick’s sigh loud and clear through the hands-free system. “No. The cop on duty was able to calm him down. Since the man had just lost his father and was visibly upset, the hospital didn’t want to press charges. He was belligerent, not violent. You might want to note that the funeral was two days before everything began happening.”

“Thanks for the warning, Patrick,” I tell him.

“Don’t thank me. I’m just the messenger. Savannah is the one who dug a little deeper and found this information.”

“Well, thank you both; to Savannah for finding it and to you for delivering it. I guess we’ll see you soon.”

“Just remember, Leanna. Once we’re up there, you don’t know us, okay? And don’t let all of this get to you. Have fun, try to relax, and enjoy yourself. You let us worry about everything else.”

Carter clears his throat and says, “Thanks, Patrick. I’ll touch base with you guys via encrypted communications once we get settled in and get everything set up.”

The line goes dead, and Carter looks over at me. “Are you all right?”

“As good as can be expected, all things considered. Do you think it could be Mark?” I worry at my lower lip. Carter notices my nervous habit and lets go of my hand to gently tug my lip from between my teeth.

“He is our most likely suspect based on the information we have available to us. But the odds of him knowing where you’ll be this week are slim to none,” he says.

“But they aren’t zero. There have been times I felt like I was being watched this past week. It’s possible he had been watching me.” When Carter’s eyes widen at my statement, I realize I had never told him that small, but important piece of information. “Before you get upset, I didn’t see anyone that

looked out of the ordinary, so I thought I was just being paranoid. I'm sorry I didn't say anything sooner."

"I get it. Did you feel like you were being watched before or after the bad stuff started happening?"

"Before and after. Once while I was at the fire station and once when I was changing my first flat tire."

He bobs his head a few times, digesting what I've told him. "You probably were. My guess is that whoever was watching you at the fire station followed you home. They were probably watching you change the tire, looking for an opportunity to do further harm. It was smart you waited to do it in broad daylight."

I stare out the window and zone out for a minute, formulating my next thought. "You said Mark is the most likely suspect, but it's possible that it might be Melissa and that the acts of vandalism were coincidentally similar to what Mark had done in the past. I know the slashed tires and red paint were things that Mark had done to his employers, but what about the dead flowers? That doesn't seem like a revenge act, but more like a scorned lover."

"You think Melissa is a scorned lover?" he says in disgust, laughing in a way that implies he is anything but amused. "I promise you, Leanna, that she was not the one scorned in our relationship. She's the one who left without so much as a word. I guess that's not entirely accurate. She left me a note on the coffee table. Instead of seeing my fiancé when I got home

from my deployment, I found a ‘Dear John’ letter and an empty apartment.”

“I’m sorry. I didn’t know. You’ve never talked to me about her. Although you promised you would, now seems like as good of a time as any,” I say. My heart breaks for Carter and what he must have felt like coming home to no one and nothing.

“I did promise you that.” He spends the next hour telling me how he met Melissa in high school and fell in love, proposing right after graduation. He joined the Army to create a better life for them than what their small town could offer, knowing she would never be happy staying there. It wasn’t until they bumped into each other at an event recently that they reconnected—not by his choice. He hadn’t wanted to entertain her request to get together, but if he hadn’t, then she would have stood in front of his truck until he relented. It was the night I lost my first patient, and he wanted to get home to me and make sure I had someone to take care of me.

When he told me that part, I felt warm and gooey inside. The feeling didn’t last long. When I learned that Melissa had thought she was pregnant at one point, I knew it could only mean one thing—they had consummated their love. Thankfully, Melissa wasn’t with child, but she panicked, afraid she would end up just like everyone else in that town.

“Ultimately, Melissa didn’t love me enough to stay and weather the storm with me. She didn’t trust me enough to fulfill my promise and take care of her. She didn’t value me

enough to stay long enough to end things face-to-face. She's one of the reasons I've only dated casually, never getting serious with anyone. I haven't felt like I'm good enough or worthy enough for someone, not when the women I've loved have never loved me back."

"You know that's not true, right? You are more than worthy, Carter. She wasn't good enough for you and wasn't whom God had planned for you to spend the rest of your life with. There's a woman out there that is meant for you, and you'll know it when you find her." Those were the hardest words I've ever said, but it doesn't make them any less true. I just hope I'm the one that's meant to be with him.

We exit the highway and pull up to a gas station to fill up the car and our bellies. When we're back on the road, I ask, "You mentioned earlier that Melissa was one of the reasons why you only date casually. Do you mind me asking if there was someone else after her?"

He takes a long time to answer. "No, there's been no one since. The other woman is my mother, which goes back to the whole 'feeling unworthy' thing. But Leanna, that's a story for another day. I'll tell it to you, I promise—just not today."

I reach over, taking his hand in mine and lacing our fingers together. Although he gives me a soft smile, I know he needs a little space right now. Having three brothers, I'm aware that sharing feelings isn't an easy thing for a guy to do and that our conversation has taken an emotional toll on him. I know it did for me, and all I did was listen to it.



Carter and I spend the next hour in comfortable silence, enjoying the scenery as we drive up the winding mountain road. Halfway to the top, Carter is forced to swerve and hit the brakes as another driver cuts us off. At least we were on a straightaway and not one of the sharp curves. I frown when I recognize the vehicle.

“I think that’s Joe’s Aston Martin.” I squint as if I’m going to be able to see anyone inside from here. I can’t even make out the plates, not that I would know them anyway.

“Are you sure?”

“No. I’ve only been in his car once. He’s not the only one to drive a black Aston Martin in New York, so it could very well be someone else. However, Joe would be traveling on this same road since the resort he’s staying at is only a few miles from where we’ll be.”

“Hmm. I don’t like the idea of you being in a car with someone who drives so recklessly. What if you had been in an accident?” Carter asks, somewhat troubled.

“It’s not like we went for a joyride, Carter. I didn’t have my car because I had walked to work, remember? It was less than a two-mile drive, on surface streets no less.”

Carter asks me to call Sebastian and warn him about the dangerous driving. My oldest brother is the only one who

could potentially be ahead of us. We knew that with four cars in our caravan—two of them carrying children—we would be stopping every hour if we didn't go at our own pace. I do as he asks and dial.

Marybeth answers on the first ring, "Hey, Leanna. What's up? Everything all right?"

"Everything's fine. I just wanted to warn you that someone is driving an Aston Martin well above the speed limit and cutting people off."

"He passed us two minutes ago," Brody says, sounding distant. He must be riding in the back seat with Ansel.

"Oh, look! There he is on the side of the road. Should we stop and see if he needs any help?" Ah, sweet Marybeth, always willing to lend a helping hand.

"You want to stop and help a guy who could possibly be harassing Leanna? I don't think so," Sebastian says adamantly.

"There are three of you and one of him. I don't think he would try anything. Anyways, what's the saying, 'innocent until proven guilty?' Give him the benefit of the doubt, Bash. You would want someone to help you and give you the same courtesy. You need to do the right thing." Her tone indicates that if he doesn't, he'll be sleeping on the pullout couch tonight.

"We can't be more than a few minutes behind you. Go ahead and stop to help. Just wait until I get there before exiting the

vehicle. If it's a trap, I don't want you guys unprotected," Carter says authoritatively. He sounds so sexy taking charge. I have rarely witnessed this side of him, and certainly not under these circumstances. I like it.

"Do you really think he could be dangerous?" Marybeth asks.

"Are you willing to risk it?" Carter responds. "I see you guys. Hang tight."

Carter disconnects the call and briefly glances at me to get my attention. "It's showtime, Leanna. I don't want you getting out of the car until I give you a signal. If I think it's safe, it will be important for him to see you with me so he can start drawing his own conclusions about your relationship status."

"And what's the signal?"

He thinks about it for a second. "I'll stretch my arms like I'm working out the kinks from sitting for so long. It's obvious enough for you to see and believable enough that it won't seem out of the ordinary."

"Okay." I start to nervously nibble on my thumbnail once he gets out of the car. Sebastian, Brody, and Ansel exit their vehicle once they see him approaching. Thankfully, I have a clear view of the driver's side of Joe's ride, but my brother's car is blocking the passenger side.

I can't hear what's being said, so I roll down my window, hoping the sound will travel far enough for me to listen. I lean closer to the opening, but I still can't make out their words. I

see a few fist bumps exchanged between Joe and my brothers, then a quick handshake between him and Carter. Joe gestures to whoever is in the car to join him, and I see Carter's face pale, even from fifty feet away. When I see who it is, there's no way I'm waiting for Carter to send me some silly signal. He needs me now more than ever.

Carter's right about one thing. It's showtime! The woman who is now standing at Joe's side and about to try to hug my fake boyfriend is none other than Melissa.

Chapter Nineteen

Carter

I casually stroll up to the man standing outside his sleek sports car, walking around holding his phone in the air so he can try to get a signal. The Arbaroa men are behind me. “What’s the problem?” I ask.

“Oh. Um. We ran out of gas,” the man says, mildly embarrassed.

Sebastian pipes up, “It happens. It’s Joe, right?”

“Yeah. Oh, hey! Leanne said you guys were coming up here for a family ski vacation. What are the odds that we would be on the road at the same time?”

“It’s Leanna,” I say sternly, ignoring his question. He ignores me back.

Joe gives each of the guys a fist bump that they reluctantly reciprocate. “I don’t think we’ve met. I’m Joe.” He extends his hand for me to shake, which I do out of politeness.

“I’m Carter.” His eyes light up with recognition of my name.

“Oh, man! I need to talk to you! I heard you have some serious connections and might be able to hook me up.”

I’m beginning to think Joe might be high on something other than life. “I’m not sure what you mean, but sure, we can talk sometime. Right now, let’s get you back on the road.”

“Right. I was trying to call for roadside assistance, but I can’t get a signal.”

“I always carry a five-gallon gas can on any trip for this very reason. We can help you out,” Sebastian says.

“Thanks. My friend and I would appreciate the assist. I’ll pay you triple the going rate for gas.” Sebastian waves him off and goes to get the gas can from the trunk of his car.

Well, at least I finally get to meet Joe. Let’s just say I’m not impressed. He seems like the kind of guy who likes fast cars and fast women, so why he’s interested in Leanna is beyond me. I take that back. I understand why. She’s beautiful. She’s sweet. She’s everything a man would want in a woman. At least I do, and it’s why I love her. But she’s not loose, easy, or up for a “good time.”

Joe gestures for the person in the passenger seat to join us. The first thing I see when a woman emerges is blonde hair. It’s not until she turns around that I recognize that it’s Melissa. She gives me a little smirk as she makes her way around the car, coming to stand beside Joe.

“Melissa. What a surprise,” I say, my voice subdued.

“I bet it is,” she says. “It’s a fortunate turn of events, for sure. I haven’t seen you for ten years and now twice in one week. Looks like the universe is trying to tell us something.” She steps in for a hug, but I step back. The sound of a car door slamming echoes through the canyon, garnering everyone’s attention. Leanna strides toward me with focused determination.

“Hey, Baby? What’s going on?” she asks sweetly, her eyes never leaving mine and her lips quirking up. She’s finally stepping up to the plate and claiming me as hers, even if it is just for show.

She slides her arms around me before Melissa even has time to register what’s happening. It doesn’t take long, though, especially when I pull Leanna closer and kiss the top of her head.

“Everyone, this is Melissa. We’ve known each other for years,” I say. Everybody already knows who she is and has seen her picture, but Melissa doesn’t know that. “Melissa, this is Sebastian, Brody, and Ansel. They’re Leanna’s brothers. Of course, you’ve already met my girlfriend, Leanna.”

“I thought you said that you were just friends and roommates,” Melissa says with a hint of derision.

“Things change,” I tell her.

I’m about to tell her the story we had decided on, but Ansel starts speaking before I get the chance. “They *are* friends. Best friends, in fact. But wouldn’t you agree that long-lasting relationships should have a foundation built on rock, not sand?”

Lemme tell you, Leanna and Carter's friendship has been rock-solid from the start. I'm glad they finally realized how perfect they are for one another before it was too late."

Brody adds his two cents. "Isn't it great when you realize that the one person you're meant to be with is the person you trust the most and will be with you through thick and thin without judgment or expectations? These two were destined to be together from the beginning."

I expect those kinds of comments from Sebastian since he's the married one in the group. However, I did not expect any romantic sentiments to come from either Brody or Ansel as both seem to enjoy the single life. I wonder if Brody, Ansel, and the rest of the Arbaroa family have always seen Leanna and me like that, and I've been too dense to notice. Or are they just pretending to be happy for us as part of the plan?

"I couldn't agree with you more. I was friends with Carter growing up, so I know him well. I might even know him better than he knows himself," Melissa tells them as if I'm not standing right here. I feel Leanna's arm tighten around me.

Sebastian returns with the gas can and hands it to Joe, then asks the question that's been on the tip of my tongue since Melissa got out of the car.

"You guys look great together. Are you two a couple?"

Melissa shakes her head. "No. I ran into Joe at the coffee shop the other day, and he mentioned he was coming up here. He has a suite with an extra bedroom and asked if I'd like to come. I'm just along for the ride. He has his agenda for this

trip, and I have mine.” She gives me a little wink and sashays around the other side of the car. She gets in and slams the door closed, effectively ending the conversation.

Joe returns and hands Sebastian the gas can along with a one-hundred-dollar bill. “Thanks, Man.”

“It’s no problem. Five gallons isn’t going to get you very far at the speeds you were driving. Might I recommend slowing down so you can make it to the next gas station? Don’t forget there are families on the roads, mine included. It would be nice if everyone made it to their destination safely,” Sebastian tells him. His tone is firm but cordial.

Joe’s eyes darken, and his lips purse. I think he’s about to retort snidely, but he looks at Leanna first and thinks better of it. “Sure. It’s good advice.” He folds himself into the Aston Martin, and the couple drives away.

“Is it safe to come out now?” Marybeth yells, her head hanging out the window.

“We’ll meet you back at the cabin,” Sebastian says to me before turning to his wife and shouting, “I’m coming, Baby! We’re all done here!”

“At least you won’t be couch surfing tonight,” Brody teases his older brother.

“There is that. Let’s get this show on the road. I’m itching to hit the slopes.”

The three of them head back to their SUV while Leanna and I stand there, her arms still wrapped around my waist. I don’t

know if she's aware she's doing it, but I'm not complaining, and I'm certainly not about to tell her to stop.

With a humorless chuckle, she looks up at me, "I think I'd rather endure a root canal than go through that again. Two out of three of our suspects will now be in our general vicinity. With my luck, Mark Jenkins isn't far behind."



Once we get to the cabin and finish unloading our gear, Leanna and I offer to help in the kitchen. It's just past noon, and we figure everyone will be hungry by the time the rest of the caravan arrives. With three firefighters and a stay-at-home mom preparing the food, they tell us that they have everything under control.

"At least let us set the table," I suggest.

Marybeth smiles warmly. "There's no need, Sugar. We will be using paper plates for this meal and going buffet style. The guys want to get out on the slopes, and according to the latest text update from Grandma, the kids want to build a snowman. No time to waste cleaning up."

Sebastian, Brody, and Ansel start singing the song from the movie *Frozen*. "*Do you wanna build a snowman? Come on let's go and play...*"

"Every time we look after Izzy, she asks to watch a Disney princess movie," Marybeth explains. She's not kidding. I've

been over at Callie and Callum's place when Izzy has been there and had no choice but to watch them with her. I'm sure I'll be watching plenty more of them when Bella Rae is old enough to appreciate the cartoons.

Callie's twin sister had died six years ago fighting a fire. She left Izzy in Callie's custody, and none of the family knew who the father was. When Callie met Callum, she was embroiled in a custody battle with a man claiming to be Izzy's dad. The situation was resolved, and Izzy now lives with her biological father, who spends almost as much time with the family as I do.

"Where's Izzy's dad? Why didn't he come on this trip?" I ask. I haven't seen him in almost a month.

Sebastian sets a bowl of fresh-cut fruit on the counter. "He couldn't get off work this week. It was either him or Ansel, but Engine 20 couldn't afford to have two firefighters on vacation the same week. At least he let Izzy come. Marcus and Izzy are thicker than thieves, and this week wouldn't have been near as much fun for him if she wasn't here."

"Woohoo! We've arrived! Now you can get the party started!" Daphne shouts. She walks in holding Bella Rae in her arms, cooing at her and making funny faces. Callie and Callum are right behind her, carrying a ton of baby stuff. I've never understood why someone so small needs so much. Leanna goes over to Daphne and holds out her hands.

"Gimme! Gimme!" She takes Bella Rae from Daphne and bounces her niece around the living room, causing the cutest

of giggles to escape. I forget what I'm supposed to be doing as I stand there and watch the scene unfold. I imagine what it would be like if she bounced around our little girl. I'm unaware of the smile that slowly forms on my face until Callum slaps me on the back and snaps me out of my daydream.

“You know, if you play your cards right, you can turn this fake relationship into something real. That right there,” he nods toward Leanna and his daughter, “can be yours.”

“That's my plan,” I say low enough only he can hear. Callum's eyes widen in surprise, but he quickly schools his features.

“When did that happen? What changed your mindset?”

“God and I had a long talk in Iowa. He made it clear that I had been focusing on the wrong things. Once I knew what the right things were, my perspective changed,” I tell him honestly.

“Well, good for you. I'll help in any way I can. For now, why don't you help *me* set up the playpen and changing table.”

Once Elena and Nick show up with the kids a short while later, we all pitch in to unload the remaining luggage from the vehicles. I find the pelican case with the surveillance equipment inside and do a quick inventory.

While everyone is eating lunch, I get busy setting up the cameras, both in and outside the cabin. Sitting on the sofa with

my laptop in front of me, I pull up the feeds and ensure there aren't any blind spots. I also call Patrick and Savannah to let them know the feeds are live and to confirm that they've arrived.

Leanna places a sandwich in front of me. "You haven't eaten anything since we grabbed snacks at the gas station."

"Thank you. I'm starving. But food needed to take a back seat to setting up the security system." She sits down beside me and leans over to see what I'm looking at. I show her the screen and all the various camera angles.

"The guys are planning on heading to Windham to get a few runs in before it gets too late. Did you want to go?"

"I can't. I still have to scout the local area to find the spots where someone could hide and have a good view of the cabin. Then I have to study maps of the area and look for all possible escape routes in case I need to get you out of here in a hurry. After that, I have to drive the roads to make sure there aren't any obstacles that the map doesn't show, like downed trees or construction."

Leanna looks disappointed by my answer. "I had no idea so much went into protecting someone."

"Did you want to go with them, Leanna? I can call Patrick and Savannah and have one of them on the slopes with you. If you stay with one of your brothers or Callum, it should be safe enough for you to join them."

“That’s okay. Would you want some company while you scout out hiding spots? We can make it look like a romantic walk in the woods instead of you skulking around alone. If people see you doing that, they might think you’re the creeper,” she teases.

I mull over the idea in my head. Any time spent with Leanna is time well spent. There’s only one answer worth giving. “I’d love some company.”

Bundled up and ready to go, I hold out my hand for her to take. With our fingers entwined, we walk around the cabin and down the lengthy path. Along the way, I’ve identified several spots where someone could hide and have a good vantage point of the family cabin. We get to the edge of the property where the last cabin is located.

I do what any good boyfriend would do at this point. I pack some snow and throw it at Leanna. Not one to go down without a fight, she returns the favor. I chase her around as we dodge each other’s throws. Chests heaving from exertion, we stand ten paces away from one another, each armed with a snowball and ready to duel.

“On three?” I ask. She nods, and I start counting. “One, two...” Just as I’m about to say three, Leanna lobs her ammo at me at the same time the door behind me opens. I duck, and her snowball goes sailing over my head, hitting the man in the doorway.

Leanna runs toward the bottom of the stairs so she can apologize. “I’m so sor...”

Before she can finish, an angry voice booms, “Oh, you have *got* to be kidding me! Haven’t you done enough?”

Chapter Twenty

Leanna

None other than Mark Jenkins is standing in the doorway, face covered in snow that's melting from the radiating heat of his anger. Carter tugs at my jacket and pulls me back while simultaneously moving to put himself between me and Mark. What are the odds that the one person who seems bent on revenge would not only be in the same area we're staying but at the same resort?

"We apologize for the noise. We didn't see a car in the driveway and weren't aware this cabin was occupied. We'll leave you alone to enjoy your time in peace." Carter attempts to diffuse the situation and inch us back slowly, but my mouth gets the better of me.

"What are you doing here? Are you following me?" I feel Carter's hand grip me tighter in an attempt to silence me and calm me down. It doesn't work, and right now, I'm anything but calm.

"There is no car in the driveway because my children are in town stocking up on supplies. As for what I'm doing here, *that*

is none of your business!” Mark’s fury intensifies the more he speaks. “You let my father die, and then you come here and assault me! I suggest you leave now before something bad happens, Little Girl.” He edges back, and just before he slams the door shut, he yells, “Do not let me see you again, or else!”

Carter urges me to walk backward, doing the same. His eyes never leave the cabin until it’s out of sight. As soon as we are clear from view and obscured by trees, he stops while I keep walking. It takes me a second to register that he isn’t following me, but when I do, I turn and face him.

“Leanna, what were you thinking to accuse him of following you? Angering a suspect isn’t the smartest thing to do.”

“I’m not stupid, Carter. I’m upset. I’m irritated. I’m...”

“Scared?” he finishes for me. My response gets lodged in my throat, and I can only nod. A tear falls unbidden, and my body begins to shake uncontrollably. Whether it’s from the cold or fear, I’m not sure.

Carter pulls me into his arms and holds me while I cry, overwhelmed by my current predicament. What is supposed to be a fun family retreat is turning into my worst nightmare, with all three suspects within a stone’s throw of where we’re staying.

“Leanna, I promise I’ll keep you safe. Mark’s arrival doesn’t change anything. If I’m being honest, it’s almost better that he’s here since now we can keep an eye on him. I’ll put up a few trail cams tomorrow to monitor his comings and goings. We’ll be prepared if he or anyone else comes near you.”

Carter tilts my chin so I can meet his gaze. The depth of tenderness I see surprises me, although it shouldn't. He's always had a warrior's spirit, a valiant knight always ready to face danger head-on to protect those he cares about.

He leans in slowly—his eyes never leaving mine—silently asking for permission. When my lids flutter and close, he has his answer. I'm not sure what to expect, but it isn't the barely-there feel of his lips as they finally touch mine—teasing and tantalizing. He kisses me again with more confidence and urgency as if he's been waiting as long as I have to feel this connection. My hands grip the front of his jacket as he continues to kiss me, his lips parting slightly so I can feel their warmth. Each brush of his mouth against mine carries a hint of promise that there's more to come.

When he doesn't kiss me the way I long for, I pull him closer, ready to take matters into my own hands.

“Aunt Leanna! There you are! We've been looking for you everywhere!” shouts Izzy as she runs up to us and hugs me. I try not to sigh at the intrusion, but maybe it's for the best. I'm ready to declare my feelings for Carter when, for him, this is all fake. I won't put myself out there, at least not until I know if his feelings for me are real.

“Hi, Sweetheart. What are you doing so far from the cabin?” I look around the area but don't see anyone. “Why are you alone?”

“I'm not alone! Aunt Daphne, Aunt Callie, and Grandma are hiding behind that cabin right over there!” She points to the

structure 100 yards away, in the direction that we're heading. "They tried to stop me from coming to get you, but that's why we came out here. They're so silly. And can you believe that Marcus didn't want to come? He wanted to build a fire with Grandpa so that when we get back, the cabin will be nice and toasty."

"That's very sweet of him, and he's a good helper. And thank you, Izzy, for braving the cold weather to come find us. I don't know if we would have made it back if it weren't for you!"

"I know! That's why I came along to find you. Nobody is better at hide-and-seek than me!" Her tiny hand wraps around mine, and she drags me behind her. I look over my shoulder at Carter and mouth "*sorry*" to him. His expression is one of amusement as he follows behind, listening to Izzy rattle on and on about the time Marcus couldn't find her during one of their games.

We join up with Izzy's cohorts in crime and finish the trek to the cabin together. Callie leans in just a fraction while still looking straight ahead, whispering, "Nothing about those kisses looked fake to me. Do I detect a shift in the dynamics of your relationship?"

I whisper back, "No. We ran into Mark Jenkins. He's staying in the last cabin at the edge of the resort property, not far from where you found us. Carter kissed me because we needed to put on a show. You never know who's watching, like you guys, for example. What if Joe or Melissa were out here

searching for us like you were? They would have stumbled onto the same scene, making all of this more believable.”

I must not have been talking as quietly as I had hoped because I hear Carter speak from behind me. He’s much closer than I thought he was. “Yep. All for show.” His tone is blunt, and the amusement from earlier is gone, now replaced by a look of disappointment. The rest of the walk is in silence; this time, it’s uncomfortable.



I want to say that the evening got better once we returned, but it didn’t. When the guys got back from their “male bonding” session, as Brody liked to put it, the adults sat around the table and discussed the fact that Mark Jenkins was staying less than a quarter of a mile away.

“With him staying so close, do you think the children will be in any danger?” my mom asked.

“I can’t promise you anything, Elena. But I can tell you that there are plenty of cameras around the house, and if anything should happen, we should catch it on tape. The children aren’t the target, so I don’t think they are in any danger. With so many people in the house, there’s safety in numbers.”

My mother frowned, not content with his answer.

“Every predator likes to separate their prey from the pack. So far, the attacks have been relatively benign, perpetrated

when nobody is around. Should whoever is going after Leanna decide to escalate their tactics, they will try to do it when she is most vulnerable and alone. It's imperative that it never happens. I wish I had a different answer for you," Carter said.

"Me, too," my mom replied.

"Maybe I should leave so that no one gets hurt by association? It might be the best thing for everyone. This way, you can enjoy your vacation without all the stress." I didn't want to go, but I would have done it in a heartbeat if it was the most viable solution and would keep everyone safe.

Sebastian leaned forward and glared at me. "Did you not just hear what Carter said? There's safety in numbers, and you shouldn't be alone. This is as much your vacation as ours, so you let us worry about the kids and ourselves and let Carter take care of you. If it means a little less time on the slopes, then so be it. What's the Arbaroa family motto?"

"Family first," I mumbled.

"That's right! We protect our own. No one is coming near you, and we certainly aren't going to run from this, Leanna. Otherwise, whoever is behind this will win. There's not a single one of us sitting at this table who likes to lose. You aren't leaving!"

"Yeah! What he said!" exclaimed Daphne.

After that, I went to bed feeling loved and cherished by my family, just not by the one person from whom I needed comfort the most. Carter was aloof and borderline cold for

most of the evening, and I had no idea why. If his attitude didn't change by the morning, I planned to have a serious heart-to-heart with him. I'm up early so I can attempt to make breakfast for him.

I creep down the stairs so as not to wake anyone, only to find I'm not the first one up. Carter is sitting at the table with his laptop in front of him, wearing nothing but black jogging pants and a scowl. I can't help but take a few extra seconds to appreciate his beautiful form. Not wanting to get caught staring, I go and join him.

“Oh, that's not a look a woman wants to wake up to in the morning. What happened to turn your smile on its axis?” I tease. Despite my light-hearted banter, I'm not sure I want to hear the answer under the current circumstances. I pour two mugs of coffee from the pot that had been set on a timer and slide a cup across the table to him after I sit down. He takes it gratefully and inhales the aroma before taking his first sip. Although his frown doesn't disappear as I had hoped, the tension in his shoulders does.

“I contacted Patrick this morning to let him know I was going on a morning hike to set up the trail cameras near Mark Jenkins's cabin. Savannah monitored the surveillance feed while we coordinated our efforts. Patrick went for a morning run up and down the road so he could keep an eye on the place while I was away. Savannah alerted us while I was five minutes out, but thankfully, Patrick was close enough to give chase to the person who tripped a sensor.”

“What? Did someone try to break in? Who?”

“They didn’t try to break in, but they entered the perimeter and dumped a bucket of red paint all over my truck. Then, they used their fingers to etch the word ‘SOON’ in the paint.”

A shiver runs through my body that someone got so close. “Did Patrick catch the guy? Is he on camera?”

“No. And yes. No, Patrick didn’t catch the guy. He took off as soon as he heard someone coming and he was fast. Patrick is quick, but the guy had too much of a head start. Yes, we have him on camera. Unfortunately, it’s just like before. He was wearing black clothing, gloves, and a ski mask, using the cover of darkness to hide in the shadows. I still don’t know who it is, but based on the size and build of the person, it’s a man.”

“At least it rules out Melissa. I can’t imagine it was easy to believe that someone you had known growing up might be vindictive enough to come after me.”

“Maybe,” is all he says. I’d feel a whole lot better if he sounded convinced.

Chapter Twenty-One

Carter

I wish I could tell Leanna with certainty that Melissa isn't the one behind this. I have no doubt that it was a man I saw on the video, but Melissa has a way of wrapping men around her finger to get what she wants. I can speak from experience. She had me hook, line, and sinker the first time she flirted with me in high school.

“It's possible that Melissa convinced Joe to come down here and vandalize my truck or paid someone else to do it. The same goes for back home. Everything that has happened—slashed tires and flowers included—could have been done by someone trying to get in her good graces or in need of a payout.”

Leanna rubs her temples as if a headache is coming on. “This is information overload, and I haven't even finished my first cup of coffee. We've been here less than 24 hours, and bad things are already happening.”

“If it makes you feel any better, I don't think it was Mark.”

“What makes you think that?” she asks with the cutest little head tilt.

A corner of my mouth lifts involuntarily at how beautiful she looks in her flannel pajamas and messy bun.

“What? Do I have drool stains?” she asks, wiping her mouth. I shake my head and chuckle.

“No, you don’t have any drool stains. The reason I don’t think Mark did this is because of the speed at which the guy ran away. Mark looks fit, but not *that* fit. He’s in his late 50s with a slight paunch in his belly.”

“I don’t know. Didn’t you say he had a son and daughter? Maybe his son is helping him. He said his kids were in town getting supplies, so we know they’re here.” My eyebrows raise at her suggestion.

“We know that Brayden lives in Texas and Amanda lives in South Carolina, so we didn’t consider them as possible suspects. They would both have been in New Jersey if they attended the funeral, which was right about the time when all this started going down. Good thinking, Lee.”

I dial Savannah’s number. When she answers, I tell her what Leanna suggested and ask her to look into their backgrounds for any criminal behavior or arrests. While I’m conversing, Leanna leaves the table to head to her room.

Leanna returns a few minutes later dressed in jeans and a sweater. She throws my Army sweatshirt at me and tells me to get dressed.

“And where are we going?” I ask.

“First, we are going to the automatic car wash and taking your truck through as many times as needed to get the paint off. It should come off with soap and water. Then, you are going to take me to the local coffee shop where I can buy us breakfast. It’s the least I can do for everything you have done for me. Besides, I need to take my boyfriend out on a date so he can explain why he was acting as if I had the plague last night.” She smiles sweetly, but she’s deadly serious.

I guess I deserve that. When I heard her tell Callie that the kiss was all for show, it hit me in the “feels.” But part of that is my fault. I’m trying to show her how I feel about her instead of telling her, but she’s either not picking up on the signals, or she’s not interested. I spent my time last night trying to figure out which and brooding over her comment.

Last night, I wanted to kiss her the way I had been dreaming about but had promised myself I wouldn’t do that until I was sure her feelings for me were real. A kiss like that means something to me and shouldn’t be taken lightly.

“How about I buy breakfast, and we chalk it up to me being an idiot?” I ask.

“You’re not an idiot, Carter, but I will let you buy me breakfast.” She gives me a playful wink. Rather than return the gesture, I grab her around the waist and nuzzle her neck, tickling her with my stubble. Her giggle is infectious, and I continue my assault until she cries out, “MERCY!” When her

stomach growls with a cry of its own, it's my cue to get her fed.

I throw on my sweatshirt and get our coats from the closet. While she's getting her shoes on, I leave a note for the family that we went into town for breakfast. Then, I text Patrick and Savannah to let them know we're on the move.

Leanna reaches for the doorknob—anxious to get going—but I stop her with my arm. “Let me go first.” When my tone brooks no argument, she understands that this is a matter of safety and steps back.

Once the coast is clear, I jog over to the truck so I can be a gentleman and open the paint-splattered door for her.

“The splash of color really makes the truck stand out. It has an abstract art vibe going for it. Maybe you should keep it the way it is.” she jokes.

I roll my eyes. “Do I look like the kind of guy who likes abstract art?”

“No. The black truck is more your style, dark and mysterious.”

“I can live with those descriptors, but I was going for rugged and sexy.” I wiggle my eyebrows roguishly.

When she mumbles her next words, it sounds like she says, “You are that.” Although she doesn't voice the compliment loud enough for me to hear clearly, I take it for what it is.

It takes us three times driving through the car wash before all the paint is gone. Afterward, I take her to the local diner,

which looks like a giant train car. When we walk inside, the first thing that grabs my attention is all the pictures of different railway cars and train stations. The ceiling is papered with old stubs from a bygone era. It's a quaint little place, and the food smells greasy and delicious.

Leanna orders the “carb-lovers” breakfast that comes with pancakes, hashbrowns, eggs, and toast; while I order the egg-white western omelet with fruit and cottage cheese. The server, whose nametag reads “Stella,” snickers when she writes it down. “Normally, an order like this would be reversed with the woman watching the carbs,” she tells us.

“There are carbs in his fruit! They're full of sugar!” Leanna defends with good humor.

“Well, you're one of the lucky ones with an hourglass figure and fit as a fiddle. If I could get away with eating carbs and have a body like yours, I'd be loading up on our Belgian waffles,” Stella tells her.

“What are you talking about, Stella? You eat one of them every morning for breakfast. I should know since I'm the one who makes them!” yells the cook from the other side of the warming area. He waves and grins at us when we glance in his direction.

“Don't mind, Jack. He's been making me waffles since we got married. We're going on 30 years next month.”

“Happy Anniversary!” Leanna says, beaming. She's always been a hopeless romantic and loves a happy ending. I'd say three decades together qualifies.

“Thanks, Hon. It’s not always an easy road, but when you find the person you’re meant to be with, it’s a road worth traveling together. I can tell that you two will make it through the long haul.”

“Oh! We’re not...” Leanna starts to say, but I quickly interrupt her.

“We’re not engaged. But I know what you mean, Stella. When I first met Leanna, I knew she was something special and meant to be a part of my life. God puts people in our paths, sometimes for a moment and other times forever. She’s the forever type. Our relationship started out as friends, but now it’s turned into something more. We’re just trying to figure it all out.”

“I’m sure you’ll do just that. I have a sixth sense about these kinds of things, and the two of you are destined to be together. The love I see in your eyes is the kind of love that endures,” she tells us, and this time it’s me who’s beaming.

The bell on the door rings as more people start to come in. I see Patrick and Savannah holding hands, waiting to be seated.

“Let me get them seated, and I’ll grab you some coffee.” Stella takes off, leaving Leanna and me to stare at one another.

Leanna immediately begins to apologize. “I can’t believe I almost ruined everything.”

I reach for her hand across the table and wait for her to take it before I speak, keeping my voice low so we aren’t

overheard. “You didn’t ruin anything, Lee. We’re so used to saying we’re ‘just friends’ that it’s become second nature.”

“Carter, I feel like I’m lying to everyone, and I don’t like it. It’s not me. It feels dishonest even though I know I need to do it for my safety. If there were another way, I’d jump on that train as long as it was the truth.”

An hour ago, I had planned to wait for her to declare her feelings for me before I told her how I felt, but now I’m rethinking my strategy. She might be as scared as I am to risk it all. I’ve never been a risk-taker when it comes to my heart, but it’s time to lay my cards on the table.

“I have another option, but I have to ask you a question first. I need your total honesty, regardless of my feelings. Can you promise me that?”

“I’ve never done anything less, Carter.”

“Is the lying the only reason you don’t like the current solution? Or does it also have to do with me?”

Leanna takes her time to answer the question, almost to the point I’m nervous to hear her answer. Who am I kidding? I’m totally nervous to hear her answer, and my palms are getting sweaty. I hope she doesn’t notice since I’m holding her hand.

She lowers her head, and my shoulders slump in disappointment. But then she takes a deep breath and raises her gaze to meet mine.

“It’s just the lying. Why? What’s your plan?”

I let out the breath that I had been holding and give her a timid smile. “My plan doesn’t involve any lying or deception, but it does require commitment. Would you consider doing this for real?”

“What do you mean?”

“Leanna, none of this has been fake for me. I’ve been head over heels in love with you for the past two years. My insecurities and fears may have stopped me from pursuing a relationship with you, but it didn’t mean that I didn’t *want* to. I have battled my desire to kiss you every day. Everything I told Stella about you and our relationship came from the heart.” There, I said it.

A slow smile forms on her lips, and a blush tinges her cheeks. She tucks a wayward strand of hair behind her ear and clears her throat. “I’m grateful that you wanted to be friends first and take the time to realize you are worthy enough to be loved. If you had suggested a relationship sooner, I don’t think it would have worked out simply because you weren’t ready. But while you were figuring things out, I also fell in love with you. I tried to respect the boundaries of our relationship, but I battled my desire to ask you to kiss me every day. Everything you said to Stella, I feel the same way.”

She said she loves me!

I bring her hand to my mouth and place several small kisses on it. “Then there’s only one thing left to do.”

“And what would that be?” she asks quietly.

“It’s time to step out of the friendzone.”

Chapter Twenty-Two

Leanna

I'm on cloud nine the entire drive back to the cabin, Carter's hand in mine the whole time. I'm still trying to wrap my mind around the fact that he told me he loved me and has for years. I, too, have been harboring my feelings for him for so long that I had given up hope that we would ever find our way to one another.

I can't wait to tell my family that Carter and I finally decided to end this charade, to stop lying to everyone, and to stop lying to ourselves. However, we never get that chance because the first thing we have to do when we arrive is tell them what transpired this morning. After that, we get lost in all the questions and planning.

We are barely through the front door when Daphne shouts, "Leanna, you better have brought me back a large iced skinny hazelnut latte with whipped cream!"

"It's 20 degrees outside, you nut! This is the season for hot drinks like the double-tall, full-fat, raspberry white chocolate mocha she brought me!" yells Brody right back.

“It’s not 20 degrees *inside*. Therefore, an iced drink is a perfectly acceptable request. Isn’t that right, Leanna?” she asks.

I laugh. “You are correct, but I didn’t bring any coffee back for anyone. Carter and I had to run an errand in town and then went for breakfast. He left a note for you guys saying as much.”

“The note mentioned breakfast but nothing about an errand. What could you possibly have needed to do at six in the morning?” my mom asks with an arched eyebrow.

“If you give us a minute to hang up our coats and take off our boots, I promise we’ll tell you. It’s important enough to warrant a family meeting. Is there a full pot of coffee? We might need it.” Carter takes my jacket from me and hangs it in the closet.

“Yeah. But it isn’t nearly as good as a raspberry mocha would have been,” Brody mumbles.

“How serious is this conversation going to be? Is it a ‘chill’ in the living room type of talk, or worthy of a dining room round-table discussion?” Ansel asks. “If we’re voting, I cast my ballot for comfort.”

Carter grabs his bag and pulls out his laptop, opening it up so he can pull up the camera feeds. “It doesn’t matter where we talk, as long as little ears aren’t around to overhear.”

My dad, Nick, suggests that we sit around the table so the children can watch a movie in the living room while we

explain this morning's events. There are a few grumbles, but everyone acquiesces.

Carter doesn't waste any time getting down to business, telling them about the intrusion this morning while he was out and about setting up the trail cameras. Although the guy wasn't caught red-handed, at least the act was caught on tape. "The good news is that we now have something we can take to the police. They wouldn't have cared about anything that had happened back home since it's across state lines."

My mom beats me to the question I'm about to ask. "Do you think they would do anything about it? This is a small resort town with the closest city more than an hour away. I can't imagine they have a large enough police force to worry about a little vandalism."

Carter shrugs. "Actually, that could work in our favor. There isn't a lot of crime in this area, and tourism is a big deal. The guests pay top dollar for luxury and expect a certain degree of security for themselves and their expensive cars. If it gets out that vehicles are being coated in paint, they're going to want to have more patrols in the area. This arm of the resort might be deemed as 'rustic,' but it's still associated with Windam Mountain Ski Lodge and Expo Center and comes at a pretty hefty price tag."

Sebastian suggests, "Maybe if they know this is a targeted event and not random, they could concentrate the patrols in this part of the resort. We could have them contact Officer

Jordan back home and corroborate the information. He was the one who filed the reports when Leanna's tires were slashed."

"I was thinking the same thing." Carter pulls up the video feed from this morning and replays it for everyone. Everybody views things through a different lens, so the more people that see it, the more likely a previously overlooked detail might be noticed.

"You said that Mark Jenkins is staying on this property, right?" Marybeth asks.

"Yes, with his son and daughter. Why do you ask?" Carter shares our theory that Mark's son might be involved and why we think that. He's still waiting to hear back from Savannah if there is anything in their background checks that might indicate they would be involved—other than the fact they are related to Mark.

Marybeth points to the screen. "You might be on the right path. If you look, you'll notice there aren't any tire tracks. There's at least half an inch of fresh snow from overnight, but all you see are footprints."

Carter thinks for a moment. "I agree. But it's possible that the man parked at another location and hiked in and out of this area. Let me call Patrick and get his take on it."

When Patrick answers the phone, Carter tells him he's on speaker and that the whole family is here. "When you chased after the man this morning, did you happen to notice the direction his footprints led? We're trying to determine whether

or not the individual in question is staying here at the property or if he parked some distance away and walked in.”

“No. The guy was quick, and I lost him in the woods. The forest canopy was large and dense enough that the snowfall from overnight hadn’t permeated the ground. He could have gone in any direction, and it would have taken me too long to find his trail. He might have circled back and entered a cabin, or he could have had a car parked on the road somewhere. It was too dark to see much of anything anyway.”

“Thanks, Patrick. Has Savannah found out anything about Brayden or Amanda Jenkins?” I ask.

“So far, there’s nothing in their background that sends up any red flags—no arrests, restraining orders, history of violence, or even an unpaid parking ticket. The kids are squeaky clean. But that doesn’t mean they wouldn’t help their father depending on how he spun his tale,” Patrick states.

We inform Patrick of our decision to go to the police and file a report. Although we don’t ask for his opinion, he gives it, backing up Carter as any good partner should. “I agree. Normally, we don’t like to involve the police in our assignments, but sometimes it’s necessary. If you didn’t have the video footage, it wouldn’t do any good to go to the police since the evidence was washed down the drain. In order for Carter and Leanna to keep a low profile, Savannah will take care of filing the police report and talking with the resort security about their surveillance system.”

“Do you think they will grant her access to review the tapes?” Carter asks.

Patrick lets out a loud guffaw. “Come on, Man! This is Savannah we’re talking about. When has she *not* been able to get what she wants?” The whole room chuckles at that.

When the discussion finally comes to an end, Brody claps his hands once loudly and then rubs his palms together excitedly. “I don’t know about you, but I think it’s time to hit the slopes!” We all agree and scatter to get ready.

The rest of the afternoon is spent riding lifts and experiencing the thrill of racing down the mountain at breakneck speeds, feeling the wind freeze my smile in place. It’s a wonderful, albeit temporary, reprieve from all my troubles, and I feel more alive than I have in weeks.

Dad, Marybeth, and Callie are all playing with the kids and tubing down the bunny slopes while Grandma takes a bunch of pictures and videos. The rest of us are on the lift for one final run before we take a break for cocoa and an afternoon snack. My brothers are on the chairlift in front of us, while Callum and Daphne ride in the one behind.

Carter gives me a quirky smile. “You look like you’re having fun.”

“I am. I’ve been looking forward to this for a year. There’s something peaceful about being up here in the mountains and taking a moment to appreciate God’s handiwork.”

“It is beautiful,” he says, but he’s not looking at the scenery. He’s looking at me. Carter leans over and kisses my lips softly.

“No hanky panky on the lifts! Didn’t you read the rules when you got on!” shouts Daphne from behind me.

“Rules are meant to be broken,” I yell back, giggling.

The seven of us congregate at the top of the mountain, lining up for a final run before lunch. “Last one down buys the hot chocolate!” shouts Daphne right after she pushes off to get a head start. We pull our ski goggles down and take off after her, not one of us wanting to lose.

The boys end up beating Daphne and me to the bottom, willing to risk some speed so they don’t have to drop \$70 on cocoa for a family of 14. Carter waits at the bottom, wearing a massive grin on his face as he watches me try to inch out my sister for the coveted second-to-last spot.

I tighten my turns and ride the edges of my snowboard, picking up speed and surpassing Daphne in the home stretch. I cackle loudly when she screeches, “Oh no, you didn’t!” and tries her best to catch up.

Unlike Daphne, I’ve never been afraid to break a nail to win and manage to leave her trailing several feet behind. When I get to the bottom, I spray the men with snow as I stop in front of them, raising my hands in victory. Daphne tries to do the same, except when she stops next to me, she loses her balance and knocks me over—right into Carter, who cradles me in his arms as we both fall to the ground laughing.

With our snowboards tangled, Carter deftly rolls us over so he can use his strength to lift himself off me. Only he doesn't, at least not yet. Instead, he leans down and presses his mouth to mine, kissing me a few times and nibbling on my lower lip. "Hmm. More delicious than cocoa," he says, his eyes twinkling with playfulness.

"There are children present," my dad says with a stern and fatherly tone. Carter helps me up, and I notice that everyone else has joined us. My father has his arms crossed, but his expression is good-natured. There are a few eyebrow waggles and giggles sent in our direction.

"Sorry," I mumble.

"No, you're not," says Callie. "I wouldn't be either if I had a sexy man kissing me." When Callum is slow to respond, she turns to him, "That was a hint, Baby!" Callum doesn't need any more prompting, taking Callie in his arms and laying one on her.

Daphne fans her face. "Whew! After those displays of affection, I need to cool off with some cocoa! Who's with me?"

Brody shakes his head in confusion and exasperation at Daphne. "What is with you and choosing the wrong temperature drink for the occasion? You want something iced when you should want it hot, and hot when it should be iced."

"It was my attempt at a segway to transition us from standing out here like a gaggle in the cold to us standing as a

gaggle inside the lodge where it's warm. I think my lips are turning blue," she retorts.

Ansel puts his arm around Daphne. "Your lips are blue because you ate our snow. Tell me, what does defeat taste like?"

She pushes his arms off and begins stomping toward the lodge, prompting us to follow. Before she turns back around, she glares at Ansel. "Like everything else in the world, it tastes like chicken."

Chapter Twenty-Three

Carter

The Arbaroa family takes up most of the lobby seating centered around the huge fireplace, laughing and having a great time. The only people missing from the group are Daphne, Leanna, and me since we're the ones getting the drinks.

I stand off to the side in a small alcove with my arms around Leanna, holding her to me with her back pressed against my front. I set my chin on her shoulder, watching people come and go while we wait for Daphne to get through the line and order the hot chocolates.

As I kiss the crook of her neck, I feel her body go rigid and wonder if I've overstepped. "I'm sorry. Is this too much too soon?"

I feel the subtle shake of her head, and her mouth doesn't move when she whispers, "Mark Jenkins, one o'clock."

The man walks in with his boots still covered in snow, having neither the courtesy nor forethought to shake off the

excess using the kickstands out front. The stands are there for that reason, but at least the man and woman following him utilize them. I recognize Amanda and Brayden from the profile pictures that Savannah sent to my phone earlier in the day.

I whisper in Leanna's ear, "Try and look natural. Pretend as if you don't see him." I kiss the tender spot where her shoulder meets her neck, hoping it might help her relax. It does, but only because my whiskers tickle the spot when I move. She giggles, and her laughter resonates through the lobby. Several eyes turn in our direction, including the one set we had hoped to avoid.

Mark glares at us—more Leanna than me—and it feels like a silent battle of wills is going on. He doesn't move in our direction but doesn't leave either. It's like watching two bighorn sheep ready to butt heads with the slightest provocation.

It's not until Amanda touches her father's arm that he seems to snap out of his staring showdown. She looks over at us and gives us a small smile of sympathy. Brayden, on the other hand, looks at us with confusion. His sister says something to him, and he nods but doesn't look our way as he walks away. Amanda follows her brother and tugs at her father's shirt, urging him to join them. Before he does, he takes his index and middle finger to point to his eyes, then flicks his wrist to put them toward Leanna. The gesture implies that he's "watching" her, which is precisely what I'm afraid of.

Nick starts to rise and go have a man-to-man after seeing the subtle threat against his daughter, but Elena pulls him back down and lets Mark walk away. It's the right call. Currently, the Jenkins family has no idea who they are.

Patrick and Savannah walk in next, arm in arm and laughing. Savannah pulls out her phone and smiles sweetly at Patrick before she sends a text message. She pockets the device when she's finished, and they continue on their merry way in the same direction as Mark Jenkins and his two children.

Feeling my phone vibrate, I know it's an update from Savannah and wait until they're out of sight before glancing at it. This time, my body stiffens when I read the text.

Leanna turns in my arms and snakes her hands around my waist, looking up at me like Savannah had just done to Patrick. She stands on her tiptoes and kisses my jawline before softly asking, "What did the text say?"

I don't get a chance to answer before the barista calls out Daphne's name, and it's time for us to help carry the drinks. When all the drinks have been passed out, Daphne quickly claims one of the two remaining spots available, leaving only a wingback chair that doesn't have enough room for two.

"I'll sit on the floor," Leanna tells me, always the first to sacrifice her well-being for others. "Then you can tell us all what the text was about."

"My woman will not be relegated to sitting on the floor when there is a perfectly good lap to sit on." I didn't realize

what I had said until every head turns in my direction and stares at me wide-eyed, along with a few salacious grins.

“You’re right! Callum’s legs are the widest and can probably support me.” She begins to walk in his direction, but I grab her back and spin her to me in a swing-dance move, pulling her into me. She laughs delightedly, and I kiss her lips.

I growl, “My lap is more than suited to the task.”

When she smiles up at me, I can’t help but get lost in it. She places her hand on my chest. “Okay, Caveman. Me sit. Your lap.” She grunts for good measure, and I can’t help but chuckle. I pull her down on my lap, and she leans forward to grab the two remaining cocoas sitting on the coffee table.

Handing me one of the drinks, she asks, “Now, will you tell me what Savannah texted you?”

I gesture to Melissa and Joe, who are walking through the front doors. “That for starters. Savannah said she had seen them pull into the parking lot and was warning me that our paths might cross.”

“What do you mean, for starters? Was there more to her text?” She brings her drink to her lips, patiently waiting for my answer along with everyone else.

“That, and she saw someone rifling through the snowboards outside. She couldn’t tell who it was from their vantage point. The man was wearing goggles, a hat, and a snowsuit. It may have been nothing, but she wanted to give us a heads up since our stuff is out there.”

“Could it have been Mark or Brayden Jenkins?” Callum asks.

“No. Savannah would have said as much. And Melissa and Joe were in the parking lot, so it wasn’t either of them. It was probably someone looking for a misplaced board or to check and make sure theirs wasn’t taken,” Carter replies. The conversation abruptly ends when we see Melissa and Joe heading our way.

Joe is the first to greet us. “Hey, guys!” He glances at Leanna, who is sitting on my lap. His smile disappears for a fraction of a second, but then it returns. Addressing Leanna, he says, “I guess this means no dinner even though our paths have crossed twice now.” He sounds disappointed but not angry. It’s not as if he wasn’t aware of our relationship after our roadside encounter.

I expect Melissa to be upset by Joe’s comment, but she isn’t. She’s too busy staring at my arm around Leanna’s waist. I don’t know if she even heard Joe speak.

“Carter, can I talk to you for a minute, please?” she asks. I don’t want to, but this might be my one chance to get her to back off. Leanna pats my arm, gesturing for me to release her so I can stand up, silently acknowledging that she’s okay with me doing this. Well, she might not be *okay* with it, but she won’t stop it.

I follow Melissa to the opposite side of the lobby, but I refuse to go any further. When she notices I’ve stopped, she

sighs. “Fine. We’ll have the conversation right here in front of everyone.”

“Melissa. I’m not going somewhere private with you when my girlfriend sits right over there. We’re far enough away that they can’t hear us, which gives you the privacy you need, even if it’s not as much as you want. Consider it a compromise.”

“I remember some other compromises we’ve had,” she says suggestively, inching closer to me. Her innuendo isn’t lost on me, and I step back to put some distance between us.

“If that’s what you want to talk to me about, then this conversation is over. If it’s not, then say what you have to say.”

When she doesn’t speak, I ask, “Why are you here, Melissa? I know about the two restraining orders, and it doesn’t look good that you show up out of nowhere and bad things start happening.”

“Are you accusing me of something, Carter? I haven’t done anything to anyone. I’ve been here with Joe with no means of transportation outside of where he takes me. And why are you looking into my background? That’s an invasion of privacy, and I expected better of you.”

“You know what I do for a living. Leanna’s safety is my priority. It’s my job to protect people. To protect *her*.” I tell her adamantly.

“She’s a job to you? Last week, you were friends and roommates and nothing more, at least according to her. And

now you're attached at the hip and romantically involved? I don't buy it and think it's all a farce. You asked why I'm here. I'm here because I want you back! Walking away was the biggest mistake of my life, and I want to fix what is broken," she pleads.

"That isn't going to happen, Melissa. I love Leanna. You're my past, and she's my future."

When I walk away, I hear her mumble under her breath, "Not if I have anything to say about it."

Chapter Twenty-Four

Leanna

I can't watch as Melissa draws Carter further and further away, knowing the conversation she plans to have with him will be an attempt to win him back. She made her intentions abundantly clear at the coffee shop when she said she would be "playing for keeps." Apparently, I'm the only one not looking because everyone else, including Joe, has their eyes glued in their direction.

Daphne's face contorts in mild disgust. "That took some guts, girl. I don't know if I would have let my man go off and talk to his ex in some secluded corner."

"That's not helping, Daphne. And for the record, I don't 'let' Carter do anything. I don't own him, and he's free to do whatever he wants." I watch the fire roar and dance in the large fireplace, trying to keep my mind occupied with anything other than this discussion.

Joe stares at Melissa with a dreaminess I've seen plenty of times in the mirror when I would wonder what life with Carter would be like beyond friendship. Joe tells me, "You don't have

to worry about anything, Leanna. It's obvious to everyone, including me, that Carter is head over heels in love with you. He's not going to fall for Melissa's attempts at reconciliation. If he does, he isn't worth wasting your time or energy."

"Aww. That is so sweet," says Callie, bouncing little Bella Rae on her knee. "I'm Callie, by the way. I'm Leanna's oldest sister." The few remaining family members who haven't met Joe introduce themselves out of politeness.

"It's great to meet you all. I didn't realize your family was quite this big." Joe sounds sad, and I don't understand why until I remember that he grew up in foster care and never knew what being part of a large and loving family was like. He didn't even know what it was like to have loving parents, let alone any siblings.

"You're welcome to join us," I tell him. He might be one of Carter's suspects, but my gut tells me he has nothing to do with what's happening. I won't deny that he might need to work through some underlying issues, but he's just a guy who's lost and wants to be loved.

Joe clears his throat. "Thank you." His eyes keep gravitating to where Melissa and Carter are talking, and he forces a smile when he catches me watching him.

"Joe, can I ask you a question? You don't have to answer it if you don't want to."

"Sure, Leanna. Ask away."

“Are you interested in Melissa? I get the feeling that something is brewing between the two of you.”

He takes a moment to formulate his answer, but when he does, I know my instincts are correct. “Yes. I like Melissa and would like to see where things can lead. I’m sure I seem fickle to you with how quickly my interest was diverted from you to her. You’re beautiful, sweet, and kind, Leanna. Carter is lucky to have you. But you are the poster girl for white picket fences and two-point-five kids, for which I’m not even remotely ready for. I hope you know that I mean no offense by that.

“Melissa is a spontaneous and free-spirited woman more attuned to my current lifestyle. We get along great and have so much in common that this could go somewhere if she gave it a chance. Only she’s set her eyes on Carter and is determined to win him back.”

“Maybe when she finally gives up on Carter, she’ll see what a good thing she has in you,” I tell him.

“You might be right, but I would feel like a consolation prize she’s settling for instead of who she really wants.” Joe’s shoulders slump in defeat, and I can’t help but feel a pang of sympathy for the guy.

“Do you think of Melissa as a consolation prize? You were interested in me last week, and now you’re interested in her? Would it be any different if she finally realizes that Carter isn’t what she needs or wants, but you are? It’s easy for anyone to get fixated on a person they think they’re meant to be with

instead of seeing the one who God placed right in front of them,” I tell him, hoping my words will give him some hope.

“Then how do I get her to see who’s right in front of her—to see *me*?”

“Whatever you do, don’t start by sending her flowers anonymously.” He laughs and promises not to.

“You can start with one of the most important ingredients in a relationship—communication. Carter and I kept our true feelings from one another, letting fear of rejection hold us back from sharing something wonderful. Because of that, we almost missed out. Tell Melissa how you feel, and then give her the time to digest and process what you tell her. She will either come around or she won’t, but at least you won’t waste two years wondering.”

“Thanks, Leanna. It’s good advice, and I’ll take some time to figure out what to say. For now, I’ll start by grabbing us some coffee. When Melissa returns, will you point her in my direction?” he asks.

“Absolutely. I’ll see you around, and good luck.” Joe walks away with his head held a little higher and a bit more bounce in his step. It’s nice to see what a little hope can do for a person. Once he’s gone, all eyes focus on me, except for Izzy and Marcus, who have fallen asleep sitting up while leaning against Grandma and Grandpa.

“That’s some sage advice you gave that man, Leanna. Are you planning on taking it yourself and telling Carter how you feel about him? Or did you and Carter already admit your

feelings and declare you're undying love for one another?" Callie asks.

"Yeah, Leanna. That speech sounded like it came from the heart and not your head," Brody adds.

"Shh. No one is supposed to know this was all fake," I whisper.

"Yeah, but it's not anymore, is it?" asks Ansel, grinning from ear to ear. He nudges Sebastian, "See! Our plan worked!"

"What are you talking about?" I nearly shout. After drawing the attention of everyone within a 50-foot radius, I lower my voice and point at my brothers, "We'll be talking about this later."

"Fine, Lee, but the stink eye you're giving me should be directed at Callie and Callum. It was their idea." Ansel says, deflecting the blame. When I direct my questioning gaze toward the happy couple and Bella Rae's chubby face, Callie shrugs.

"Callum and I figured that if a fake relationship worked for us, it would work for you and Carter. And it did, so there!" She sticks out her tongue at me like when we were little.

"Here comes Carter, and he does not look happy," Sebastian mumbles.

Carter is storming in our direction, his body tense and his face grim. I immediately get up and go to him, wrapping my arms around his waist to provide comfort. The last time I saw Carter this upset was when his father passed away nearly a

year ago from a heart attack. I don't say anything to him; I just tighten my arms to let him know I'm there for him when he's ready to talk.

Carter wraps his arms around me and leans his head on top of mine. We stand like that for half a minute before he steps back and says, "Thanks. I needed that."

"There is something to be said about the healing power of a hug. But you can always talk to me, too. Whatever you need, Carter. I'm here for you."

"Another hug and a run on the slopes should make things right as rain. As far as talking about things, the conversation with Melissa went much like you would expect. She wants to reconcile and win back my affection. I told her that what we had was in the past and that you are my future. Not much more to it." There is definitely more to it, but it's either not important, or this isn't the right place to discuss it. He kisses my cheek, then turns to everyone else, "Anyone ready to conquer the mountain?"

There are plenty of whoops and hollers, but my mom quickly interjects. "Lunch first, then you children can go out to play," she says, only half joking. There are four restaurants on the resort property, including one all-you-can-eat buffet. We choose the latter option since our dining party contains five burly firefighters and a bodyguard, all with voracious appetites.

As we finish our meal, Carter gets another text update from Savannah that Mark Jenkins and his family have left the

premises and returned to their cabin. She also informs us that Melissa and Joe were last seen heading toward the resort's pool and spa area. With the coast clear, we seize the opportunity to grab our gear and go for a few more runs before it gets too dark.

Sebastian and Callum offer to stay with Mom and Dad to watch the kids so their wives can get in on the action. Callie jumps at the opportunity, but Marybeth declines, stating that she doesn't feel very well. Sebastian opts to stay with her, giving Callie and Callum some time together.

The rest of us grab our boards and ride the lift to the top of the mountain. When we arrive, I prepare to get off the lift. Having my right foot free, I place it between my bindings as I glide down the ramp, where Carter waits for me. Once everyone has gathered, we line up near the top, strap into our bindings, and race down the mountain.

Carter is off to my left, and we're about a quarter of the way down the slope when I feel my back binding start to vibrate and shimmy. My brothers and Daphne speed past me, unaware of the possible danger I'm in. When I go to make a wide arching turn to slow myself down, my binding completely separates from the board, and my arms flail as I try to regain my balance.

I manage to recover without face-planting in the snow or tumbling down the slope, which is a small miracle. I place my binding where it should be screwed in and start carving my way down the hill, putting all my weight on my heels to slow

myself down. When I hit the bottom third of the run, I see my family waiting for me at the base of the mountain. I continue the process until I finally hit bottom, grateful that Carter never left my side.

I bend down to unstrap the binding still attached to the board and then undo the straps of the one that's not. When I have the malfunctioning piece of equipment removed from my boot, I let it dangle from my fingers so everyone can see the issue without me having to explain.

"It's not unusual for a foot binding to loosen, but it is unusual for it to separate from the board completely. Was it showing any signs of wear and tear after our last run? Didn't you check your equipment this morning, Leanna?" Brody asks.

I nod, unable to get the words out, my adrenaline still pumping wildly through my veins. Carter speaks up for me, "She did. But none of us checked our boards after lunch. Likely, whoever Patrick and Savannah saw rifling through the snowboard storage rack wasn't searching for their own. They could have been looking for Leanna's board and then returned to tamper with it."

I'm grateful that I didn't get hurt and can walk away from this unscathed. I turn over the binding to see the metal plates where the screws should have been. There's no damage, not even a scratch. I can confidently say that this was not an accident.

Chapter Twenty-Five

Carter

By the time we get back to the cabin, I'm still blaming myself for being so lost in my thoughts and upset by Melissa vying for my attention that I had forgotten entirely about the man who had been rummaging through the snowboard storage rack.

I barely get the truck parked when Leanna jumps out and stomps over to my side, grabbing my hand and dragging me behind her away from the group. Everyone looks amused by my predicament as they pile through the front door. I plead with my eyes and mouth the words, "*Save me!*" to anyone willing to help, but they merely laugh and leave me to fend for myself.

Thankfully, our destination is close, as in the cabin's back porch kind of close. Leanna spins around and shakes a finger at me, feisty and fiery as ever. "I know what you're doing, Carter Zane Andrews, and you need to knock it off right now! You're blaming yourself for what happened even though none of us thought to recheck our equipment after Savannah's

warning. What happened wasn't your fault, and you need to stop beating yourself up over it!" It appears that I was not hiding my feelings as well as I had hoped.

"It was *my* fault! It's my job to remember the details, no matter how insignificant they might seem to everyone else! You could have been seriously hurt or killed if you had been any less skilled. What would have happened if we had been on a black diamond run that was steeper and more challenging? Your experience and ability to stay calm in stressful situations is what saved you from something that never should have happened in the first place!"

Leanna's gentle touch as she places her hand over my heart helps calm me down, but not by much. "I'm still here, Carter. We can't change what happened, but we can learn from it and move forward."

I grab the wrist attached to the hand over my heart, preparing to step back and walk away if that's what it's going to take to keep her safe. "You're absolutely right about that. I need to stay vigilant and not let my feelings get in the way of doing my job."

Leanna turns her wrist toward my thumb and twists it until she breaks my hold, reversing our positions and placing my hand over her heart. "I can see it in your eyes, Carter. You're about to turn your back on us in some noble attempt to keep me safe. We are either going to do this together or not at all."

I rest my forehead against hers and close my eyes briefly while I try to figure out the best way to convince her that

taking a step back would be for the best. I place my palm on her cheek and use the pad of my thumb to gently rub against her soft, plump lips. In a whisper, I say, “I can’t lose you, Leanna. I love you, and it would destroy me if anything happened to you.”

Leanna avoids my gaze when she utters her next words, “You’ll lose me for sure if you walk away and try to do this alone, Carter. I’m not your job, and I’m not your burden. I’m your best friend and your partner. If you turn your back on us at the first sign of adversity, how can I trust you to stay by my side when things get tough again? Because they will, that I can promise you.”

When she finishes her monologue, she looks at me through her lashes. A small tear falls down her cheek, and I lean in to kiss it away. I kiss a path toward the corner of her mouth but stop and pull back to look into her eyes. The love I see in her eyes mirrors my own for her. It’s the sign I have been waiting for.

There’s no doubt in my mind that she would lay down her life for me just as I would do for her, and that we’re stronger together than apart. A vague recollection of a plaque hanging on the Army Chaplain’s wall comes to mind. It read:

“Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends.” John 15:13 ESV

When the Chaplain caught me staring at the plaque, it led to a deeper discussion that lasted nearly an hour. But the greatest takeaway for me wasn’t in the ‘who’ of the verse, but rather in

the ‘action’ in it.” It’s possible to love someone so much that you would sacrifice your life to save theirs, just as the Son did for us.

“Are we in this together, Carter?” Leanna asks, pulling me back into the moment.

“Always.” Unable to contain my emotions or my desire for Leanna any longer, I pour them into our first real kiss as my mouth crashes against hers. My feelings are unleashed like a force of nature, propelling me forward as I walk her backward until we come to rest against the cabin wall.

Tilting my head, I part my lips and allow my tongue to dart out and trace her bottom lip. She reciprocates in kind as our tongues tangle and twirl in perfect sync. I take the time to savor her lips and show her how much I love her, kissing her how I’ve longed to and how she deserves to be kissed.

The moment is shattered when our audience on the other side of the window begins to applaud wildly and shout out their catcalls and cheers.

A “Woohoo!” comes from Callie, followed by a “You go, Girl!” from Daphne.

Sebastian questions, “You couldn’t have waited one more day to kiss my sister so I could win the prize pool back home?”

Callum laughs and slaps him on the back, “Trey is never going to let you live it down, Man.”

We hear an “Eww!” from Marcus and Izzy and an “It’s about time!” from Marybeth.

“Show her who’s boss!” and a “You da’ man” spill from Brody and Ansel, but I can’t decipher who said what.

Elena’s motherly tone carries from deeper inside the house, “I know I raised you all better than that. You’ve had your fun; now leave them be. You can come in here and tell me all about it instead.” Everyone laughs, waving to us from the window and leaving one by one until we are finally alone.

I pull Leanna onto my lap while I hold her in the Papasan swing, enjoying her breath against my skin as she snuggles up to me. We swing back and forth, holding onto one another in silence, no closer to figuring out who has targeted Leanna and why. Now that the assaults have crossed the line from scare tactics to physical harm, the intense pressure to find him or her before it’s too late weighs heavily on my shoulders and on my heart.



Over the course of the next two and a half days, Leanna’s large family reminds me that I’m not alone and the burden of protecting her is on them all. The Arbaroas stick together, and they’ve made it clear that I’m a part of their family. I hope to make it official someday, but that will have to wait until this situation is resolved.

It's been quiet since Leanna's near disaster on the slopes, which can likely be attributed to the increased police presence of patrols in the area and the fact that the family has banded together, never giving her much time alone unless it's with me. We've snuck away for a few kisses here and there, but for the most part, we've always been in someone's line of sight so that no one ever worries about her.

I pull out my laptop, open the encrypted video communications link, and wait for Patrick to connect on the other end. It takes a minute, but eventually, his face appears on the screen.

"Are you and Savannah ready for tonight?" I ask. Tonight is the Friday night gala for all the resort guests, which will be held at the main lodge.

"We are. You should know that we overheard Melissa urging Joe to extend their stay so they could attend the gala. I didn't hear everything, but I did hear their new checkout date is Sunday, which aligns with your checkout date," he says.

"Are you really surprised? Melissa was trying to get Joe to go 'explore all the resort had to offer,' including the other guest areas such as this one. Thankfully, Joe had his reasons for being up here in the first place, which included attending the expo and networking, not hunting down ex-fiancés." Savannah says from behind him, giving me a little wave.

"Twice, Melissa was having coffee in the café when a man came up and joined her. He didn't stay long, certainly not long enough for us to get in a position to listen in or gather any

intel. This may be the man who has been coming after Leanna. If that's the case, Melissa can be directly tied to whoever is causing the chaos and playing mind games. I know that's not what you want to hear," Patrick states. I wave his concern away.

"All right. I should expect to see Melissa and Joe at the gala. What about Mark, Brayden, and Amanda? Do you think they'll be there, too?"

"It's highly likely. I don't see Mark passing up a free meal that includes lobster and steak, but whether or not he stays for the party afterward is debatable. As far as his kids go, they'll either stay and take a shuttle back or ride with their father since they only have one vehicle. If they leave, Savannah and I will have to separate in order to keep an eye on both Melissa and Mark."

"Does that mean you don't think Joe is a suspect anymore?" I ask them both.

Savannah shouts from the other room, sounding tinny through the speaker. "I don't. Call it a woman's intuition or whatnot, but he doesn't strike me as the type to vandalize property or seek to harm a woman he's interested in. He's a playboy at heart, although a bit rebellious and misguided."

Patrick bobs his head slightly while Savannah is expressing her thoughts. After she's done, he looks back at me through the camera lens. "While I agree with Savannah, it doesn't mean either of us will disregard Joe as a potential suspect. However, if we have to split up, he won't be high on our

priority list. It will be up to you, Callum, or one of Leanna's brothers to follow him."

"Roger. I'll inform everyone to keep a lookout and assign one of the guys to follow Joe. Nick, Elena, and the kids are staying here, along with Marybeth and Sebastian. Marybeth isn't feeling well, and Sebastian doesn't want to attend without her. Do you think they will be safe here with just the security around the cabin?" I ask.

"They should be safe enough. You showed Sebastian where your hunting rifle is and gave him the combination, correct?"

"Yes, along with a few other non-lethal weapons." Leanna walks up behind me, looking positively stunning in a floor-length dark purple gown with a beaded heart-shaped top. She leans in to smile and wave at the couple on the screen.

"Hi, guys. We're just about ready to leave. Before I have to go and pretend that I don't know who you are, let me just say that you both look great!" Leanna kisses me on the cheek and whispers, "But not nearly as sexy as you." Savannah waggles her eyebrows at me from behind Patrick, who tries his best not to laugh. They heard every word despite Leanna's attempt to be quiet.

Leanna heads over to where her family is standing, waiting for me to finish up when the perimeter alarms start blaring. Patrick and I both pull up the feed on our laptops and see the local florist's delivery van parked out front and blocking our vehicles.

"Standby. I'm heading outside," I inform him.

“Roger.”

I pull my Glock 19 from my holster and drop the magazine into my hands. I rack the slide back to clear the weapon, then slap the magazine back in and send the slide forward. The process takes me only a few seconds, but now I don't have to worry about whether or not I have a round in the chamber if I should need to use it.

The feed I transferred to my phone shows the driver carrying a large box to the front door. I meet him on the porch and stop him from going any further. The kid doesn't look to be more than 17 or 18 years old.

“Hi. I have a delivery for Leanna Ar-ba-roh-ah,” he sounds out.

“I can take those. She's inside getting ready.” He gives me the pad to sign for the package, and as soon as it's in my hands, I tear the ribbon to shreds.

“Hey, those aren't for you!” the kid says. I ignore him and pry open the lid, gasping at what I see inside.

“Who ordered these?” I ask, my tone demanding.

“I don't know. My boss thought it was a weird request, and it took three days to get them in. That's all I know,” he says.

“These were ordered three days ago?” I pull out my phone and dial the number on the side of the florist's van, not waiting for the kid to answer.

When a woman on the other end of the line answers, I immediately ask if she's the owner.

“Yes, I’m the owner. How may I help you?” I tell her who I am and the delivery that was just received.

“Can you tell me who sent the flowers?” I ask.

“The gentleman who called wished to remain anonymous and paid for everything with a prepaid card,” she explains.

“And this order didn’t raise any red flags or warning bells for you?”

Sounding indignant now, she tells me, “Of course it did! But I’m a small business owner trying to make ends meet. The rarity of the flowers pulled in a \$400 price tag, not including delivery or tip. I wasn’t about to turn that down for a gag gift. At least that’s what he told me it was.”

“You don’t have a name or number to go with the flowers, just a prepaid card?” I ask once more to clarify.

“Yes. I’m sorry if it caused any distress. Please don’t leave a bad review.” I’m floored by the woman’s audacity to worry about such a thing when I’m standing here holding a dozen black roses that symbolize one thing—death.

Chapter Twenty-Six

Leanna

I can't see much from where I'm standing, and no one will let me near the window until they know the coast is clear and it's safe to go out there. My dad, Nick, is peeking through the curtains but refuses to tell me what's happening. After what feels like hours, but couldn't have been more than a minute or two, I hear him, Savannah, and Patrick all gasp in unison.

"What is it? What's going on? Is Carter all right?" I ask, nearly frantic.

"Yes, Leanna. Carter is fine. He's just not too thrilled about the delivered items and what it could mean," Savannah tells me.

"And what was delivered?" I ask her.

"Black roses," Dad says from across the room.

"Why would someone send me black roses? Don't those symbolize death?" As soon as the words leave my mouth,

understanding dawns on me. “Oh. Now, I get why Carter is upset.”

Savannah chuckles. “Upset doesn’t even come close to describing what is going through his mind right now. If you could see his expression, you would want to run for cover and hide. I’m surprised the poor delivery boy hasn’t wet himself from fear yet. You can come see for yourself, Leanna, if you look at the feed on Carter’s laptop.”

I can’t believe I didn’t think of that. I could have been watching the whole thing unfold instead of staring at the door, wondering what was happening on the other side of it. I sit in the chair and watch Carter pace back and forth across the front porch while talking on the phone. When he hangs up, he gestures for the boy to leave. Not waiting to be told twice, the kid runs away as fast as his legs will carry him.

“Ahh!” I hear Carter yell through the door, and I watch on camera as he throws the flowers all over the front yard in frustration. He runs a hand through his hair, and though he is angry, he looks downright sexy with his “Don’t mess with me” disposition.

“I’ll just state for the record that I’ve never seen Carter lose his cool on a job before, and this isn’t the toughest one we’ve had by far,” Patrick states apologetically, as if we might think this is Carter’s normal behavior while working. I know Carter better than that.

“Can you blame him? How would you react if someone you loved was being threatened and had no idea where it was

coming from or why?" I ask him.

Patrick stares at me unblinking, as if he's looking through me and not at me. Finally, he clears his throat, "No. I can't blame him, and I can tell you from experience that I have reacted the same way. If you'll excuse me, I need to finish getting ready."

Savannah slides into the seat Patrick had occupied with a worried and confused expression on her face. Did she even know that Patrick had once loved someone he was protecting? Is he thinking about *her* when the word "love" comes up and he gets that far-away look? Is he still in love with her? It's a mystery that I hope we get answers to someday.

"Can everyone hear me?" Savannah asks, and the family gathers behind me to hear whatever she says. "Patrick and I will not be here to monitor the surveillance feed. Those of you staying behind will have access to it on the laptop. Still, I want to assure you that an operative at headquarters will also be watching it and can communicate with you through the computer and Sebastian's cell."

A door slams behind us, and several of us jump in surprise. Carter raises his hand in surrender, "It's just me, and I'm sorry. I didn't mean to startle you or let the door slam." He lets out a long breath, and I'm in his arms before he even has time to drop his back down to his side.

With grim determination, Carter states the facts for us as he knows them. "The flowers were ordered three days ago, about the time of the ski incident or right before. Although it's been

quiet since then, I believe this is a sign that he's about to make his move. Joe, Melissa, and Mark are expected to attend the event tonight. We assume that Brayden and Amanda will be there with their father."

"If everyone with a motive to harm or harass me will be at the gala, maybe we should just stay here?" I suggest.

Patrick returns and addresses everybody present. "We can do that if it's what you want to do, Leanna. Or we can end this sooner rather than later so you can move forward with your life. We have nine sets of eyes tonight, three of which are professionally trained. We know who to look out for, except for the man who was randomly meeting Melissa. We don't know if he was flirting with her or working with her. My gut says he's the latter, and Melissa is the key to all this.

"That does not mean that I'm right and that we should discount the others. We all know what happens when you assume." There are a few chuckles, but Patrick doesn't wait long to continue. "Keep your eyes peeled for anyone that seems out of the ordinary or a single man watching the crowd. Do not let your guard down, but don't forget to have fun. There are no guarantees that this person will make their move tonight."

We say our goodbyes and head out. Carter and I ride together in his F-350 while Brody, Ansel, and Daphne ride in Callum's Dodge Ram. Callum pulls into the valet parking area, but Carter goes to the self-park. I'm grateful it's not much more of

a walk because it's cold outside, and my jacket is dressy rather than functional.

Carter notices my shiver and removes his coat to place around my shoulders as we walk arm-in-arm toward the entrance. "Why didn't you use the valet like Callum? Wouldn't it have been a lot quicker?" I ask.

He brings my hand to his lips and kisses it gently before blowing his warm breath across it to warm it up. "Quicker to arrive, but not to depart. If we must leave in a hurry, I need to know exactly where my truck is parked and who has the keys. Sometimes, seconds count, and I don't want to waste them waiting on a valet." It makes sense, so I hold my tongue as my skin pimples from the cold.

The rest of our group waits inside the lobby, which is cozy and warm. "I'm so hungry I could eat a horse," Brody says uncouthly, considering all the men are dressed to the nines, wearing three-piece suits.

"The menu said steak and lobster. I don't recall seeing any horse," Ansel retorts. I can't tell if he's messing with Brody or being completely serious. But the pretty young woman greeting all the guests winks at Ansel, "That's next week's specialty entrée. I hear it's delicious."

We're seated at an eight-person table, which leaves one chair open. I glance around the room and note that Patrick and Savannah are at a table ten yards away, and behind them sit Mark, Brayden, and Amanda. I haven't seen Melissa or Joe yet, but I'm sure they'll be around soon enough.

My nerves are getting the better of me, and my hands tremble slightly. Carter notices and takes them in his to calm me down. He chuckles when the shaking in my hands subsides, but the energy travels through my body, and my foot begins to bounce.

“Do you want to dance?” Carter asks, even though there’s no music playing and no one’s on the dance floor.

I laugh. “Yes, but later. Right now, I need to walk around.” Carter stands up and offers his arm, which I gladly take, and we stroll around the outskirts of the room until I relax. Just as the lights in the dining area dim in preparation for dinner to be served, Carter warns me that Melissa has arrived. It had slipped my mind that he has two-way communication with his team, but I’m glad to get a heads-up.

Despite the warning, my smile fades when we return to the table to find grim expressions on everyone’s faces. Melissa isn’t simply here in the room. She’s sitting at our table wearing a teal blue cocktail dress that looks plastered to her skin, dressed more for a party than for a gala.

“What are you doing here, Melissa? And where is Joe?” Carter asks brusquely, scanning the room for her date.

“Joe is upstairs gaming and should be down later. He said he’s allergic to shellfish and doesn’t want to risk a bad reaction. I don’t see what the big deal is since he has one of those pen thingies,” she says flippantly.

“It’s called an Epi-pen, and it wasn’t too long ago that Joe nearly died from anaphylaxis, so you might want to cut him a

little slack. With such a high probability of cross-contamination, it's smart to refrain from the meal so he doesn't *die*," I emphasize the last word, my irritation obvious.

Melissa looks down and clasps her hands in her lap, looking chagrined. "I had no idea that Joe almost died. He told me that he went to the hospital because he didn't have his medication close by and that you took him there in your ambulance. But he didn't give me any details or tell me you had to save his life. I didn't mean to sound callous or uncaring," she says. When her gaze meets mine, I see an unexpected tenderness in them and am shocked when she says, "Thank you, Leanna, for saving him. He's a....He's..."

"He's a good guy?" I finish for her.

She nods her head. "He truly is. It's one of the reasons why I would like five minutes of Carter's time. I promise that when I'm done, neither of you will have to see or hear from me again."

I turn to Carter, "The choice is yours." Savannah and Patrick face our direction, and I watch as Savannah mouths something at the same time that Carter cocks his head slightly as if he's straining to listen. Carter whispers in my ear, "Savannah says that they have your back should I go, but I don't want to leave you alone."

I kiss his cheek and linger, whispering back, "I'm not alone. Take five minutes to hear her out because this might be an apology or a goodbye. Closure would be good."

He dips his chin once, then says to Melissa, "Five minutes."

She leads him to a glass-enclosed balcony off the side of the ballroom, where they can talk privately while remaining in public view. It's not the kind of place where you would sneak off and steal a kiss. For that, I'm thankful.

I try my best to avoid Carter and Melissa talking in the other room and pray for any distractions to help make the time pass faster. I should be more careful what I ask for because my prayer is answered when a woman screams, "Help! Please, somebody, help! My father is choking!"

The tingling sensation I've come to associate with saving a life during an emergency call permeates my body and propels me into action before any of my family even dares to respond. It's as if they didn't even hear the person cry out for help, continuing their conversation while I weave through the crowd and stop to find Mark Jenkins turning blue from lack of oxygen.

I point to Brayden. "Help me stand him up!" He quickly jumps in to assist. I get behind Mark and spread my legs for balance as I hold him to me and bend him over. I strike the area between his shoulders several times using the heel part of my hand, hoping the force will dislodge whatever is stuck.

"Nothing's happening!" Amanda wails, going into full panic mode.

"What can we do?" Brayden asks, far more calm and collected than his sister.

By now, a crowd has gathered, blocking my family from getting to me. "Give me space!" I shout, answering not only

Brayden's question, but also telling the mass of people to step back.

Since the first technique didn't work, I switch to the Heimlich maneuver, using abdominal thrusting to free the blockage. On the fifth thrust, an object flies from Mark's mouth, and he takes a deep, gasping breath.

Amanda hugs her father, then me, thanking me profusely. Brayden's gaze meets mine, and I see his eyes have welled with tears. He mouths the words "thank you" but can't get them out. I smile at them both and step back while they comfort their father. As I'm about to turn around, the next distraction comes in the form of someone yelling from the kitchen, "Fire!"

Unlike Amanda's call for help, my entire family hears this one and instinctually responds to this call, running toward the kitchen to put out the flames. The massive crowd pushes me toward the exit as they try to escape a perceived danger, leaving me with little choice but to go with the flow or be trampled. I lose sight of Patrick and Savannah amongst the wave of people and barely catch a glimpse of Carter banging on the glass door, trying to get to me.

I sigh in relief when I feel a large hand grip my arm to pull me from the fray into an empty corridor. I turn around to give Patrick my gratitude for getting me out of that mess, but instead of meeting my friend, I'm greeted with the muzzle end of a gun. The Glock 22 is the standard-issue weapon for the

Newark Police Department and a weapon I've seen plenty of times before.

“Hello, Pollyanna. I think it's time we had a talk.”

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Carter

I trudge behind Melissa, desperately wanting to be by Leanna's side instead of engaging in another conversation where my ex refuses to accept that our relationship is in the past. She's leading us to a row of glass-enclosed balconies that overlook the scenic valley below, keeping us in full view of the ballroom while giving us the privacy to talk without being overheard.

I double-tap my earpiece to establish one-way communication to make our conversation even more private, but I can still hear Patrick and Savannah if they need me. When I'm ready to reestablish two-way comms, I'll double-tap it a second time.

"Thank you for agreeing to talk to me, Carter. After our last conversation, I'm surprised by your willingness to do so."

"I am, too. I'm here at Leanna's behest. She believes this conversation is necessary. I, however, do not. What is it you need to talk to me about?"

“First, I want to apologize. It wasn’t fair of me to come up here and try to win back your love when I’m the one who threw it away in the first place. I may have been young and scared when I walked away, but I was also selfish, thinking only of myself. Youth is not an excuse, and I need to accept responsibility for my actions and let you go up here,” she says, tapping an index finger to her head.

“The two restraining orders that you dug up are proof that I hadn’t been able to move on, at least not in a healthy way. It wasn’t them that I wanted, but rather a chance at redemption. I’ve been seeing a counselor regularly since the last incident,” she explains. The sincerity in her voice blows me away as she tells her story and openly admits her wrongdoings.

“That’s great, Melissa. I’m glad you’re getting help. But then why would you tell Leanna that you are ‘playing for keeps’ and then follow us up here?”

“In all fairness, Carter, you introduced Leanna as your roommate, and she claimed you two were ‘just friends.’ But when she saw us together, I could tell she had feelings for you even though she hadn’t admitted it to you or to herself. The next thing I knew, she was on a date with Joe, and I was letting her know my intentions toward you.”

I grunt in displeasure. “Is that why you used a threatening tone?”

“I did not mean for it to come out threatening! A little intimidating, maybe, but not threatening. Some women want what others have, and I didn’t want her to go after you just

because I was. I didn't want this turning into an episode of *The Bachelor* with crazy catfights.”

I raise an eyebrow in her direction. “Are you the pot or the kettle in this scenario?” I ask.

She raises her hands in defeat. “Fine, Carter. I went about things the wrong way, but that's why I'm trying to apologize.”

“How does Joe fit into all of this? How did you come to be here?” I ask.

“I didn't lie to you when I told you Joe offered me a spare bedroom in his suite. When I tried to intimidate Leanna and get her to back down before anything started between you two, he thought my ‘feistiness’ was cute and offered the option to come along so I could get you back. He wanted to pursue things with Leanna and needed to free up her schedule. What better way to do that than to have me occupy your time? Joe and I had no idea how well *we* would click or that you two had become a couple until we met up on the side of the road on our way here. That reminds me. When we're done here, I need to pull Leanna aside and thank her for her help,” she tells me.

She looks at my confused expression and explains, “When you and I were talking the other day—my poor attempt at reconciliation—Leanna was urging Joe to communicate his feelings for me. Instead of being jealous or vindictive, she was supportive and caring toward Joe and me finding our happiness together. She's an amazing woman, and you are as lucky to have her as she is to have you.”

I couldn't agree more. "She's my world," I choke out. "Which is why I have one more question. I need to know if you had anything to do with the attacks against Leanna—the slashed tires, dead flowers, red paint, the unscrewed snowboard binding, or the black roses?"

Melissa gasps and places a hand to her mouth. "Oh my gosh! No! I would never do anything like that," she shouts. "But I know who might! I was approached by a guy who saw me talking to Joe and Leanna. He said he wanted to help me out and that he would get Leanna out of the way. All I had to do was be myself and distract you. Honestly, I thought he meant to take her out on dates. He seemed so nice, and he knew her. He helped her carry the coffee that day when we were at the coffee shop!"

I know exactly who Melissa is referring to. I double-tap the earpiece to reestablish two-way communications to inform my team of what I've learned, but I don't hear anything but static. When I turn around and see a crowd of people cheering, Patrick and Savannah trying to push through them to get to Leanna, I know things are about to go from bad to worse.

When I walk toward the automatic sliding glass door, it won't open. I look down and see a broomstick wedged into the door's track base, preventing it from moving. Bryce Jordan walks by, waving a small black device in his hand and wearing a huge smile.

Standing on the other side of the glass door, Bryce points to the device and mouths "signal jammer" before setting it on the

table a few feet away. He cackles as he joins the crowd.

Everything from that point on unravels like a loose string of a sweater. It's the moment when everything comes apart, and there isn't anything you can do to stop it.

I bang on the door, kicking and screaming, trying my best to break the glass. It doesn't even crack. The only thing I can do is watch as someone yells, "Fire!" Everyone begins to panic and push their way through the main doors. I get a brief glimpse of Leanna before she is washed away in a sea of people trying to escape a danger that may or may not exist.

Bryce's plan worked perfectly because Callum, Callie, Daphne, Brody, and Ansel all react to the word 'fire' as if they are Pavlov's dog, seeking out the source to extinguish the threat. Patrick and Savannah are pushing through the melee to get to her. Still, the last thing I see is a shock of auburn red hair disappearing around the corner with Bryce Jordan close behind.



"I'm so sorry, Carter. We didn't mean to leave her behind. We all know how quickly a fire can get out of control if it's not contained quickly. It's a natural instinct for us to respond." Callie says, the oldest of the group.

"And it took all five of you to put out a grease fire that the kitchen staff had under control? Now we have no idea where

Leanna is and what Bryce wants with her!” I shout at them. Then, I turn toward Patrick and Savannah.

She raises her hand to stop me from speaking. “We’re beating ourselves up enough over this. You don’t have to add to it,” Savannah says.

Callum comes over and puts his arm around me. “I’ve been where you’re at. Do you remember when Callie was in the burning apartment, and the family wouldn’t let me run in to save her because I didn’t have the right equipment? I was lost, scared, feeling out of control and useless. Nick reminded me that *praying* wasn’t useless. So why don’t we start there?”

Callum and I walk outside where the temperatures are near freezing, so cold it hurts to breathe. We bow our heads and ask God for protection over Leanna and that He will lead us in the direction of where she might be. Once we’re done, I head back inside and eat humble pie.

“I’m sorry for raising my voice. I want you to know that I don’t blame anyone other than Bryce for what happened. I shouldn’t have taken my frustrations out on you. Leanna’s my best friend, and I love her. But I sometimes forget she’s your sister, and you’re all as scared as I am. Will you forgive me?”

“There’s nothing to forgive,” Callie says. “But all of us will be in deep trouble if we don’t let Mom and Dad know what’s going on. Not it!” she yells and points to her nose. The last person to touch their nose is the one who’s supposed to make the call, but it’s my responsibility.

I dial Nick's number and hear Elena sob on the other end when I tell them Leanna is missing. "If there's anyone that can bring my baby girl back to us, it's you, Carter. You are a strong-willed, capable, and worthy man, and I couldn't be prouder that you and Leanna found one another," Nick tells me.

"I promise I'll bring her home, or I'll die trying."

"I know you will, Son. Don't let it come to that. We'll be holding vigil here and praying for you all.

I hang up the phone, and the eight of us get to work. Melissa and Joe bring us coffee in preparation for a long night, trying to help where they can.

Patrick grabs a mug before updating us. "Headquarters is on high alert and monitoring Bryce's credit cards, cell phone usage, and email logins. They are also monitoring all traffic cameras in and out of the area. The closest traffic cam is a few miles away, where the resort's driveway meets Highway 244. Bryce would have to pass through that intersection to exit the mountain."

Savannah leans forward and points to the map. "There are a lot of small roads in the area, but the main road is the only one that will allow him to escape. The good news is that they are still somewhere on the resort property since the cameras haven't recorded his Silverado at the intersection. That narrows things down a bit. If only we had some way to track her!" She slams her fist down on the table.

“I installed a tracking device in her phone that can be remotely activated by dialing her secondary number with a PIN code. It’s the same one we use in all our phones for headquarters to find us in an emergency. I did the same for Daphne. The only thing is, I didn’t see Leanna bring a phone or her purse. She had a lightweight jacket, which is still hanging in the coat room.”

Daphne laughs. “I had forgotten all about that tracker! And Leanna has her phone on her Carter! She’s wearing a bra that can hold a cell phone around the underarm area. I doubt Bryce even checked her for it when he grabbed her!”

Having wasted enough precious time, I start dialing the code and PIN before Daphne’s done speaking. Immediately, a dot appears on the screen, but in the last place I expected it to be.

“Where is that?” Brody asks.

“It’s Stella’s, the diner where Leanna and I went to breakfast our first morning here.”

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Leanna

Bryce Jordan was the last person I expected to see holding a gun on me and escorting me down the narrow service corridor. He's always been a nice guy—friendly and helpful—while also tenacious and persistent. His latter two qualities make for a good police officer but are quite off-putting when he refuses to accept “No” as an answer.

“Where are you taking me, Bryce?” I ask, perturbed. We've taken several different turns, and I haven't seen a single soul in the hallways. However, I have seen several cameras and stare at them to ensure my face is captured on camera.

Bryce chuckles but ignores my question. “It's no use, Leanna. The signals to the cameras are being jammed. No one knows where we are, and they won't be able to track you, especially since you don't have your purse, jacket, or phone.”

After ten minutes of walking with a weapon being held against my back, we end up at a side entrance where a white Silverado is parked. “Arms up,” he demands. Instead of setting down the gun and using both hands to pat me down, he chooses

to hold on to it, requiring him to perform an awkward, one-handed pat down that is ineffective. I'm not about to complain about his methods and consider it a miracle that he has enough decency to avoid my fitted bodice, where my cell phone is hidden.

Satisfied that I don't have any pockets in my dress and I'm not carrying anything on me, he opens the passenger door for me as if we're on a date. When I don't move, he raises the gun to my chest and says, "Get in!"

His truck is camouflaged using the resort logo magnets on the rear passenger doors. Between the mud and the logo, his normally pristine truck looks like a maintenance or landscaping vehicle owned by the Windham Lodge.

I'm tempted to try to escape while Bryce goes around to the other side, but I know that I wouldn't get very far since I can't outrun a bullet.

Bryce drives one-handed, keeping the gun pointed at me the entire time. Still having no idea where he plans to take me, I try to get it out of him again.

"Where are you taking me?"

He looks over and gives me his trademark dimpled grin. "To dinner. All I've ever wanted from you, Leanna, was one date. Just one chance to show you how compatible we are together."

"And you think that pointing a gun at me is going to change my mind?"

"You're here, aren't you?" He shrugs like this is just another day in the park.

Bryce continues to drive all over the resort as any of the maintenance staff would. I hate to admit it, but it's a genius tactic if he's trying to hide in plain sight.

"Yep, I'm along for the ride. While I appreciate the resort tour, you mentioned something about dinner?" My stomach growls loudly, causing him to laugh.

"Let's go get my woman fed! I know the perfect place. They have good food and even better service!" he says excitedly. I watch as the hand holding the gun relaxes a small fraction. The happier he appears to be, the less attention he pays to the weapon. If I play along and pretend to be 'his woman,' then maybe he will forget about the gun entirely, and I can make my move.

He drives back into the small town in the middle of nowhere and pulls into the parking lot of the train car diner where Carter and I had breakfast. "Great choice," I tell him, grateful for a very public location for our meal. "Carter and I had an amazing meal here; the owner, Stella, was our waitress."

Apparently, it's the wrong thing to say because Bryce's eyes darken, and his mood sours even further. "We'll walk in there and have a nice meal together, Leanna. It will be just you and me. As far as I'm concerned, Carter doesn't exist, and I don't want to hear his name spill from your lips. I may not be pointing my gun at you while we're inside, but I will have it close by. Don't do anything stupid to make me use it."

I tuck a strand of hair behind my ear and try to look contrite. "Okay, Bryce. It's just you and me tonight."

He gets out and walks around the back of the truck to my side, where he opens the door for me. He offers his hand, playing the role of a gentleman, which I have no choice but to take. I don't want to do anything to ignite his wrath, especially now that innocent people will be around.

Thankfully, the place is empty when we walk in, and Stella is the first to see Bryce, his body blocking me from view. "Hi, Bryce! Welcome back. I thought you planned to bring your girlfriend by to meet me tonight! I saved you both some of our famous chocolate cream pie!"

He tugs my hand to pull me forward. "I'm a person of my word. Stella, meet Leanna, the love of my life." When recognition dawns, her jaw drops, and her eyes widen in surprise. She's about to ask me a question or say something that might upset Bryce, but I give her the subtlest shake of my head to stop her, hoping she will play along. Her safety depends on it.

Stella recovers quickly. "It's a pleasure to see you again, Leanna, and with such a handsome man! Don't you two look picture-perfect!" She grabs two menus and leads us to a booth by the window, giving anyone passing by a great view of us. I smile at her, silently thanking her for the seating arrangement.

"Can I get you started with anything to drink?" she asks, with a nearly undetectable warble to her voice. It would be easy to miss if you weren't listening for it. "Hot tea for me, please," I tell her while Bryce orders a hot chocolate. "Coming right up!"

Bryce has placed himself in a position to have a full view of the entrance and see anyone coming from the parking lot. My view is of the kitchen area, where I notice Stella whispering to

her husband, Jack. He looks over at me with genuine concern on his face.

“I need to use the restroom and wash up,” I tell him. When I move to get up, he grabs my wrist to stop me.

In a low tone, he warns, “If you aren’t back in three minutes, bad things will start happening.”

“I’ll be back, I promise.” He lets me go, and I scurry to the restroom. I use the time to pull out my phone to text Carter from my secure line, not that it matters. He already knows my circumstances are dire.

The screen comes to life, and I double-check to ensure it’s still on silent mode before opening up my text message thread. Carter has already sent me several messages.

Carter: Tracker has been activated

Carter: Have your location

Carter: Keep him busy

Carter: Will be there ASAP.

Carter: Record the conversation if possible.

I pay attention to the time stamp and notice the last message was sent less than two minutes ago. I almost drop my phone when it vibrates softly in my hands.

Carter: I love you! XX

I do as he asks, starting the voice recording application on my phone before tucking it securely back in its hiding spot. Bryce is staring down at his watch with a pinched look. He looks up when he hears me coming and smiles.

I slide back into the booth with seconds to spare and focus my attention on Bryce, folding my arms to rest them on the table in front of me. He mirrors my pose. “Now that you have me here, what do you want to happen, Bryce?” I take a sip of the hot tea that Stella delivered while I was away.

“I want you to give me an honest chance. That’s it. That’s all I’ve ever wanted,” he tells me sincerely. It’s something I can use to my advantage.

“Okay, Bryce. I’ll give you a chance, but only on one condition. Since trust and communication are important to any relationship, I’ll need you to be honest with me. Otherwise, whatever could be between us is doomed from the start.”

“What is it that you want to know?”

“Are you responsible for my flat tires?” I ask.

He leans back in his seat and folds his arms across his chest, preparing to defend his actions. “I am.”

“What about the dead flowers with the note that read, ‘All good things must come to an end,’ or the paint on my door made to look like blood?”

“Yes. I did that, too.” When he doesn’t elaborate, I ask him why.

“Because for years, I have been asking you out on dates only to be rejected over and over again. At first, I thought it was because of Carter and that you harbored romantic feelings for him, but then you went out with that Joe guy after he made one lousy play for you!

“I did those things because I wanted you to turn to me for help. Instead, you turned to Carter!” He spits out Carter’s name as if he tastes vile on his tongue. “The flowers were meant to symbolize the death of your relationship with him!”

“How did you know to make it look like Mark Jenkins? You weren’t there the night Mark’s father died.”

“Oh, but I was there! Just not when you were around. The hospital called the precinct because Mark Jenkins was disturbing the peace. I was the responding officer. When he screamed your name and said he wanted you to pay for your incompetence, I knew I had the perfect scapegoat.”

“Are you telling me Mark Jenkins hasn’t been helping you?” I ask.

“Not at all. When he said he wanted to ‘make you pay,’ he meant in the legal sense of the word. He was a lawyer and plans to sue you and the fire department for negligence. With me by your side, I’ll make sure that never happens! I made him sound

delusional in my report, tarnishing his credibility. You're welcome for that, by the way."

The audacity! "I suppose I should thank you for nearly killing me by stripping the screws from my bindings, too? Or for the black roses?"

"I thought it was Carter's snowboard! I never meant to hurt you! Your boards looked similar, and I had to guess. I don't know the first thing about snowboards, but I have mad skills on a pair of skis. I was ready to rescue you if I had gotten it wrong. But once again, Carter never left your side, and you managed to save yourself."

"I have one final question. Was Melissa or Joe helping you?"

"Joe doesn't have a clue, and as far as Melissa goes, I made it sound like I was helping her in exchange for her occupying Carter's time. But he never fell for her charms like I had hoped."

"Thank you for your honesty," I tell him. I hope I got his confession recorded.

I hear the door behind me jingle with bells, the tell-tale sign of someone entering the restaurant. Stella comes over to greet the couple, and I follow Bryce's narrowed gaze. Patrick and Savannah smile brightly at Stella, ignoring us as they follow her to a booth deeper into the restaurant. I ask Bryce, feigning ignorance, "Do you know them?"

As he continues to stare at the couple, I catch Carter silently moving through the kitchen area, briefly talking to Jack. I divert

my gaze outside to avoid drawing Bryce's attention to the man sneaking up behind him.

When Carter is within ten feet, Bryce hops out of the booth and draws his weapon. Using a weaver stance, he has both hands on the gun, aiming in Patrick's and Savannah's direction, not Carter's like I expected. "I've seen you both before, standing outside Leanna's house! Who are you?" He shouts. Not waiting for an answer, he yells, "Get up! Hands in the air and move slowly!"

Patrick and Savannah comply, keeping their hands raised as they slide out of the booth, Savannah turning to face Bryce. "I have no idea what you're talking about. Surely, you must be mistaken."

"I never forget a face!"

Savannah smiles, calm and cool as a cat. "Then you must know that wherever we are, Carter isn't far behind."

"Where is he?" Bryce screams, his face now red with anger.

"Right behind you," says Carter.

Bryce swings around to point his gun at Carter, but Carter deflects it by using his left elbow to push Bryce's arm in an upward trajectory while simultaneously sending a right hook into Bryce's side. The gun goes off before Bryce drops it, and Stella shrieks in alarm.

Patrick draws out his weapon to point it at the two men fighting while walking over to lock the door to prevent new customers from entering. Savannah darts around the ongoing fight to get Stella and Jack to safety. Thankfully, the diner was

empty, with most of the guests at the resort for the gala. I suspect that my abduction is being kept under wraps to prevent widespread panic, and the gala resumed as planned.

I watch in awe as Carter and Bryce look like they're dancing, trading blows, ducking, and weaving, both light on their feet. Patrick pulls me behind him while we both stare at the spectacle.

I tug on his sleeve. "Aren't you going to stop this?"

"Eventually."

Bryce punches Carter's face, but Carter turns with the blow, minimizing the impact. When Bryce body slams Carter and takes him to the ground, I tug on Patrick's sleeve again, hoping he'll step in.

"Your man has it under control, Leanna." Like Patrick, Savannah is simply watching with her gun trained toward the fight but not doing anything to stop it. If they aren't worried about it, I suppose I shouldn't be either.

Carter takes another blow from Bryce but catches the second one coming toward him, twisting their bodies so that he ends up on top. Carter delivers an elbow to Bryce's jaw before rolling off, scooping up Bryce's weapon and pointing it to the now unconscious form on the floor.

Within seconds, Patrick and Savannah have Bryce's arms secured behind his back and his feet bound, waiting for the police to arrive. As soon as the threat is neutralized, Carter rushes toward me to take me in his arms. Without saying a word, his lips crash against mine, and he kisses me like I'm the

air he needs to breathe. I can feel his love, passion, and worry with each and every nip.

“I almost lost you,” he says, worry still in his gaze.

“Never, Carter. I’m right here, and all this is finally over.”

“No, Leanna. This is just beginning.”

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Epilogue

Carter - Two Days Later

Everyone's bags are packed, and we'll all be heading home soon, but for right now, I'm enjoying the feel of Leanna snuggled up against me on the giant Papasan swing.

"I don't care if these swings were popular in the 90s or not; we need to get one for the back porch once we get home," she says, nuzzling my neck while I stroke her arm with my fingertips.

"As you wish," I tell her, quoting Westley from *The Princess Bride*. I'd do anything she wants as long as it makes her happy.

"You're no pirate, Carter. You're my Shining Knight!" she teases. I roll my eyes and kiss her temple. I bring her hand up to my mouth and delicately kiss the tip of each of her fingers. I pull one into my mouth and suck lightly when I hear a loud throat clear. I open my half-lidded eyes to find Nick, Sebastian, Brody, Ansel, and Callum surrounding me like a firing squad.

“Leanna. Will you excuse us for a moment while we chat privately with Carter?” Nick asks, not truly intending it to be a question. She looks at me hesitantly, unsure if she should stay beside me or leave me to the wolves.

“It’s okay, Baby. I’ll be all right.” *Maybe.*

“I wouldn’t be so sure about that,” Sebastian jokes.

“We’ll make sure he stays in one piece, but I can’t promise the condition he’ll be in when we’re done with him.” Brody cracks each knuckle one at a time, trying to be intimidating. It doesn’t work.

Callum knows the one thing that will get Leanna to leave faster than anything else, “Bella Rae wants her Auntie Lee.”

“Well played,” I tell him as Leanna runs off to play with her adorable niece. I give the five men encircling me the respect they deserve and stand up to meet their challenge head-on.

“I’m not going to sugarcoat this, Carter. You were a part of this family long before you and Leanna got out of your own heads and learned to follow your hearts. But now it’s time for everyone to take a step back and reevaluate the living situation. Up until this point, I have allowed my daughters to live in your house because of the safety and security you have provided for them. I trust you implicitly as long as you can tell me that you trust yourself,” Nick says.

I take some time to think about what he just said and what he’s really asking. Can I trust myself to keep his daughter safe, not only from the world and all its dangers but from myself

and my desires? Before I can answer him, Sebastian steps forward and asks a question of his own.

“What are your intentions with my sister?” he asks, cutting to the chase.

I point at him. “That’s a question that I don’t even have to think hard about to answer!” I say with a ten-mile smile. I lower my voice to a conspiratorial level and put the back of my hand up to my mouth like I have a secret. “I plan to make her the future Mrs. Andrews.”

Ansel leans in and says in an equally low but playful tone, “That’s good. I thought we were going to have to make you see sense,” he says, cracking his knuckles like Brody had earlier. One. At. A. Time.

“What is with you guys cracking your knuckles? Doing it one by one makes you sound weak and pathetic like you can’t handle the full effect of all of them popping at once! Real men crack in stereo!” I joke, cracking mine like I had just described. I barely refrain from wincing at the sound. Knuckle cracking is like nails on a chalkboard to me. It’s unnatural and makes me shudder, but there’s no way I’m showing any sign of weakness in front of these guys.

Brody and Ansel both cringe. “Yeah, you’ve made your point. That’s *waaay* more intimidating!” We all laugh except for Nick, who is still waiting for me to answer *his* question.

“Mr. Arbaroa...”

“Nick.”

“Nick, I love your daughter with every fiber of my being. But we both love God more and want to honor Him. That said, I’m not sure I’m strong enough to live in the same house and not want to take things further. I am human, after all.”

“I appreciate your honesty, Carter. So here is what we propose. Brody and Ansel have a spare room in the house they rent and are offering it to you until you decide to make my daughter your wife. When that time comes—and there is no rush—Daphne can move in with her brothers.

“That might be for the best,” I say honestly.

Ansel says, “May as well keep your stuff in your suitcase. I don’t think you’ll stay with us long enough to unpack.” He’s not wrong. I’ve been in love with Leanna for too long to wait. It’s not as if we have to spend time getting to know one another.

“Knock knock,” says Elena from the other side of the screen door. “Carter, Mark Jenkins and his family just stopped by, and I thought you might want to be present as they talk to Leanna. Do you think it’s safe to invite them in?”

“Yes, but please wait until I get there.” I walk around the side of the cabin and see Mark, Brayden, and Amanda standing at the front door. I shake their hands and invite them in.

“Sorry for the wait. A lot happened the other night, and we’re all still on edge,” I tell them. I anticipate a snide comment from Mark, but nothing comes. Instead, he looks almost ashamed.

“Thank you,” Amanda says as we walk inside. I try not to burst out in laughter at the view that greets me when we enter. Elena, Marybeth, Callie, Daphne, and Leanna are all sitting on the long sofa and loveseat, leaving the other loveseat available for the Jenkins family. But it’s the men who are posted around the room like sentries, with their feet spread and arms crossed, that have me amused.

Amanda and her father take the small sofa while Brayden stands behind them, matching the stance of the Arbaroa men.

Amanda nudges her father when the silence becomes uncomfortable. Mark Jenkins clears his throat, his face pink with embarrassment.

“I owe you an apology, Leanna. I never should have said that you were responsible for letting my father die. He was 82 years old and had lived a very long and happy life. My daughter has reminded me that it was simply his time to go, and nothing you could have done would override God’s will.

“Even though I treated you poorly, blamed you, smeared your name, and threatened to sue you for negligence, you were the first person to come to my aid and save my life. I’ve withdrawn my lawsuit and sent a check to your fire department to donate to your charity of choice. I have no excuse for my behavior, and I hope you’ll forgive this old codger.”

I stand behind Leanna and massage her shoulders lightly in a show of support. She tells Mark, “Thank you. That means a lot to us, to me. Our family has suffered close and unexpected

loss before, and we understand what it's like to lash out not only to strangers but also to those we love most. All is forgiven on our end, but that's the easy part. Now, you need to forgive yourself. You've got a wonderful family who dropped everything to support you. You're luckier than most."

"I couldn't agree more." He chuckles. "You know, when I first saw you, I thought you were following us. All we wanted to do was come here and spend some family time together and spread my father's ashes; then you showed up out of nowhere. I didn't handle that well, and I'm sorry."

"We thought the same about you," I tell him about the copycat vandal and how he used his knowledge of Mark's past transgressions to frame him and cast doubt.

"Really! That's insane. You could sue the police department with a civil suit!" he exclaims.

When every single mouth drops open in disbelief at his suggestion, Mark slaps his knee and shouts, "I'm only kidding!" I think I felt the room shift when everyone breathed a sigh of relief.

The Jenkins family thanks us one more time for our hospitality before they leave. After that, we load up our bags and head to the main lodge for check-out. Once we arrive, the first thing Leanna and I do is make a beeline to the coffee shop to get drinks for everyone before hitting the road.

Melissa and Joe come down, dragging their luggage behind them. Melissa's eyes light up when she sees us, but it's Leanna she runs over to and hugs. "I want to thank you for

encouraging Joe to express how he feels about me. We didn't deserve your support, but you gave it anyway." Melissa grabs Joe's hand and pulls him by her side.

"You're a very lucky woman, Leanna. Carter is one of the best there is. He will love, honor, and cherish you forever if you let him. I spent years regretting that I hadn't, but Carter wasn't meant for me. He was made for you." She looks up at Joe and smiles adoringly, "I won't make the same mistake twice."

The couple doesn't linger long, but they're soon replaced by Patrick and Savannah, who are also checking out. Patrick walks over to us as we inch our way forward in line.

"I thought you should know that Officer Jordan is being held for questioning. Windham wants him gone because they don't like holding one of their own. Savannah and I will handle the situation, but we need to know if you want him prosecuted under New York or New Jersey state law. His entire confession is on tape, so it's up to you."

"Which one carries the greater penalty?" I ask.

"New York, but not because the laws are more stringent, but because of attempts to cause physical harm as well as Leanna's abduction occurred within state borders. If you're looking for prison time, then New York is your best bet. If you really want to do a full-court press, I can use one of my contacts in the FBI since he crossed state lines," Patrick explains.

“What would happen if I were to prosecute in New Jersey?” Leanna asks.

“There’s no telling. When he’s convicted, he will lose his job and never be able to work in law enforcement again, regardless of where the trial occurs. The charges will be lesser in Jersey; hence, the consequences will also be lesser,” Patrick tells her.

“I’d like him prosecuted in New Jersey. That’s his home, and he has a reputation there for being a decent cop. He’s done much more good than harm. He just got lost along the way.” When Patrick begins to protest, Leanna raises her hand. “He needs to be punished for his actions. I’m not arguing that point. I just don’t think it needs to be the maximum punishment for a first-time offense. There’s as much power in forgiveness as in consequences, but one doesn’t negate the need for the other. Maybe between the two, we can keep it to a one-time thing with a strong lesson learned?” she suggests.

Savannah comes over after hearing tidbits of the conversation. “Do you think Bryce will be okay with keeping his distance?”

Leanna shrugs. “I hope so. But maybe through this experience, he’ll learn the best lesson of all,” she says.

“And what’s that?” Savannah asks with a wry grin.

Leanna gives her “mike-drop” smile and drops her bomb, “That everyone is redeemable, and forgiveness is possible. God loves us all, including you,” she winks.

Leanna walks away while Savannah stands there stunned.

Patrick stays in line with me while I order 14 drinks to go. The barista looks at me disparagingly. I put up my hands in defense! “Three-quarters of those drinks are your Ghirardelli hot chocolates, which you brew in bulk like margaritas in New Orleans! Adding a few shots of espresso to them isn’t going to take years off your life!” The barista rolls her eyes but doesn’t argue with me.

Leanna walks back up to me as we wait for the drinks, Patrick and Savannah beside us. Savannah wraps her arms around Patrick and gives him the sweetest kiss on the cheek. If you didn’t know them better, you’d think they’re a happy couple. But the kiss was more sisterly than anything.

That doesn’t stop Patrick’s face from draining with color as an exquisitely beautiful woman calls his name from across the lobby. The woman gets one look at Savannah with her arms around Patrick’s waist and takes off running, tears filling her eyes.

I hear a single word escape from Patrick in a whisper before he takes off running after the woman.

“Ariella?”

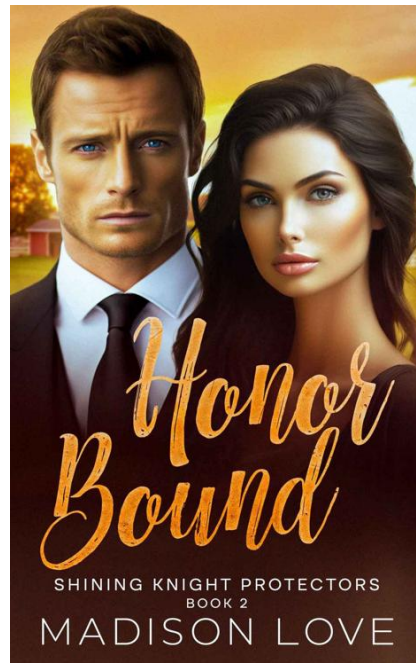
Leanna sidles up to me; concern etched in her features. “Did Patrick take off after that woman? Who was she?”

Savannah and I both shrug.

Savannah smiles, “Maybe that’s the woman that holds the key to his heart.”

Coming Soon!

If you like this book, then you'll love what comes next.
Keep reading for a sneak peek of Carter and Leanna's story
in Honor Bound: Shining Knight Protectors Book 2
Available on Amazon and Kindle Unlimited Here!





**When I left the love of my life under the cover of darkness,
I had no idea I would have to return in the same way.
Shrouded in secrecy and hidden from the world, I hoped to
find safety, solace, and a second chance.**

What I found instead was more than I expected.

I never stopped loving Patrick Kent, not even after being whisked away in the middle of the night with barely more than a goodbye. After returning home to find the family palace bombed, our country in chaos, and my betrothed waiting for me, I didn't think I would ever see him again. Yet, I prayed every day that I would.

Nine years and an assassination attempt later, I'm forced to flee my homeland in search of the one person who I trust to protect me and my son. When I find him, it's with a wedding band on his finger and a smile on his face, and yet I have a ring on my left hand, too.

But the one thing I've learned from playing politics is that nothing is ever as it seems.

Only a Shining Knight can rescue me from an evil queen who wants the throne, a rival king who wants more power, and the hired hitmen after me for a debt that's not mine.

He tucks me safely away on his family farm—where truths are revealed, forgiveness is possible, and the promise of redemption is within arm's reach. It's not the place anyone would expect to find a princess, but then again, my life is not a fairytale.

*** ***Honor Bound: Shining Knight Protectors Book 2*** is a sweet, Christian, romantic suspense novel that combines intrigue, love, and humor for a fun and exciting read that will keep you guessing until the very end. There is no swearing,

promiscuity, or cheating in these stories. Although this is the second book in the Shining Knight Protector series, it can be enjoyed as a standalone novel.

Excerpt from Honor Bound: Shining Knight Protectors Book 2

Patrick

When I graduated college more than a decade ago, it was with the full intent of getting my commission and spending the next four years in the military as an intelligence officer. I majored in computer science and communications, where my goal was to eventually work for the Department of Defense in their cybersecurity department. I imagined myself being locked away in a dark room, monitoring and intercepting signals and communications that could be used to provide assets in the field with the intelligence they needed to accomplish their missions. Being one of those assets was never on my bucket list.

My aptitude scores and grades in college garnered the attention of the Federal Bureau of Investigations, and they came knocking on my door with an offer I couldn't refuse. The FBI would pay off my debt to the military for my education if

I worked for them as an Intelligence Analyst. The only stipulation was that before I was officially hired, I had to go through all the same hoops as any other applicant. I was assured that it was just a formality, but that didn't preclude me from having to attend the 20-week field training course.

They must have liked what they had seen because I was made a special agent instead of sitting in a vault staring at computer screens. My first few jobs were spent sitting in unmarked white vans and box trucks, passing along information to the more experienced agents who were undercover and infiltrating criminal organizations. I was happy and content with where I was and what I was doing. I thought I was doing an excellent job of it until my team leader, Roger, assigned me to a job that didn't amount to more than babysitting duty.

"Pat, we have another assignment, and it's different than what you're used to," Roger said.

"If I don't like it, do I have the option to decline?" I asked, already knowing the answer.

"Of course you can! It's not as if you signed a contract with the FBI or anything," he retorted sarcastically.

"All you had to say was, 'No,'" I joked.

He rolled his eyes and then told me more about the assignment. "This is a protection detail. It's not generally in our realm of responsibility, but this is a personal request from the director himself. King Caras of Cothena will arrive next

week for the trade summit with his daughter and a contingent of personal bodyguards in tow.”

“If they have their own security, then why are we needed? Or better yet, why isn’t Homeland Security or the Secret Service being assigned to watch over them?”

“Because this is a personal favor to Director Ambrose, and Princess Ariella is his goddaughter. Director Ambrose and King Caras went to university together in London and have been close ever since.

“There has been a significant increase in pressure from major political powers for Cothena to expand their export operations, not only of their pharmaceuticals but the opium poppy seeds in their unrefined state. One is easier to control and regulate than the other. Until now, King Caras has refused any trade agreements other than those already established. The director wants to ensure that nothing happens to his friend and goddaughter while they’re here, and he’s afraid that Ariella could be used as leverage to get King Caras to change his stance on the exportation of the plant.”

I stood there with my arms crossed, taking it all in. “Okay. What is it that you need me to do? Monitor communications? Install surveillance equipment? Maybe create a gaming app for his little girl to play with while Daddy is away at work? Just so you know, I’ve never been good with kids.”

Roger arched an eyebrow at me. “Ariella is 21, Patrick, not 10.”

“Oh. So, no gaming app then?”

Roger ignores my question. “Like I said before, this won’t be the kind of assignment you’re used to. In fact, it’s the type of assignment most of us dread. But since it’s coming from higher up, we don’t have a choice and need to make the best of it. I and two other agents will be with King Caras during his stay. You, however, will be guarding Princess Ariella. As the youngest member of the team, it will be less conspicuous for you to befriend her than for any of us.”

Roger detailed my roles and responsibilities upon their arrival, and I wasn’t looking forward to it. Although it should have felt like an honor since it was a special request and would gain us the favor of the most prominent person in the FBI, it still felt like we were being relegated to babysitting duty. Nothing could have been further from the truth. When I saw Ariella step down from the private jet a week later, I knew at that moment that I would do anything to keep her safe.

Ariella was the most gorgeous woman I had ever laid eyes upon. She had long, black hair weaved into an intricate braid with a few stray hairs framing her beautiful face. Her almond-shaped green eyes were stunning and captivated me the instant they connected with mine. When she slipped her hand into mine—and I felt the spark travel up my arm and straight to my heart—I knew I was a goner.

When I told her my name was Patrick Kent, the cutest giggle escaped her lips, and a blush covered her cheeks.

“Kent? As in Clark Kent?” she tittered. The comparison has been made before and has always annoyed me, but not this

time. I'll be her Superman any day, especially since I know she will be my Kryptonite. I tried not to roll my eyes at my silly thoughts and schooled my features into a passive mask. I'm supposed to be a professional, not a little schoolboy with his first crush.

“More like a Clark bar, but you're not the first to suggest the reference.” After that, we were inseparable. The following month flew by much faster than I wanted or expected, and I was sad that our time was nearing its end.

When King Caras invited our team to go to the Bahamas with them, I wanted to jump up and down and yell, “Pick me! Pick me!” I didn't do that, but I didn't need to. Roger, in all his years of experience reading people, knew that I not only wanted to go but that I needed to as well.

It wasn't until our last day that Ariella and I had the chance to spend some time alone, without bodyguards or prying eyes following us around. I've never told anyone the choice we made together that night and never will. It's just for us. Although I had hoped she would contact me after she was whisked away after learning that her home had been bombed, she never did.

Three months later, I discovered that Ariella had eloped with the Prince of Brachha, and I nearly fell apart at the news. I have always loved Ariella, and nothing will ever change that. What we did that night may not have meant anything to her, but it meant the world to me.



“Another successful mission,” Carter tells me as we stand in line at the coffee shop inside the Windham Lodge, nestled in the heart of the Catskill mountains. We’ve just caught the guy who had been harassing Leanna, Carter’s now girlfriend. They’ve been best friends for two years but only recently admitted their feelings for one another.

I thank God for that because everyone has been rooting for them to get together since they met. You couldn’t find a couple more perfect for one another, and it was excruciating for us all to watch them as they figured out what we already knew.

Savannah, one of the six Alpha team members for Shining Knight Protective Services and my partner for this assignment, walks up and slips her arms around my waist for a hug. We’ve been posing as a newlywed couple, so we could move about the ski resort to be Carter’s backup should he need it. Since we haven’t vacated the premises yet, we’re still technically undercover. When she kisses my cheek, I hear a familiar voice I’ve yearned to hear for nine very long years.

“Patrick?”

I look in her direction, my jaw dropping and eyes widening at the figment before me. She doesn’t look like she’s aged a day. Savannah squeezes my middle and smiles adoringly at me, unaware of who it is that has my undivided attention. I can’t imagine how this must look to Ariella, standing at the

lobby entrance with a stunned expression. Before I have time to react, I see her eyes well with tears just before she turns and darts away.

“Ariella?” I whisper, removing Savannah’s arms and taking off after her.

When I get outside, I look left and right, but don’t see Ariella anywhere. Her beautiful face and warm smile have plagued my dreams every night, so much so that maybe I’m now imagining her in real life. An elderly couple notices my despair and points toward the parking lot.

“Thank you,” I tell them.

“We’ve had our fair share of lovers quarrels,” the elderly woman says playfully.

Her husband gives me a wink, “It’s because the make-up is well worth it! It’s how we’ve made it through 50 years of marriage.” They both laugh and continue on their merry way.

I don’t wait around and immediately take off in a full sprint, hoping to catch Ariella before she gets in her car and drives out of my life for good. As I get to the top of the ramp, my feet hit a patch of ice and fly out from underneath me. Trying to regain control, my arms flail wildly but do nothing to stop my imminent fall.

Oomph! That’s the sound of all the air in my lungs being expelled as my back hits the ground, followed quickly by my head. Slightly dazed, I lay there momentarily with my eyes

closed, waiting for the stars to disappear and try to gain my bearing.

A tinkling laugh can be heard from a few feet away, getting louder as she draws near. I'm afraid to open my eyes, fearing that she'll vanish if I do.

"And here I thought Superman could fly! I had no idea he could crash with gusto!" she teases.

I open one eye and see her squatting beside me, a small smile on her lips even though her eyes are ringed in red. "Are you really here? Or did I hit my head harder than I thought?" I ask. I slowly sit up, rubbing the back of my head but never taking my eyes off her.

"I'm really here."

I move to stand up and wobble a little bit, still unsteady on my feet. She holds my elbow until I've shaken off the effects of the fall.

"It's truly great to see you, Patrick. I'm sorry for running off like that. I hadn't expected to run into you here, of all places, and was a little shocked to see you happily married." She looks down at the fake wedding band on my finger.

"It's not..." I'm about to tell her that it's not what it looks like when she interrupts me.

"Although I shouldn't be. You deserve every happiness in the world, especially after the way I left things," she mumbles. Her eyes are cast down toward the ground in embarrassment.

I tilt her chin upward so our gazes connect and ask her the one question I need an answer to. “Why didn’t you contact me, Ari? I waited years for you.” I don’t bother telling her that I’m still waiting for her.

“I should have. But circumstances prevented me from doing so, along with obligations to my country. Maybe one day I’ll get the chance to explain, but not here and not now.” She looks around as if someone might overhear us, and I notice a slight tremble in her body that isn’t from the cold but from fear.

I’m about to wrap her in my arms and provide comfort, but as I step forward to do so, a child’s voice yells out, “Mommy! Who’s that man you’re with?”

A young boy, about seven or eight years old, walks up to Ariella with a man following behind him. I’d know the man anywhere. It’s Kiernan, the Prince of Brachha—Ariella’s husband.

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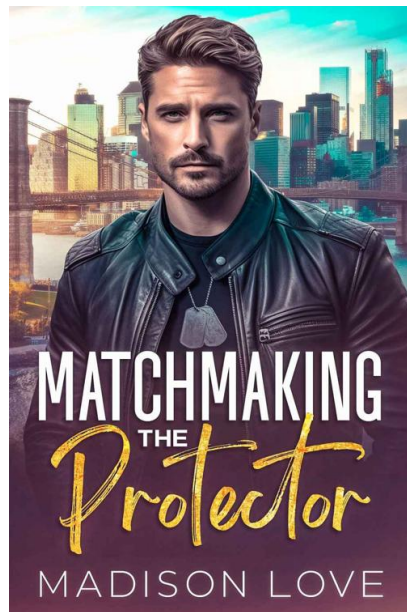
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After one conversation, it's clear he's hiding something from
me.

But I've been hiding something, too.

So when my past comes back to haunt me, I have no choice
but to share my secret.

It's no surprise that he is willing to protect me.

It's what he was born to do.

But will he be able to overcome his past in time to save me
from mine?