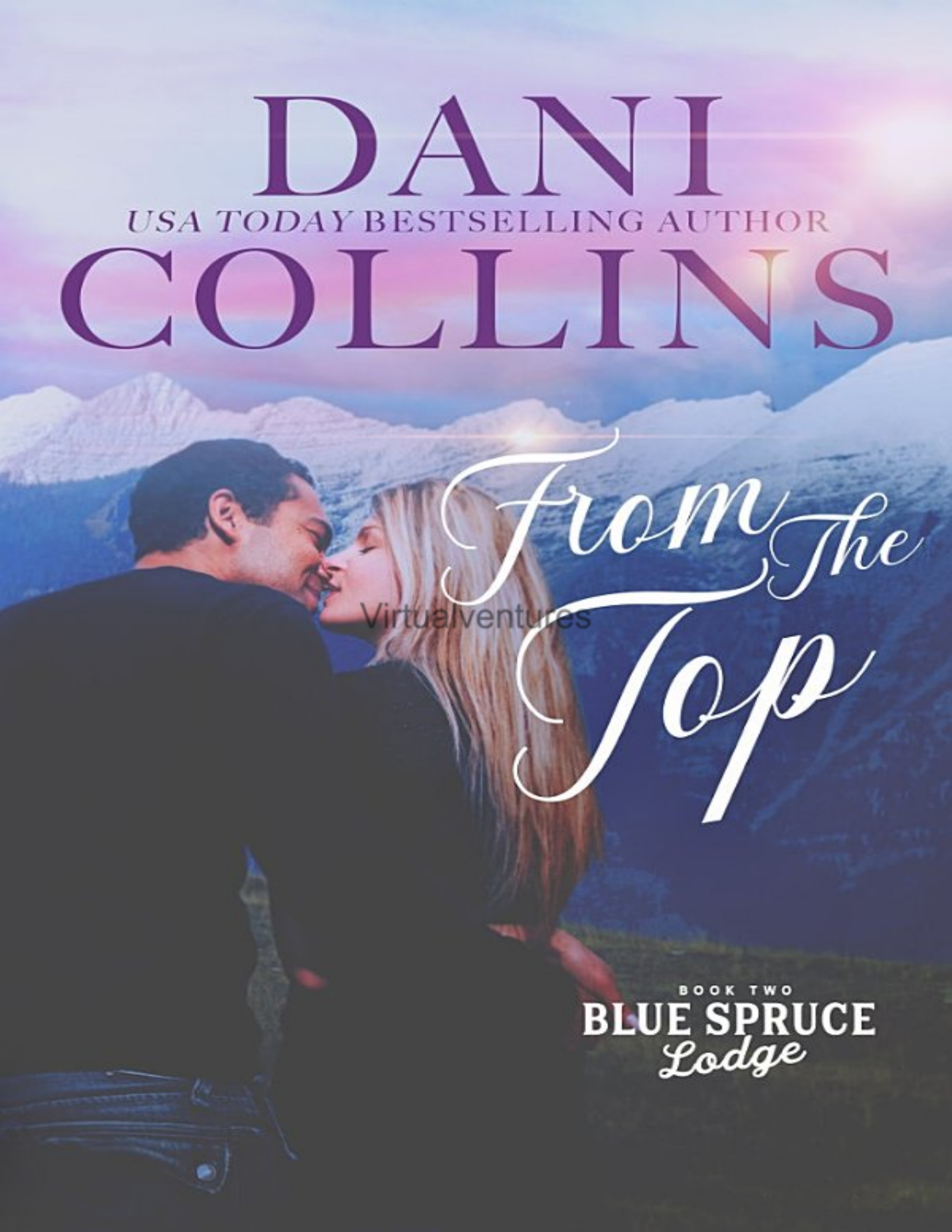
DANI
USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR
COLLINS
From The Top
Virtualventures
BOOK TWO
BLUE SPRUCE
Lodge

From the Top

A Blue Spruce Lodge Romance

Dani Collins

Virtual Ventures

OceanofPDF.com

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Dedication

This book is dedicated to Jane, Sinclair, Meghan, Michelle, Sarah and the rest of the Tule team. Writing is a solitary occupation until the time comes to bring the story to readers. Then you hope desperately for someone to have your back and Tule is an amazing force to have in your corner. I’m deeply grateful for their wonderful support.

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The Blue Spruce Lodge series

About the Author

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Dear Reader,

When Ilke first made an appearance in *On The Edge*, she was that frosty, clichéd ‘other woman’ character we often see in romance. By the time Ilke sat down with Glory, however, and revealed she was a fan of romance, I knew there was a deeper character here who deserved her own story.

Nate also started out in my earliest drafts as a background character. Someone needs to be in charge of actually building the ski resort so I brought him aboard. He had such a great sense of humor, though, and a *son*. I wanted to get to know him better.

I started playing the ‘what if’ game. What if Nate and Ilke got together one night? It’s only supposed to be one night because they both lead very full lives. They don’t have room for a romantic relationship, but what if they suddenly have a very serious and binding connection, one that demands they realign their priorities?

Then some other ‘what ifs’ happened that I’ll let you discover for yourself, but they turn everything on its ear. In fact, you may want a box of tissues handy.

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How do you find happily ever after when your version of it changes? That’s what I asked myself as I wrote Ilke and Nate’s story. I hope you enjoy finding out how they reach theirs.

Thanks for visiting Blue Spruce Lodge,
Dani

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Chapter One

SECRETLY, DEEP DOWN, Ilke Lundquist was a romantic.

Not that she could afford to be. She had tried at every turn to curtail it and, God knows, the world had certainly done its best to beat that streak out of her. She possessed classic Nordic beauty, which should have been an asset, but in reality, it meant she was treated like a dumb blonde or as if she was easy—most often both. Women in sports were taken almost as seriously as pigtails on a goat, especially when they were pretty, and her mother's example of *happily ever after* was an abomination of the phrase.

Out of self-preservation, Ilke had put away childish dreams that included knights on white chargers. She had pushed herself to become resourceful, disciplined, and logical. A realist. A cold bitch, some called her, which didn't bother her. Much. She made sure no one *knew* it bothered her. Besides, it meant less was expected of her and it allowed her to focus on her goals. The one dream she *did* allow herself to have.

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And yes, living that way was lonely as hell, but she didn't *want* to need anyone. That was her mother's way—financially dependent, afraid to be alone, seeing what she wanted to see so she could believe she had everything.

Every woman's marrow-deep fear was to turn out like her mother so, no. Ilke wasn't going to be *that*. She allotted herself one passion, one crazy aspiration that crowded out everything else. The podium was her happily ever after. All the moves she made were aimed at standing there. If an action didn't serve that dream, it didn't need to be taken.

So why was she overcome by a swell of hot emotion when she arrived at Blue Spruce Lodge? Not misery at this detour, either. Her eyes stung with something like homecoming. She was *here*. She hadn't cried in years, even in the last few weeks as her life crashed and spilled itself in pieces across media outlets around the world.

She turned off the engine of her rented SUV, squeezing the wheel as she tamped down on the swell of anxiety that lurked beneath her carefully restrained surface.

Maybe the way the feathery flakes swirled rather than fell was affecting her. If she did have a home, that's where it was—in the snow. Not inside some throwback lodge glowing like a scene in a child's snow globe.

She leaned forward, taking in the low, flat ceiling of dull gray and what looked like a cut-out of snow-covered peaks forming a backdrop behind the lodge's blue roof. Floodlights tucked into the landscape at the front of the building cast pale funnels of light upward, bathing the laden branches of the shrubs in hints of gold, warming the creamy daffodil-color of the building's walls. With the amber glow through the yellowed glass on either side of the door, the lodge was a beacon of welcome on this gloomy March morning.

Not much had changed since she'd been here at the turn of the year, but it was significantly improved from the eyesore she'd seen last July. At that time, she had privately wondered what the Johanssons were thinking.

For decades, this had been a family-run lodge on the Whiskey Jack ski hill. The resort was off the beaten track and only had a handful of day buildings and a chalet for overnighters. Oskar Johansson, founder of Wikinger Sports, had seen a diamond in the rough and bought it to develop as a training facility for his sons.

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That had been fifteen years ago and an avalanche had promptly wiped out everything except this old lodge, which had been shuttered until last year.

That was when Rolf and Trigg Johansson took up the challenge of resurrecting the resort. They had the pockets, the passion, and the capacity to build a world-class winter destination from near-scratch, but they had left the refurbishing of the only on-site accommodation in the hands of an ex-professor from Seattle and his romance author daughter, Glory.

Progress was being made, Ilke supposed. She folded her hands on the wheel, noting that since last summer, all the broken uprights in the exterior balcony had been repaired. The rails and shutters had been painted Bavarian-blue to match the roof. With the muted light turning all the colors mellow and quaint, Blue Spruce Lodge looked like an enchanted place straight from a fairy tale.

But fairy tales weren't real. She knew that better than ever now. The ones where children were eaten? Those were legit. In the last few weeks, her hopes and dreams had been spat out like broken bones and wasted years, completely without regard.

Just when she had begun to believe she was done with rundown chalets and clawing her way into better circumstances, here she was all over again.

Because of one stupid night.

It was supposed to be a virus. That's what she had told herself, trying to explain why she was sluggish and nauseated and forgetful. That's why she had had so many slow starts and fudged a gate, getting herself disqualified from one event. Once she had started second-guessing herself, the whole thing had gone to hell and her finish times had sucked balls.

This was supposed to be her year. Her arrival on *the* podium.

Instead, she'd come away fifth and seventh and *nineteenth*. They'd scratched her from a team event because she'd been performing so poorly.

How was she pregnant? *How*? She barely even had sex. People whispered that she was a closet lesbian, she turned men down so consistently.

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Yet the stars had aligned two months ago. She had impulsively shared her bed with a man who had—apparently—worn a faulty condom while the prescription she'd started as a travel precaution had rendered her birth control patch useless.

She had fallen twice since then. Not bad falls, but she could have miscarried any time over the last weeks, maybe without even knowing she was pregnant. Instead, she'd hung on to that baby and embarrassed herself in front of the world, lost the backers who would have given her a full ride if she had medaled—and soon, the entire Alpine racing world would know why she had choked.

Still time to end it, she kept thinking, but what was the point? This baby had already cost her the most important four years of her life.

And she wanted to have it, which didn't make sense to her at all. This wasn't a book where everything worked out in the end. It was real life. From the day she had become sexually active, she had always believed she would terminate an unplanned pregnancy. Her goals were too important, her trajectory impossible to interrupt. Not to mention there was no such thing as a man good enough with whom to procreate.

Even so, after the team doctor had quizzed her with routine questions and she had assured him that, no, she couldn't be pregnant, she had taken a test on the sly. She had then skipped the closing ceremonies, too chagrined by her failure, too astounded she was expecting, to stay in Korea. She hadn't even considered going to see her mother in New Zealand, which was far closer than Stockholm or the Montana Rockies.

No, she had bolted on the first available flight, taking her gear back to Sweden and leaving it in storage with the club that would likely expel her for someone who knew how to ski. Then she had declined to renew the lease on her furnished apartment, since her income was dropping like a barometer before a hurricane.

In a move that had truly gutted her, she had flushed her season down the toilet by pulling out of the World Cup finals, *to which she'd been invited*. Until the games, her point standings had put her in a contender's position for overall champion. If she had done what she was supposed to do in Korea, she would have pulled herself into the lead in the rankings and finished the season with precious medals around her neck *and* a crystal globe in her hands.

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Instead, she had to set all of that aside and talk to the father of her baby. That was the only decision she had been able to make.

Two days and three stopovers later, she felt like hell and not just from the travel. She had woken with morning sickness after a restless night in a cheap motel in Kalispell. She was feeling trapped in a way she hadn't felt in a long, long time and hated it.

At least she was surrounded by her true friends now. Tall, jagged peaks and clean, pure snow. Snow was nature's miracle, whitewashing imperfections and providing a clean start to a new day. Watching it calmed her. It always did. She only wished she could snap on her skis and lose herself in its glittering powder.

A streaking pang of loss hit her as she realized she wouldn't be allowed that vital meditation for a year.

She worked her hands on the steering wheel, trying to believe gold would be hers in another four years—when she would be pushing thirty and the upstart eighteen-year-olds with uninjured knees who had surpassed her this year would be reaching the top of their game.

What was she doing here?

Every single day she battled toward the top, training through hardship, qualifying, beating her last time and beating her competitors. Winning this race, then going after the next one. She couldn't put her conditioning on hold for a year. She would lose too much ground.

But what was her alternative? Fly to Queenstown and ask her mother for help?

That thought was so repulsive, she threw herself out of the car to get away from it. Not bothering with her luggage, she turned up the collar on her insulated jacket, tucked her chin against the wind and kicked her knee-high boots through the inches of snow that had accumulated since the last time the lot had been cleared.

How was this place keeping the lights on? There were only two snow-covered vehicles in the far corner of the lot.

Would they even give her a room? She planned to prevail on Vivien, a friend of her mother's, kind of. Maybe she was Ilke's friend, not that Ilke encouraged close relationships, but Vivien had reached out once, a long time ago, when Ilke's mother had been turning a blind eye.

Ilke had been too afraid to let Vivien interfere at the time, but a thread of something had remained between them. Trust? She wasn't sure what it was, only that each time she crossed paths with the older woman, Vivien acted happy to see her. She made Ilke feel seen and valued. Even though Vivien was Vivien. She was entitled and demanding and overbearing. Not in a hurtful way. She simply made assumptions that she would get what she wanted and always did.

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Somehow Vivien had talked Ilke into bringing her here last summer, so Vivien could see what her 'boys' were up to. Then she had invited Ilke to join a heli-ski trip over the new year. Ilke didn't know why Vivien was so nice to her, but Ilke was a slut for powder so she had accepted.

Was Vivien even back from Korea? She'd been there to watch her son, Trigg, win a hat-trick of gold in his snowboard events along with two silvers. The bastard. Must be nice not to worry about a stowaway taking up residence in your uterus, throwing off not just your stamina and coordination, but your entire life.

What if it wasn't even open? The ski hill didn't have any chairlifts yet and only a quarter of the rooms at the lodge had been guest-ready when she'd been here in January. Maybe it had gone belly-up?

The door opened when she pulled.

A cheerful gas fireplace with gorgeous stonework separated the lobby from the adjacent lounge. The mantel held a sweet cuckoo clock and comfortable-looking chairs were arranged to face the flames, but they were empty.

Ilke paused to take in the staircase that rose on her right, fully restored with polished woodgrain and new carpet in a rich red with gold accents. A sparkling chandelier hung over it. On the far side of the lobby, paneled-glass doors formed a wall that closed off the dining room.

She crossed to peek through.

Her heart pounded the way it did when she was waiting for her name to be called before a race, but the dining room was empty. He wasn't there. No tall frame with brawny shoulders. No lean face with smooth, brown skin, dark straight brows, and hair so closely trimmed it was more of a black cap, matching the neatly shaved stubble that framed his strong jaw. His irises were dark brown and somber, his lashes so ridiculously long, his eyes bordered on pretty. His mouth… If she were the type to objectify a man, she would call his mouth erotic. That night, she had thought she could feast on him for the rest of her life.

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Of course, her ovaries had been waking up from hibernation, starving and sending her libido on the hunt. Biology was a cruel mistress. Witness how her nerves were firing on all cylinders when she wasn't planning for this to be a scene. Her emotions were still firmly packed in the suitcase she'd left in her rental. She was here to inform and plot a way forward. It would be very civilized.

Pragmatic and dispassionate, even.

Seriously, where was everybody? This was creepy.

Glancing into the lounge behind the fireplace, she found it empty, too. There wasn't anyone tending the bar or drinking at it.

Nate was at the base, she supposed, working. It was only ten o'clock in the morning.

Her palms were clammy and she shoved them into her pockets.

This was eerie, finding the place so quiet when it had been a hive the other two times, especially on New Year's Eve. With the arrival of winter, all the activity had moved inside. There'd been a cute brunette who'd called

herself the lodge's manager at the reception desk. She wasn't there today, however. No staff was visible.

Ilke pinched her lip, growing quite convinced they had either run out of money, or there was a carbon monoxide leak and her body would be found along with the rest.

She glanced at the bell on the reception desk, but didn't press it. She looked down the hall that led toward the kitchen and a suite that Marvin, the owner, lived in. Halfway along was his office.

Starting down that way, she paused as she neared the cracked door, hearing voices as she came alongside it.

"—going to kill him. In fact, you can tell him he can do this fucking job himself, since it's his fault she quit. I don't need this shit! What am I supposed to do now?"

That sounded like Glory, Marvin's daughter.

Ilke wavered between knocking and going back to tap the bell.

"You know my feelings on this, *schatzi*."

That was Rolf, Vivien's stepson and owner of Whiskey Jack Resort, President of Wikinger Sports and self-appointed king of all he surveyed.

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His tone suggested disinterest. What did Glory even see in him? Beyond the physical, of course. Ilke couldn't fault Glory's taste since she'd had a brief fling with Rolf herself a few years ago. When Ilke did have sex, it tended to be hit and run so her thing with Rolf hadn't lasted more than an hour from lobby to shower. Nate had been an exceptional—pun intended—all-nighter.

But still a one-off. She didn't allow herself to expect anything from her affairs and good thing, because nothing ever came of them.

"You promised you would intervene if this happened." Glory sounded really bitter. "What the *fuck*? Why couldn't he keep it in his pants?"

"I'll speak to Vivien." So flat and unaffected. "Ask her to help your father find someone else."

"Oh, it'll be three weeks before this gets sorted out and we both know what I'll be doing all that time. I didn't move back here to run this place. Your fucking brother's unstoppable dick is ruining my life and *you don't care*."

A thick pause where Ilke could imagine one of Rolf's dead-eyed looks dissecting Glory into tiny pieces for daring to get strident with him.

“Any other day I would give you the fight you’re begging for,” Rolf said in a voice that was calm and—was she crazy? Did he sound gentle? *Tender*? “Today you get a free pass to blame me for Trigg’s dick and Vivien hiring a woman who couldn’t stay off it and your father’s inability to solve his own problems. If you want to stay here and work, I’ll stand here and listen to how much you resent it.”

Another loaded silence, then Glory spoke again, voice choked. “If I don’t yell, I’ll cry.”

“I know.”

“She’s not even my mom.”

“I know.”

“I *hate* funerals.”

“Come here.”

“I can’t. I’ll ruin my makeup.” She sniffed. “We should go or we’ll be late.”

A resigned feminine sigh and the scuff of footsteps.

Ilke smoothly retreated to the desk in time to watch the door swing inward.

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Glory emerged, Rolf behind her. He gently pulled her around to face him and they exchanged a brief make-up kiss. They were dressed for a service, Rolf in a dark suit, Glory in a black dress and heels. He wasn’t as lean as he’d been when he’d been racing and waving flags on podiums, but his increased bulk was all muscle. He was ruggedly handsome and a gorgeous foil for Glory’s slender, redheaded femininity.

Their somber expressions flickered into surprise as they noticed her. Rolf’s expression darkened and his hand went to Glory’s waist, drawing her closer to his side.

Ilke wanted to smirk at how protective he was, but she felt a weird pang instead. She doubted he felt any guilt for their hookup. She never gave more than a passing thought to the time they’d collided body parts, but now he and Glory were a thing, he betrayed that caution whenever he saw her, wary of their extremely brief history hurting his beloved fiancée.

The idea she had designs on him was laughable, but she found his concern for Glory endearing. Something to envy even, which was odd since Glory wasn’t someone she aspired to be, especially if she had a man dominating her life. Ilke admired her, though. She was funny and had a cool

side job. She also didn't take shit from a man who didn't seem to possess a human bone in his body.

Rolf's reaction to Ilke's coming here had been dead last on her list of worries when she had booked her flight, but she belatedly realized he could become a problem if he felt his relationship with Glory was threatened.

"Ilke." Glory frowned in confusion.

"Shouldn't you be in Norway?" Rolf asked.

You could take the racer off the circuit, but you couldn't take the schedule out of his head. She had to admire his economy, too. He managed to scold her for Korea while trying to get rid of her in five short words. True precision. That's why he was a champion, she supposed.

"I believe Vivien will have a room for me." She deliberately made it sound as though she was here at Vivien's invitation when she hadn't even told her she was coming. "Is—" She had forgotten the manager's name and realized that's who had probably fallen victim to Trigg's relentless libido. "Shall I wait in the lounge for Vivien?"

"We're locking up for a funeral." Rolf's gaze told her to wait in her car, preferably in Billings.

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Ilke showed no reaction, even though his hostility stung. Even though an anxious sweat rose on the back of her neck. She didn't have anywhere else to go.

"We don't have any finished rooms available," Glory warned. "Rolf has a heli-tour group coming in late tonight. Paula's up there now, prepping for them." She tapped into the computer. "Your contractors are in these three, aren't they?" She pointed at the screen while glancing at Rolf.

He shrugged.

"Oh, screw it," Glory muttered and pushed the mouse away. "I'll register you when I get back. We're already late. Here." She grabbed a key from behind the desk. "I think that room's habitable. If not, ask Paula to find you one that is. Oh, the sign for the door." Glory spun and hurried back to the office.

"Who—?" Ilke started to ask about the funeral.

"Why are you here?" Rolf asked, blunt and confrontational enough she had to fight taking a step back.

Ilke licked her lips. Fortunately, Glory came back with a piece of paper and moved to pull a piece of tape off the dispenser, which gave a little

screech as she did.

“We’ll be in Haven most of the day, but Dad and Vivien are coming back right after the service. Suzanne Adams passed away. Do you remember her?”

“I don’t. I’m sorry.”

“She owned the bistro in town. We’re friends with the family.” Glory’s face darkened as she moved to stick the sign on the door and turn the lock. Her shoulders lifted and fell as she took a bracing breath before she came back to Rolf. “Oh, do you need to go out for your luggage? Can you lock up when you come back in?”

“Of course.”

“Thanks.”

Rolf set his arm across Glory’s back and they moved down the hall, passed the kitchen where there was a back exit to the staff parking lot.

Ilke hated when a man threw his arm around her. It always felt very possessive and controlling to her. She had loathed it since she’d been fourteen and had had to pry herself out from under her stepfather’s thumb and the rest of his straying hands.

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Glory wasn’t a teenager or a wilting violet like Ilke’s mother, though. Watching the pair, she thought Rolf’s hold seemed protective and supportive. Loving.

Not that she cared, she reminded herself, heading out into the snow. She didn’t want or need a man in her life. She was independent. Cold, tough. A pragmatic bitch.

Although, as she pulled her heavy case from the back of the SUV and carried it across the thickening snow, she had a worrisome thought that she might be hurting the baby with her exertion. It would be nice to have a man do things like this as her pregnancy progressed. And what about the coming months? She would burn through her savings. Why was that all on her when it had taken two to conceive this kid?

As she walked back into the hotel, and she was surrounded by silence, she told herself being alone was the way she preferred it.

Except she wasn’t alone. She was pregnant.

What was Nate going to say when she told him she wanted him to raise it so she could continue competing?

"YOU LOOK LIKE you're running a day care out here."

Nathaniel Hart glanced away from the four kids playing in the snow to Eden Adams. She had pulled on what had to be her father's jacket since it swamped her and had the police crest on its shoulder. Her green pom-pom hat was already turning white from the short walk from the porch to the hillock where the kids were taking turns with plastic toboggans.

"The other dads said they would be right back."

"And you fell for it?"

Nate had had his keys in his hand when he'd walked Aiden over to join his son's preschool friends, but he didn't say anything about the men who would rather drink beer out of the weather than spend time with their kids. He kept his opinions to himself as a rule, mostly because he had a superiority complex, according to his ex-wife. *Which makes me better than those with an inferiority complex*, had been his response, very much not to her great amusement.

The take-away had been to keep his trap shut over pointing out the rest of humanity's failings. And the very fact he *had* an ex-wife scorched the perfectionist in him enough to instill some circumspection, if not actual humility.

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"You would think they could PVR the game on a day like today." Disgust replaced the grief that lined her expression, but only for a moment. She quickly found a smile for the children dressed in brightly colored snowsuits, hoods pulled tight around their faces, hands bound in waterproof mittens, feet clumsy in insulated boots.

"Auntie Eden, come slide with us." That was Zuzu, named for her grandmother Suzanne, the woman whose loss had brought what looked like all of Haven to the community hall and now the Adams's home.

"I'm still in my skirt, sweetie. See?" Eden pointed to where her knees were shaking in thick black nylons beneath the band of her black skirt and above the oversized green galoshes she had stepped into.

Aiden looked at Eden as if she'd run over his dog, then kicked the remains. "Please?" he asked with a blink, blink, blink of his long-lashed

eyes. Poor kid had the same problem Nate did—lashes so long the snow stuck to them.

“Sweet Lord, how do you say no to that face?” Eden asked Nate in a beleaguered tone. “Next time, buddy. I promise.”

Nate had taken Aiden last night and this morning, which wasn’t his usual day, but Wanda was close with Eden’s sister and Nate hadn’t thought a funeral service was something their just-turned four-year-old needed to attend. Not if they could shield him from harsh reality a little longer.

He had only intended to stop by here long enough to express his condolences and hand off Aiden to Wanda, but he didn’t view spending time with his kid as a chore. Work tasks might be swirling in his brain as thick as this falling snow, but listening to children’s laughter went a long way on a day like today.

Maybe that’s why Eden had come out here, but he still said, “You don’t have to stand around in this.” It was cold and she was having a rough enough day. “I’m fine.”

“I needed a break.” She pushed her fists deeper into the jacket pockets. “You want to get a coffee, though?”

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He had wondered sometimes if she was hitting on him, being so friendly all the time. It wasn’t pure conceit. He worked out, kept his clothes clean, and was paid well. In this town of limited prospects, being single and possessing all his teeth made him Haven’s most eligible bachelor. Even so, he had chalked up the impression to her naturally outgoing personality.

Yet here he was, fielding a legitimate invitation.

Weirdly, the image of a lithe blonde flashed into his brain along with the compulsion to say, *I can’t*. He hadn’t been in a monogamous relationship since his marriage and he was never going to see Ilke again, so why—?

“Oh, my God.” Eden dipped her head and covered her eyes. “I meant do you literally want to go inside and get yourself a coffee. You’ve been out here a while and I thought you might be cold. I wasn’t asking for a date.”

Okay, then. He scratched his cheek through his beard. “Dang. I’m always picking up bereaved women at funerals. No reason you should be the exception.”

That made her chuckle and he was glad. She looked like she needed a laugh.

Of course, now he should say something like, *But if you do want to get a coffee sometime, give me a call*.

She glanced up at him with a smile of anticipation as if she expected him to say it and would agree.

For some reason, the words stalled in his throat.

After a beat of silence, her mouth twitched philosophically.

Now he felt like he had rejected a woman who had enough going on she didn't need a man turning up his nose at buying her a coffee.

"Listen—"

"No, it's fine. Honestly."

"It's the small-town thing," he insisted on explaining, thinking he really shouldn't be so fastidious. She was cute and funny. A genuinely nice person. "Not that you're small-town. I know you're not." She was pretty worldly for this otherwise backwoods, white-bread town, but he saw her all the time. He bumped into her at the lodge if she came out to see Glory and they exchanged a few words at the preschool if he happened to pick up Aiden and she was getting her niece. "People know enough of my business as it is. I thought this kind of overlapping of lives was a made-up TV cliché until I moved here and started to live it. It makes me cautious about giving people things to talk about. That's all."

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Having nowhere to hide in this town probably wouldn't bother him so much if his life looked the way he had always planned, but it didn't. The least Wanda could have done was stay in Sacramento where they would have had some anonymity, but no. She had pressed him to move here, where she could hang their laundry to air-dry in front of people they had to talk to every day.

"It chafes, I know. Why do you think I moved away soon as I finished high school and only came back kicking and screaming? 'When are you going to get married? When are you going to have kids?'" she sing-songed.

"Exactly."

Eden was giving him the look, though. The one that told him she was speculating on what kind of marriage he'd had if his ex had left him to shack up with another woman. Why had he followed them here?

"So you're not going to remarry and have more kids?" she joked.

He snorted, but answered truthfully, thinking he might as well make his position crystal clear.

“If Wanda and I had stayed together, it would be different, but…” He shrugged. “My sister’s ex has kids with someone else and her current boyfriend has kids with his first wife… It gets complicated.” His sister’s situation wasn’t even contentious, just a juggling act and more drama than he wanted or needed in his own life. He was happy to keep his personal life neat and simple. Him and his son.

“Yeah, and if Wanda is thinking about having more kids—”

“What?”

His tone was so sharp, it made all the kids stop and look.

Eden widened her eyes. “I didn’t mean—It was just something she said the other day. We were chatting when I was picking up Zuzu. Honestly, it sounded like a someday thing. Not like it was *happening*.”

“Yeah, well, she would have a problem making it happen, wouldn’t she?” The sperm count in Wanda’s girlfriend, Frankie, was zero.

He wouldn’t put it past Wanda to visit a bank, though.

Fuck.

“Nate.” Eden touched his arm. “I’m babbling about other people because I don’t want to think about my own life right now. Don’t take anything I say seriously.”

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Too late. His temper was lit.

Not because he was holding out for a reconciliation, either. He was one hundred percent over his marriage, but he was one million percent protective of his son. Couldn’t Wanda keep one single thing stable for half a minute before forcing Aiden to adapt to new circumstances?

Before forcing Nate to do the same?

“I have to pee,” one of the little ones said, ruddy face all that was showing in the tightly drawn hood of a neon green snowsuit.

“I’ll take you in, sweetie.” Eden offered her hand. “And I’ll start some cocoa for everyone. One more slide each, then you all come in, okay?” she said to the kids, then glanced at Nate.

He nodded curtly. “I’ll bring them.”

He wouldn’t hang around, though. Wanda and Frankie were inside. He wasn’t ready to be civil to either of them if they were thinking about bringing another child into their broken family. No way. Not if he had any say in the matter.

Which he probably didn’t.

Fuck.

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Chapter Two

"MARVIN."

His name said in that particular baritone made Marvin Cormer feel like the literary Mr. Bennet every single time. *He is the kind of man, indeed, to whom I should never dare refuse anything.*

"Rolf." Marvin smiled and handed his future son-in-law one of the floral arrangements from the back of his SUV. Marvin was late arriving at the Adams's home, having hung back to help with gathering up the flowers and putting away chairs with the handful of volunteers at the community hall.

Rolf gave the spray of white roses and baby's breath a perplexed look.

That wasn't even the half of it. Marvin handed him the tripod that would hold the enormous wreath with a satin ribbon imprinted with a goodbye message. He and Glory had had the sickly scent of dying flowers in the house for two weeks before Glory had finally had a fit about it and threw them all out in one day. But how did one ask a freshly bereaved family if they'd prefer not to watch beautiful bouquets shrivel metaphorically, day-by-day. If Marvin had known how depressing it was, he would have sent all of their bouquets directly to a senior center or some other place where the living and unaffected could enjoy them.

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"Lovely service," he said, as he had a dozen times already. People didn't know how to process something like this. Best to help them along with easy conversation. That was his specialty, after all. "Good to see the local florist does such a nice job. We can trust them with the wedding."

"That's what we need to discuss. If the lodge won't be ready, tell me now. I'll make other arrangements." So blunt.

Was Glory out of her senses to be accepting this man? She had always been such a sensitive girl. Marvin couldn't fathom how these two had ended up together.

But they had.

Like every other parent in history, he had to let go and watch her stand or fall—while doing everything he could to keep her standing.

"The lodge will be ready," Marvin assured Rolf with a magnanimous smile.

"Your manager quit. Again."

"She did," Marvin confirmed, but left it at that. Rolf's brother, Trigg, the little turd, was the reason women kept departing in various states of anger, disappointment, heartbreak, and disgust. Trigg was Marvin's only ally in this endeavor with renovating Blue Spruce Lodge, however, and the brothers locked horns enough as it was. Marvin didn't want to—as the kids said these days—throw Trigg under the bus.

"I'll have a new manager hired long before July." The calendar had just turned to March. Lots of time. "It won't affect the renovations. Those are on schedule."

"But it affects Glory." Rolf tucked his chin in a man-to-man directness.

Marvin turned to close the back of his vehicle, hiding the sting that came from having this man, who had only come into Glory's life a year ago, trying to protect his daughter from *him*.

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"She's upset today. This hits close to home." Nevertheless, Marvin felt the creep of failure pressing into his bones. Somehow, over the last years, he had lost something in his daughter's eyes. She loved him, but she didn't believe in him. Dragging her into his dream of renovating and running an inn might have resulted in her finding the love of her life, but she didn't think her father could make a go of Blue Spruce Lodge. Not really. Not in the long run.

Her lack of confidence in him hurt. Failing her on her *wedding* day was not something he would or could allow to happen.

"Everything will be fine," he told Rolf. "You'll see."

"I'll ask Vivien to take a more active role," Rolf said. "Just to be sure."

Ouch. It wasn't as if he didn't feel every day that Rolf was waiting for him to crash and burn so he could pick up the pieces and do things his way. Vivien was the thin edge of that wedge. She already behaved proprietarily enough: quick to order staff, playing lady of the manor when VIPs were in residence. Marvin didn't need anyone taking him in hand, most especially a duchess of the Johansson realm.

Marvin was a pleaser, though. Always had been. That's why it had taken him nearly sixty years to go after what he really wanted. He was here now, though. Blue Spruce Lodge was his, and, "I have everything under control."

"She's very organized. Always kept my father on track."

Marvin smiled past his dismay at Rolf's relentlessness.

"I'm sure she did. She's a fine woman." Too fine. She looked down on this entire venture. Since agreeing to plan the wedding, she hadn't stopped complaining about the lack of resources in this small town. "But I can—"

"I'll tell her to schedule a meeting." Rolf talked right over him, nodded once to indicate the discussion was over, and carried the flowers inside.

VIVIEN HAD LIVED high and she had lived low. Rock bottom had been her foundation, growing up in poverty, moving around as her father went from job to job, drinking himself out of each hint of security with reckless abandon. At sixteen, with him in the drunk tank and her lacking even a high school graduation certificate, she had applied her pretty smile and pretty legs to every reputable business taking names, including the airfield on the outskirts of whichever town they had occupied at the time.

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That stint making coffee between filing and running bank deposits had inspired her to become an airline hostess. Two years into that, she had found a pilot willing to marry her. He had stationed her in Berlin where they had lived a little too well. It had been the eighties, after all.

When her marriage had fallen apart, she'd been flat broke all over again. She hadn't even had the airfare to fly back to the nothing she had left in America. She had taken up with a midlevel executive who had a wife in the country and an apartment in the city. He had complained constantly that his secretary didn't know how to use the new computer she had been given to streamline her workload. He was investing in the company that made those contraptions, though, convinced they would soon appear on every desk in every office.

Being highly adaptable, and quite full of shit, Vivien had applied her pretty smile and pretty legs to every office looking for a computer systems *manager*. Soon she'd been the personal assistant of Oskar Johansson and

fathoms deep in love with him. He'd been a bear of a boss, determined to take his father's sporting goods chain into developing its own line of gear that would dominate the industry and very soon had.

He had also been married. When she and Oskar had become a little too close one night, and she had subsequently turned up pregnant, quite by accident—Vivien hadn't wanted or planned to have children—Oskar had set her up in Manhattan where she had lived very well. She had seen him often, as he made regular visits to see their son, Trigg, but she didn't sleep with him again until his first wife died. Then Oskar had married Vivien and she had been living like the one percent ever since.

What she had never lived, nor aspired to be, was middle class.

Taking in the home of Chief Adams and his recently deceased wife, Suzanne, she supposed this midlevel of society had its charms. The furniture was decent quality, if worn, the dishes pretty, if department store brand. There was a cozy permanence to the array of snapshots and children's artwork and hand-knitted throws that spoke of familial connection, though. That was something Vivien *had* aspired to, especially when she'd been married to a workaholic, fighting his pigheaded, teenaged stepson for a shred of respect, fairly begging him to return the love of his hero-worshipping, much younger half-brother.

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That ship of nuclear-family perfection had long sailed, though. Her husband was dead and his sons were adults. She had a fortune at her disposal and wasn't a snob, per se, but she *liked* the way she lived. She had no intention of taking a step backward.

Which was why she was so frustrated by this ski resort project Trigg and Rolf had taken on. She'd fought Oskar on buying the wretched thing, but it would seem her lot in life was to manage hardheaded men.

And yes, Whiskey Jack Resort would eventually cater to the level of society she had risen to call peers, but currently she was living with blue-collar laborers in a pioneer setting. There was no shopping, no river cruises, and her best dinner parties were attended by athletes and executives, as if she hadn't had her fill of *those* in this lifetime.

There wasn't even a spa—*yet*—to turn her boredom into pampered ennui.

What was she supposed to do, though? Live in Berlin and hope Rolf and Trigg would visit once or twice a year, when they happened to be in

Europe? Follow Trigg on his training circuit? Of course, she would always attend his most important races. South Korea had been a welcome reprieve from homesteading in the Rockies, but that visit to civilization was over and here she was, back in the backwater, her only choice of setting if she wanted any involvement in her sons' lives at all.

And what of male companionship? Marvin Cormer was her natural squire to local events, being her contemporary and the father of her stepson's fiancée. He was chivalrous and well educated, but he looked like an old English sheepdog in an unpressed suit. At best, he kept the other middle-aged heathens at bay, but he wasn't a serious option for romance. If she attached herself to any man, it would be one who would keep her in the style to which she'd grown accustomed. When it came to running his lodge, Marvin was a disaster looking for the quickest route to bankruptcy.

She couldn't imagine what had possessed Trigg to entrust such a vital piece of the resort's restoration to such a haphazard man. Trigg was as stubborn as his brother and father, though. And loyal, which she couldn't fault. A dreamer, too. That would be her DNA, she supposed, since believing she was destined for a life of grandeur was the primary reason she lived one.

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No, she wouldn't have any luck convincing Trigg the Whiskey Jack Ski Resort was a bad idea. As for Rolf, well, he was Oskar two-point-oh, veins seething with more piss and vinegar than a man had a right to. He had committed to Oskar's original vision of Whiskey Jack becoming the number one resort in the world. Moving Rolf from a course he'd chosen was like moving the mountain he was trying to revive. Exasperated tolerance was the best she had ever been able to expect from him.

So here she was, mingling with the proletariat, trying to work out how to be happy with what she had. With *this*.

"Vivien." Rolf cast his shadow over her.

"*Bärchen*." Forced affection always made Rolf bristle, which was half the reason she did it, but the endearment was *apropos*. He *was* a bear, if not a little one. And she adored him for his thorny personality. He reminded her so much of Oskar, she couldn't help love him with all her heart, the monster. "Do you need me to find a vase or something?"

She'd seen him moving around the home, using his long arms to set flower arrangements on every flat surface. She set aside the tea she'd only

accepted to have something to do with her hands. Her bladder wasn't the stalwart it used to be and she'd heard rumors there was only one bathroom in this house. Honestly, they might as well have an outhouse at this rate. This wasn't even glamping.

"The lodge needs a new manager." Quick to the abrasive point, as always.

"Since when?"

"Since Trigg ghosted the last one."

"*Tsk*." She sighed, longing to defend her son, but how could she?

"Help Marvin for real this time. Don't just hire a replacement. Make it all work."

All? Simple as that?

"I have my hands full with organizing your wedding. In case you've forgotten." And the town's best catering option had just been laid to rest. She offered the calm smile she always used when the rest of the world was running around like their hair was on fire. Taking control was easy when you acted like you already had it.

"There won't be a wedding if the lodge isn't ready. Marvin leans so hard on Glory he pushes her out the door."

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"Devon will get every room guest-ready by July. Of that, I have no doubt. And Glory wouldn't leave you again."

"No, she won't, because you'll prop up Marvin and hire whoever is needed to make that place run like a well-oiled clock."

So much like his father she wanted to smack him.

But if Trigg somehow caused the lodge to fail, by impacting staff or by his choice in teaming up with Marvin in the first place, Rolf would never forgive him.

Ah, parenting. Did it ever end?

"I'll see what I can do."

"*Danke*. And why did you invite Ilke to the lodge again?" He switched to German to underline how dismayed he was.

"She arrived?" She skipped the part where she had no idea the girl was coming. "I talked to her in Korea. You know that." Vivien had said she hoped Ilke would find time to visit again soon. It hadn't been empty manners. Ilke held a special place in Vivien's heart. Still, she was dead-shocked Ilke had taken her up on the offer. Ilke isolated herself at the best

of times and after her disappointing performance in Korea, this definitely counted as ‘worst.’

Rolf wasn’t happy, though. He’d been downright pissed after Ilke had been here over the new year, skiing with one of his heli-tour groups. He hadn’t said it in so many words, but Vivien read him like a primary reader. Ilke didn’t have anyone to spend the holidays with, however, and sexism annoyed Vivien. It had held her back so often during her own professional life; she always called out her sons when they forgot that Oskar’s boys’ club had died with him.

“Run these things past me in the future,” Rolf said. Commanded.

“Don’t feel threatened, darling.” The thing with Rolf was, if she didn’t head right into the eye of the storm, he won by default.

He narrowed his gaze so his brown eyes were slits of hammered copper. “*Ich nicht*.” *I don’t.*

“Then there’s no problem, is there?” Checkmate. *Not* her first Johansson.

“Why is she here? She should be in Norway, finishing the season.”

Vivien’s heart had broken for Ilke as she watched the poor girl drop like a stone in the rankings. “Let her lick her wounds a few days.”

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“Is that what she’s doing? Because that’s not how you win. Is she injured?”

At their level, team doctors did everything they could to keep athletes competing. Ilke would have to be in a full-body cast for Rolf to believe she couldn’t ski.

Before she could conjure a prevarication, she spotted Nate moving toward the door, zipping his leather aviator jacket.

“Nate! I thought you’d left already.” She waved him over.

“Leaving now.” He and Rolf stood eye to eye. “I want to finish the procurement list so we can go over it tomorrow, before you lift off,” he said to Rolf.

Rolf nodded acknowledgment.

Vivien had once heard Devon refer to Nate as ‘the black knight.’ She didn’t think it was meant as an insult. More a remark on how chivalrous he was beneath that strong, silent veneer. Vivien had always found him incredibly appealing, quietly going about his business, never missing a thing, quick to take action that solved a problem without making a fuss.

He was utterly heart-stealing with his son, too. She'd watched him today, not for the first time, standing like an alpha wolf over the litter of children, letting them throw themselves at him while he rolled a snowball, picking up and dusting off the ones who fell on their faces.

Being far too old to make a play for him herself, her matchmaking impulses shot through the roof every time she remembered he was single. Surely there was a woman in the vicinity who could see how badly this smartly turned out specimen needed a mate? Today he was especially handsome, with a freshly trimmed beard and civilian clothes instead of his usual reflective vest, work boots, and radio belt.

"Would you mind terribly if I went back with you?" Vivien asked. "Marvin is still making the rounds." And could talk the ears off a stalk of corn. He would be here for hours. It was also a convenient excuse to leave this prickly conversation with Rolf and check in with Ilke. They should get their story straight before her stepson's next interrogation.

Rolf sent her a half-lidded glare, knowing full well what she was doing. "Don't drag your feet on finding a replacement manager. Glory is ready to castrate Trigg."

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"Likely have to take a number," Vivien mused.

Nate said nothing, but his mouth pursed as Rolf walked away.

"No comment?" she prompted.

"I expect you'd like grandchildren someday. Might be in your best interest to guard his tackle."

"Yes, well, mixed feelings if those grandchildren turn out like either of those boys." No way was she ready to be a grandmother. Grandmothers were *old*.

She led him toward the bedroom where everyone's coats were strewn on the bed. *Dear Lord, deliver me*. She unearthed her wool and cashmere Burberry and smiled as Nate took it to hold for her.

"I suspect Rolf is concerned with his own tackle," she said. "And how much use it will see."

Nate snorted.

"Oh, you must have a comment on that one." She turned to give him a knowing smile. "I've heard the gossip." There was a running joke amongst the staff that bingo cards should be issued for all the places Rolf and Glory

had been caught fooling around. “What happens when Glory delivers his lunch to the base?”

“I eat at the lodge and take my time,” he drawled, holding the door for her, pointing to where he’d left his company-issued pickup truck.

She chuckled, but grew misty at the passion and genuine love between Rolf and Glory. There had been a time when she had felt that deeply cherished by Rolf’s father and sometimes wistfully ached for such devotion again.

“Even so, he doesn’t have to act like losing another manager is a humanitarian crisis. He’s completely forgotten we sent half the staff home through Christmas and I managed to pinch-hit right through the new year __”

She stalled, brain veering to New Year’s Eve. Some of the locals had come out, joining the heli-skiers in the lounge. The party had gone on well past midnight. Ilke and Nate had danced almost exclusively with each other before disappearing as so many other couples had through the course of the evening.

Nate steadied her as she climbed onto the runner and into the truck. He hovered, waiting for her to finish her sentence. She waved at him to close the door.

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Nate wasn’t the type to screw around with a local woman, not in a small town where his son resided. She would bet he sought TLC further afield, maybe in Sacramento, when he disappeared to visit family.

Or maybe when a woman passed through whom he wasn’t likely to see again.

A woman who had shown up unexpectedly after a piss-poor performance at the winter games.

Hmm.

“Looks like we’re the first ones back.” Nate put the blade down on the truck as he turned off the highway and resigned himself to a slow crawl through half a foot of snow up to the lodge.

“I thought the city plowed to the parking lot,” Vivien said beside him.

“Once a day. They came by this morning.” Rolf had an arrangement with the town of Haven to clear the access during heavy snowfalls, but the road crews had plenty of other work in town and through the pass to Kalispell with the white stuff falling nonstop this week. “Our own tractor is supposed to sweep it the rest of the time.”

“Everyone had the day off,” she reminded him.

“Yeah, but…” The Adamses were fixtures in Haven. Rolf hadn’t refused any local who had asked to attend the service, which included most of the laborers. Marvin had done the same with his staff and even Devon, Marvin’s contractor renovating the lodge, had only left a couple of carpenters behind. Everyone seemed to know Suzanne and her daughters, loving the food and cheer she had served up at Lazy Suzanne’s.

“Someone should have been down here by now, though. Hope you weren’t in a hurry to get back.”

“No,” Vivien murmured, but her tone almost suggested otherwise. She lapsed into silence.

Nate was fine with silence. He kept thinking about Wanda and how many ways he had already accommodated her—for his son, so they could share custody and not disrupt Aiden’s life too much.

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He was still mostly furious with Wanda over everything, including this move to Montana, even if this job had turned into a silver lining.

He was very employable, but *where* he worked had become an issue even before Wanda came out of the closet. After growing up without his own parents, he had been prepared to do everything in his power to give his son picket-fence perfection. Money had always been tight, though. His grandparents had helped as much as they were able, but he had struggled financially to get into engineering. He had ended up in project management, which he loved, and the pay was lucrative. Unfortunately, bridges and other big construction projects didn’t come to him. The more remote the work, the better it paid.

He had been lured by a windfall travel bonus three years ago. It had been enough to get his wife and son out of her parents’ garage apartment and put a nice down payment on a house of their own. He had left for the pipeline job and returned to money in the bank, but no wife in his bed. Wanda had moved herself into the home of a woman he’d never met. She had fully expected to keep their toddler son with her.

Nate didn’t have an issue with homosexuality, but he was still incensed that Wanda had married him knowing in her heart she preferred women. He could almost forgive her for not coming out to him before he proposed and married her. To this day, her parents hadn’t come to terms with her orientation. He understood why she had kept that secret for so long.

But she had had his baby knowing their marriage was doomed and their little family would come apart at the seams. This, after he had made it clear before he even proposed that it meant everything to him to give his child a stable foundation.

And, rather than telling him she was ready to live her true life, she had slept with Frankie behind his back. The gender of her partner didn’t matter. Infidelity was infidelity.

He continued to feel tricked and cheated and lied to.

Before he could come to terms with any of that, before he had even found a new job local to Sacramento—something that would pay the bills and give him the time he needed for shared custody—Wanda had announced she was moving to Montana.

Frankie, Wanda’s new girlfriend, was a nurse-midwife. She had been on the hiring list for the clinic in Haven for three years and hadn’t wanted to turn down the opportunity once her chance arrived. Frankie’s grandfather owned a house on the edge of town that the pair could buy for a song. Wanda wanted to start a preschool there. Both women believed the town would be thriving in a few years, thanks to rumors the local ski hill would be starting up again.

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Nate hadn’t been convinced the women were serious about each other, let alone ready to settle permanently in a mountain village. Winters were cold here. Wanda was Californian, born and raised. She wouldn’t last, even though she had claimed to have visited Haven and loved it. When she had urged him to try getting a job with the resort, he’d damned near refused out of spite, sorely tempted to force her to stay in Sacramento.

He’d looked into the resort more to find a way to dissuade her from the move. The PM job hadn’t been a clear fit for him. He had never been responsible for anything so big and complex. Structures were one thing. The scope of building a mini-town around a network of people-moving equipment was like trying to wrap his brain around the universe accelerating as it expanded.

Still, as he'd read up on the ambitious venture, he'd seen years of steady, interesting work in one place. *If* the money was there. *If* the construction milestones could be met on time, on budget.

All challenges he thrived on.

Rolf had been leaning toward hiring a PM who would have commuted from Germany with the rest of the consultants while Rolf lived on site. Rolf had skied damned near every resort in existence as a competitive Alpine racer. He knew exactly what he wanted. His brother, Trigg, was still dominating the snowboarding world, and was equally determined to put his personal stamp on Whiskey Jack Resort's snow park.

Nate had thrown his hat in the ring with a frankness he might not have risked if his relationship with Aiden hadn't hung in the balance.

If I don't have a job, I don't see my son, he had told Rolf. *You won't find anyone as motivated to make this happen on your terms.*

Rolf had gambled on Nate's drive and they had just passed a year in a working relationship that was as much side by side as it was boss-employee. They'd shared beer, sarcastic banter, and the odd scramble to recover from minor disasters. Nate stayed on top of his workload, gave a hundred and ten percent, offering Rolf no reason to complain about the time he took to spend with Aiden.

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This was as good as it got, under the circumstances, but he was still bitter. Wanda wanted another baby? Seriously? He tightened his hands on the wheel in sheer frustration.

"Fu-udge," Nate muttered as he reached the lodge and started to turn into the staff lot. It was also unplowed. The tractor was sidelined under the streetlamp in the corner. The engine hood was open and a couple of guys were scratching their head as they peered in. "Looks like I'll have to change and get out here to help. I'll pull around front so you don't have to walk through this."

"You're such a gentleman, Nate." Moments later, Vivien clung to the arm he offered after helping her from the truck, letting her hold on to him as they made their way up the slippery walk to the entrance. "Your mother should be very proud of raising such a good man."

"She died when I was young. I don't really remember her," he said, even though he remembered distinctly when she hadn't come back for him

and his sister, despite promising she would. “My grandparents raised me. Grammy would skin me alive if I let my manners slip.”

“Like swearing in front of ladies?” Her tone held laughter at the ‘fudge’ he’d managed to substitute at the last second. “Here’s news. I’m not actually a lady, but be sure to tell your grandmother I appreciate you treating me like one.”

“Will do,” he promised as they stamped their feet on the grate. He reached to open the door for her. It was locked. “I’ll walk around and let you in.”

“Ilke will open it,” she said, pointing through one of the blurred panes of glass in the door.

Ilke. A kick of pure, carnal hunger landed in his gut and shot heat through his limbs. That was before he actually caught sight of the blonde rising from the sofa near the fire. She set aside a book and moved toward the door with athletic grace. He absorbed her smooth gait and the way she flicked back her hair and tilted her head, briefly peering through the glass before she unlocked the doors and let them in.

A smile of anticipation pulled at the corners of his mouth.

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Chapter Three

No coffee, no alcohol. Ilke avoided sugar out of habit, so no soft drink. That left ice water or herbal tea. She had gone with chamomile, even though she was already having trouble staying awake.

Lina, the barista, delivered it to her in the lobby, then disappeared into the kitchen where she was prepping what she warned was a limited dinner menu. Ilke had heard a couple of workmen on her floor when she had gone to her room, but otherwise hadn't seen anyone else.

Welcome to the Overlook. Were all those creaks and groans the boiler's pressure valve?

At least there'd been a lobby copy of Glory's book, *Blessed Winter*. Ilke sat in front of the fire, trying to concentrate. Romances were usually her escape of choice, sweeping her away to pirate ships and corporate penthouses and erotic dungeons. Sexy or filthy, sweet or heart-wrenching, she read it all. She had already read this one on her tablet the day it came out. She loved it, but couldn't get into it today. The tick of the clock was too loud.

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What was she going to say? *Hello, Nate. Can we talk?*

What if he had his son with him? What if he didn't want to talk to her? What if he thought she wanted to marry him? What if he wanted to marry her?

She didn't want to get married. Ever. She wanted to ski. That's why she wanted to leave the baby with him.

What if he said no?

He wouldn't. She had seen him with his son. Last summer, she'd watched him help his boy throw a stick into the pond for Trigg's dog. This winter, he had returned to the lodge one afternoon from seeing family over Christmas. His son had been fast asleep on his shoulder. The way he'd held Aiden had been so casually tender, her maternal instincts had quivered

under the permafrost like a seed sensing spring. Nate was a father in the way fathers were supposed to be. Loving. Involved. Protective.

He would want this baby. She was sure of it. *That's why she was here*.

But what if he didn't?

Oh, she had never worried so much about someone else's mindset in her life. It made time crawl and she even dozed to make it pass. Then suddenly, she heard voices at the door.

It was dusk, but she easily recognized Vivien's creamy complexion and well-modulated voice, even heard her say her name. Ilke started to smile with relief as she opened the door, then realized Vivien was with—

"Hello." She fought to keep her smile in place and unaffected while an uncharacteristic shyness made her heart wobble. Her throat felt hot and her blood expanded in her arteries. Dragging her gaze to meet Vivien's was difficult, and not just because Vivien's eyes were narrowed in sharp curiosity. Ilke wanted to look at Nate, gauge his reaction to seeing her. She wanted to simply *look at him*. "Did Rolf tell you I was here? How are you?" She tried to act totally normal.

"Well enough, all things considered. It's good to see you." Vivien took her in a light embrace, touching their cheeks briefly. "Are you settled in?"

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Ilke liked Vivien, but still had to consciously remind herself not to reflexively stiffen at being touched.

"Undocumented, but I have a room, thank you," she said as they drew apart.

"Good. Let me put away my purse and change my shoes. I'll come down and have a drink with you. We'll catch up."

"No hurry. It sounds like it's been a difficult day."

Ilke took that into consideration as Vivien headed for the stairs, leaving her with Nate. He wore a leather aviator jacket and a flat, gray cap with a brim cocked to the side. It should have looked like an old man's hat, but he was so casually sexy he took her breath. Her blood was rocketing through her veins faster than she plummeted down a hill.

"Were you at the service with everyone else?" It was a lame conversation starter, but all she had. The half-smile on his mouth made her feel like she was watching the sun rise, feeling the heat begin to warm her face, the brilliance threatening to blind her in a second, but she couldn't look away.

“Literally everyone. What brings you back here? You’re not with Rolf’s group tomorrow are you?”

There was the wide-open opportunity to blurt out her news, but she was breathless under the look he was giving her. She was used to men casting glances of avarice. She usually knew how to defuse and deflect them, but this was different. The tone in his voice and the heat in his dark brown eyes wasn’t objectifying. It was pleased, taking a leisurely tour of her throat framed by her open collar, dropping to her narrow-legged corduroy pants tucked into calf-high boots, catching on her breasts very briefly before coming back to scan her features like he was reacquainting himself with a place he loved to visit.

“No, I—” Her brain checked out. Her skin tingled as though his perusal was a caress. Her heart rolled over with a sensual throb. All of her grew melty and stricken with longing for things she couldn’t even identify.

For some bizarre reason, this man didn’t just stir her hormones. He stroked them into wakeful neediness before piercing deeper and driving the want higher, stealing her ability to think.

She hadn’t consciously thought about having sex with him while she was here, except maybe to dismiss the idea. It would only muddy an already murky situation, but quite suddenly she was flushing with desire, thinking, *Yes, please*.

virtualventures

She shouldn’t be surprised. The first time she had seen him, he’d been in the lodge’s basement gym, sweaty and ripped, intensely focused on what he was doing. He hadn’t even glanced at her and she had felt like this, loose in the knees, willing to get naked with him right then and there. Trigg had been there, so she’d controlled herself, but the same undeniable lust had driven her to invite Nate to her room on New Year’s Eve. Now that she knew what a generous and thorough lover he was, her skin tingled all the harder with anticipation.

But she also had a flash of yearning for something beyond, something so far out of reach, she knew better than to entertain it. *One dream*, she reminded herself and tried to pull herself together.

Then he glanced toward the lounge and said, “I watched you race. We had the big screen going the whole time.”

Oh, terrific. It was enough humiliation to shut down all her wayward thoughts.

He rubbed his stubbled jaw. “Looked like you had some tough competition.”

“I’m pregnant.” She sent a quick glance around and up, ensuring Vivien was gone and no one else was within earshot. “I just found out. That’s why I wasn’t at my best.”

It still seemed like a pathetic excuse. Like she was *making* excuses. She felt sick all over again.

Her news took him aback. He actually rocked as though buffeted by a strong wind. Something flashed in his eyes that she couldn’t identify before he put on an easy, if distant smile.

“That’s great. Well, except the part where it affected your skiing. That could have been dangerous.”

She smiled flatly, waiting for him to connect the dots.

“So who—”

He cut himself off, processing the tone she had used, the way she held his gaze, heart lodged in the base of her throat. Her pulse was hammering there with panic.

The lightness in his expression faded to shock. Alarm. Horror.

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“*No*,” he said with enough force to charge the air with danger. As if that tiny word could erase reality.

Good luck with *that*.

She refused to cower under the growing accusation in his stare. She folded her arms across her chest and made her spine stretch tall toward the high ceiling. Her tender breasts gave a little throb of protest while her throat tightened, but this wasn’t her fault. It just *was*.

It still took everything in her to stand there while her arteries sizzled with adrenaline. Her muscles twitched, screaming at her that they were ready for use. *Go, go*.

“Is this a joke?” Oh, that tone was deadly. Bone-chilling.

“No.” Her voice was a dry creak.

He swore. The low, sharp word pierced like a bullet. Both his hands curled into fists.

Gathering more courage than she ought to need, and hiding that there was a weeping damsel deep inside her, desperate for a savior of some kind, just *once*, she lifted her chin and made herself look him in the eye.

Her heart died at the blame she saw there. Was it outright hatred? Definitely every level of suspicion and loathing. His eyes were filled with something furious and bitter that made everything in her shrink tight behind the internal shields she had taken her whole lifetime to construct.

Above them, a door closed.

Swallowing the lump in her throat, Ilke turned to force a smile at Vivien as she came down the stairs.

Behind her, a gust of snow-scented wind blasted against her, pushing goose bumps onto her skin as Nate charged into the night.

"Is Trigg here?" Ilke asked as she and Vivien entered the lounge. She pushed her hands into her pockets to hide the fact she was shaking.

"Europe. Getting ready for Italy." Vivien moved behind the bar, but her gaze slanted like a magnifying glass swiveling to capture and throw an intense ray of sunlight. "Why? Does your being here have something to do with him?"

Virtualventures

"Not at all," Ilke said firmly, seating herself on the stool nearest the window, and forcing a casual smile, even though she was still reeling under Nate's appalled reaction. "Just that I'd rather not advertise where I am and he's likely to talk to people we both know."

"Why are you here, dear? Don't take that as a lack of welcome. I'm always delighted to see you. You know that. Stay as long as you'd like. I'm surprised is all. I would have thought you would have places to be." Vivien spoke kindly as she set out two wineglasses. "I realize Korea was a disappointment, but you still have a shot in Norway, don't you?"

"Not this year." Ilke lifted her hand in mute rejection of alcohol, knowing it would give Vivien the answer she was seeking. She then tucked that quivering hand under her thigh.

As Vivien took a moment to read her expression, Ilke tried to portray indifference. *No one* was invited into the tower where she locked her emotions, but the backs of her eyes were hot. Vivien's mouth pursed and her cheeks went hollow.

“Well,” she murmured. “That’s news.” She put away the wineglass, then folded her forearms on the bar, plumping her breasts against the low neckline of the elegant gray sweater-set she wore. “Tell me Rolf has nothing to do with your being here, either.”

“Absolutely nothing,” Ilke assured her flatly.

“I couldn’t imagine how he would have found the time. Glory seems to keep him busy and happy, but nice to hear all the same.” She straightened to reach for a tall glass and gave it a polish. “I suppose if it’s not either of my boys, it’s not my place to ask who might be your reason for dropping off the circuit and coming here.”

She left a nice long silence, inviting Ilke to fill it as she efficiently poured soda water over ice before adding a dash of bitters, then a squeeze of lime.

Ilke was still stinging from Nate’s reaction, which kept her from saying his name. In fact, until she knew he was on board with this baby, she wasn’t going to talk about it with anyone. But if he thought she was going to slink away, now that he’d made his displeasure clear, he had another think coming. She was a competitor. That meant she was at her best when she was scared shitless.

Virtualventures

“That always settled my stomach.” Vivien slid the drink across.

Bitters had alcohol, but Ilke didn’t say anything. Voices were approaching.

People trickled in over the next hour, staff who’d been at the service, returning to the lodge where they lived in unfinished rooms and worked to finish them or had jobs at the resort base, shoveling or acting as security, flagging trails for clearing once the snow melted or monitoring avalanche conditions.

When Marvin arrived, he took over behind the bar while a simple meal of lasagna, salad, and garlic bread showed up in the dining room.

By then, Rolf’s group of heli-skiers had arrived. They were deep-pocket investors from Montana and the surrounding states, Vivien informed Ilke. Rolf was courting them to appease the Wikinger Board of Directors. He had already had to push back their arrival until tonight because of the funeral. Vivien disappeared to help check them in.

Ilke picked at her food, fighting yawns and watching for Nate while cliques of people moved like fish in an aquarium, all the similar species

gathering in schools as they settled into their territories at this table or that.

She had never found ‘her’ people. Ski clubs were tightly knit and some of her fellow athletes would kill or die for each other, but her competitive nature had been a hurdle as a child and later experiences left her so defensive, she no longer allowed anyone to get close to her. People might act like they cared about her, but what did they *really* want? Her own mother had used her at different times, so really, who could she trust?

The slopes were her safe space. Pistes, runs, trails… It didn’t matter what a particular resort called that snaking line of compacted snow, she wanted to be on it. That’s where she felt in control and good about herself. It was the place where she could be utterly alone, yet connected to time, space, earth, and air.

How would she weather the months of her pregnancy without that? This abstinence from skiing would be a peek at her future beyond racing, the years after she retired that she always avoided contemplating because it was too much of a whiteout.

She wouldn’t think of it tonight, she decided, and waved her good-night to Vivien on her way up the stairs to her room. There was no elevator and the lodge used the European numbering convention, so the lobby level was the ground floor and she had to climb four half-flights to get to her second-floor room.

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The other two times she had stayed here, she’d been given a finished room on the first floor. Those had card readers on the knobs, not the old-fashioned keys. Vivien had one of the big corner rooms on that level; Trigg had another. Ilke imagined the rest of the rooms had been assigned to Rolf’s guests and contractors.

Glory and Rolf were on the third floor. The top and the best, unsurprisingly. Ilke had taken a peek up there after she arrived and almost all the doors were off along the length of the gutted hallway. The rooms were stripped and each had new plumbing and other supplies awaiting installation. The scent of epoxy and paint had lingered so she hadn’t stuck around.

Nate’s room was on her floor, two over from the one she occupied. Half the rooms on this floor were also missing doors. Her room was functional, but still a work in progress. The carpet had been pulled out, the subfloor repaired, but her carpet was an area rug in blue and gold geometric patterns.

The walls were primed white, the plumbing new, the sink cabinet still smelling faintly of sawdust. Her bed was a rollaway cot, her only other furniture a bench for her luggage and a night table that had been freshly painted, but was obviously from the lodge's earliest days.

She changed into pajamas: body-hugging leggings in dusty blue and a long-sleeved top printed with polar bears dancing between penguins playing orchestra instruments. She had a weakness for the absurd, which was a good thing, since her life seemed to be taking a hard turn in that direction right now.

She was exhausted and had been for two months. It was yet another delightful symptom of pregnancy, she'd been told, but it was too early to go to bed. She turned off her lights and opened her curtains to watch the snow. Gentle, beautiful snow. The lazy fall of white flakes against the black sky mesmerized her.

Each room had an exterior door onto the wraparound balcony, allowing guests to come and go without tracking snow through the lodge. The balcony was covered by the one on the floor above, but snow collected on her rail.

Virtualventures

She had her forearms braced on the windowsill, breath fogging the glass, vaguely comparing the growing accumulation there to the duplication of cells, the expansion subtle yet relentless, when suddenly, a man was crossing right in front of her.

She gasped and straightened from leaning on the sill, bumping her wrist into the glass, causing him to halt in surprise.

They stared at one another through the glass. He cursed.

With all her instincts screaming at her to retreat, she reached to click the lock on the knob, then opened her door. The blast of cold wasn't all first of March subzero bitterness. Nate's glower held plenty of frostbite.

He looked in the direction of his own room, profile pulled into a grimace. Steam was coming off him, like he'd been working out. Or he was that furious.

This isn't my fault.

But the flat look he wore made her pull her elbows in defensively. She closed the door a bit, starting to shiver in the chill.

"I'm not going to be able to sleep until—"

What? There was no magic resolution to this. There was nothing he could say that would change the fact she was having his baby and facing months of waiting. But she hated not knowing what was going to happen. That's why she typically booked up her schedule as if each minute was a brick that couldn't be left unassigned or her whole world would crumble.

Right now, the next several months were a giant open space of terrifying unknown.

"I need to know what you're thinking," she insisted.

"You really don't." His breath puffed a cloud in the air, then he let out a longer hiss through his teeth. "I need a shower. Gimme fifteen."

She locked up, then closed her curtains and pulled on a cardigan over her pajamas. Fourteen minutes later, she stepped into ballet slippers and went to him since she didn't have anywhere to sit in her room that wasn't the bed.

At her knock, he called a growly, "Just a minute," then opened the door while still pulling his shirt over his head. His jeans hung low across his stacked abs and well-defined obliques.

She saw hot men all the time, but that glimpse of his hard stomach with its arrow of hair from his navel caught her attention and warmed her blood. Stupid hormones. Even his bare feet seemed too sexy for words as he moved briskly around the room picking up a few pieces of strewn clothes and stuffed toys, jeans shifting while hugging his butt and thighs.

virtualventures

Maybe there was something about being pregnant that made a woman measure up a man as a provider and protector. Although, she hadn't looked at anyone else this way since January. Never, really. She was a stranger to herself every time she was near this man. It was incredibly disconcerting and she had to fight to keep her usual veneer of unaffected self-assurance in place.

"I was going to come to you," he said.

He didn't like having his space invaded, which was why she had come to him. She'd been invaded enough, thanks.

There wasn't anywhere to sit in here, either. The chair had his work vest hanging off the back, a hardhat with insulated gloves on the seat. The only other option was a child's chair at a miniature table that held a few cans of children's sculpting dough.

It was a nice-sized room, though. The corner ones, like Vivien's, were the premium suites. This was a middle one, which were still bigger than her standard one and were probably intended to hold two queen beds.

The room was in the same state as hers: half-refurbished with fresh paint, but a bare floor. His area rug had a city and roads printed on it. A bucket of cars sat on the floor by the nightstand. He had a real bed, not a rollaway, and it was a king. There was a desk where a closed laptop sat and a toddler bed tucked against the wall where the second queen was probably supposed to be. His lamp was a round cartoon character and a bin of bigger toys sat next to the dresser.

"Your son is with his mom?"

Saying it made her realize someone might someday ask him that of their child, and she would be that child's mother. She didn't know how to be a mother! Her role model was terrible. She had never felt any sort of affinity toward children. They kind of repelled her with their unruly antics and messy hands and whiny voices.

Why the hell was she here?

Especially when he was staring at her like she didn't have the right to mention his son.

Virtualventures

Whatever dim, fall-into-place vision she'd had of how this would go faded another few degrees. Fairy tales *definitely* weren't real. And reality sucked raw eggs.

"It was an accident." That was the most important thing she needed to convey, in a voice she struggled to project evenly. "I was taking medication that counteracted my birth control. I didn't know until last week."

"I wore a condom. Every time." He threw the clothing he'd gathered into a laundry bag near the door. "Are you sure it's mine?"

She felt her weight go back onto her heels, then the raw sting hit her front, raking from her throat to her breastbone to create a sick knot that settled in her gut. Why were women always virgins or sluts and nothing in between?

She hated him in that moment for being *exactly* like all the rest. Why then, did she feel *his* baby was worth keeping?

"Since you're the only man I've had sex with in the last…" she looked to the ceiling, trying to recall "…two *years*, yes."

"Two years," he repeated with deep skepticism.

Another wave of defensive affront went through her. What did he think?

As their gaze met, however, she could see what he thought. Or rather, what he remembered. She had lost track of the times she'd gone back for seconds. The memory made her tender breasts feel that much heavier. The pulse at the base of her throat throbbed a little harder.

Clearly a woman with her appetite was a sex fiend who gave it up to any man who wanted to throw her a bone.

She held his gaze even though it was like holding something hot enough to leave third-degree burns. Even though it melted away whatever invisible shield she managed to hold against him and left her naked and splayed and not something *he* wanted a second helping of. Not now. Not ever.

A pang of profound hurt went through her. She hadn't expected this much cynicism and aversion, but why not? How well did she really know him? They'd chatted very casually last July, then spent more time dancing and screwing than talking on December thirty-first. In her head, she had painted him to be…not soft. Definitely not that, but capable of softness. Not hard. Not *this* bitter and hard.

Any rationale that had brought her here was based solely on that damned romantic streak that needed another serious beatdown. Somehow, seeing him interact with his son on two occasions had convinced her he would exhibit a more welcoming reaction to another baby. Maybe a shred of empathy or remorse.

virtualventures

Somehow, she still had a shred of *girl* in her who had thought maybe he was—

No.

Disappointment only happened if you had expectations. She had none. She swallowed back the lump in her throat and steeled the crumbling walls around her heart.

He was acting like this was a personal attack and striking back with every weapon at his disposal. *Dig deep*, she told herself. He might think he was above her on the leader board, but all she needed was one clean, fast line.

"When was the last time *you* had sex?" She didn't really want to know. She was only trying to tie them up. Slap back. But the way he averted his face and tightened his mouth made her throat burn even hotter, like she'd

swallowed acid. Why? What did she care if he had slept with a dozen different women every night in the eight weeks since they'd been together?

She tried really hard not to care, looking toward the window and willing her hot eyes to stay dry while her chest felt as though it filled with acrid smoke. *Leave*, she thought. But where else would she go? That was the question that had been torturing her since the little blue positive sign had appeared on the stick.

"Is this for real? You're really pregnant? It's really mine?"

Each question was a missile. A nuclear warhead that landed and left a burning wake across her skin.

She threw up helpless hands. If she had any other response, she would voice it.

He pushed his hands into his pockets. "You're having it?"

That was a whole other detonation of agony that she had to fold her arms to contain.

"Would you rather I didn't?" She braced herself while everything in her went still and cold. *Don't say yes. Don't say yes*.

His gaze drifted to the toddler bed. His profile hardened and his jaw pulsed.

Virtualventures

"No," he conceded with a wince.

"So you want it." She needed to hear him say it.

"That's an overstatement."

His words left a jagged tear across her heart.

He ran a hand down his face, then revealed an expression of shame and struggle. Impatience. "Of course, I want my kid. I'm surprised you do, though."

He didn't know her. He knew nothing about her. That's what she wanted to say, but she didn't *want* him to know her. The way he narrowed his gaze to give her a hard study made her squirm inside and struggle not to show it. To keep him on the edges where he couldn't hurt her more than he already had.

"You're ready to give up skiing?" he asked with harsh disbelief. "Where are you planning to live—"

"I'm not."

"What?"

“I’m not giving up racing.” She couldn’t. It was her…everything. That’s why he had to take the baby. She was able to breathe now that she knew he wanted it, but it was still hard to say, “I’ll have the baby and leave it with you when I have to travel.”

His hand dropped to his side. His mouth hung open.

“Are you high? How am I supposed to take care of a newborn and hold down a full-time job?”

At least he knew *how* to look after a baby. That was more than she could say.

She made herself shrug. “That’s exactly the position I’m in. I have to put off competing until the baby is born, but then—”

“Are you out of your fucking mind?” He didn’t raise his voice, but the power in his quiet words nearly knocked her out of her shoes. “Why are you having it, if you’re not going to be around to raise it?”

“I’ll be around.” Sort of. She hadn’t figured that part out yet. Babies needed their mothers, but not if they were terrible at it. Her heart battered inside her chest like a trapped bird. She didn’t know what kind of relationship she wanted with her child, but she knew she wanted one. Otherwise she would be talking to an adoption agency, or a clinic that offered other options. “I have to train and race, though. Male athletes do it.”

VirtualVentures

That was how she tried to approach the big decisions in her life. Men didn’t worry about hurting feelings or how they were perceived. They did whatever advanced their own interests. Doing the same shouldn’t make her a criminal, just because she had a uterus.

“Which tells me how much you’ll actually be here. Trigg is gone *all the time*.” He rubbed his face again, curses flowing in a tone of astonished disbelief. “No, Ilke. You don’t get to show up and dump a baby on me and expect me to look after it.”

Dump? She didn’t like that word at all, but was compelled to point out, “That’s what you’ve done to me.”

“What the fuck? *No*. I have to work. How am I supposed to explain this to Rolf?”

First Vivien, now him? God in heaven, why were Rolf’s tender feelings so paramount?

“It was *one time*.” She clapped her hands onto the outsides of her thighs. “Years ago. He isn’t going to care that you and I hooked up.”

Nate's face blanked. "I meant, how am I supposed to work the hours he expects? Are you saying you and he—?"

"I thought that's what you—" She closed her mouth and closed her eyes against the clouds gathering in his expression. The blistering silence thickened with even more acrimony. "It was *years* ago," she said through her teeth. "*Once*."

He swore under his breath, a muted F-sharp with a string of blue behind it. "That's just great, isn't it?"

"He's engaged to Glory. There's nothing—Forget it. That has nothing to do with us."

"There is no 'us.' Let's get that clear if nothing else." He pointed a finger at her, but it was more like he was throwing laser pulses that were meant to cut and sever and eviscerate. "Maybe you're pregnant with my kid, but whatever else you're thinking? No." He incinerated any fragile connection that had formed between them on their one seemingly magical night.

Men didn't hurt her. She didn't allow it. Not physically, not emotionally, and not even on an ego level.

Virtualventures

His rejection stung all the same. It stabbed deep and twisted hard. So hard she couldn't stand there and pretend he had no effect on her.

"*We* are going to be parents," she managed to state coldly. "*We* have until the end of September to figure out how *we* are going to raise this child. I'll be here until *we* come to an agreement."

She stalked out, heart hammering, cheeks fiery and eyes stinging.

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Chapter Four

NATE HADN'T SLEPT so poorly since Aiden had been teething. Even when Wanda had walked out, he hadn't tossed and turned like this. At least with Wanda, he had known that whatever she did or planned to do with her own life, she ultimately loved their son and would continue to be the best mother she could be.

Ilke? She sounded like the biggest narcissist ever sewn together from spare parts, heart sold separately.

I'll have the baby and leave it with you when I have to travel.

Did it escape him that he'd been away for weeks at a time when Aiden had been learning to walk? No. Which made him a hypocrite, but it was also how he knew what a raw deal it was on all sides. Did she plan to nurse it? Because he had no problem growing a pair and stepping up for his kid, but if she wasn't going to commit just as wholly to their child, she could leave and not come back.

Virtual Ventures

He threw his arm across his eyes. Finding workable solutions was supposed to be his strength. Plan, execute, settle up. But all he could do was swear and roll over again, giving his pillow a frustrated punch.

What was he supposed to do? Ask Rolf for maternity leave? Wear the kid in a sling while he hiked the site? He would lose this job and it was the only thing allowing him to see Aiden as often as he did. Ilke was asking him to choose between the boy he had and the child she carried.

No.

Ask his grandparents to move here and help? Aside from the fact they were pushing eighty and had already raised their own children and two of their grandchildren, he could already hear their reaction. They were tolerant people who believed family stuck by each other, but they also ascribed to old-fashioned ideals like marriage before babies. Grammy would have some strong opinions about this.

He did. He hated himself for messing up and making a kid by accident. Wearing condoms was his Golden Rule and he'd worn them with Ilke, all the time, every time.

And man, had they had a lot of times. He had performed like some kind of jacked-up sex god. He hadn't even been drinking that night, aside from a beer and a glass of champagne when the clock had struck. Rolf had hired a band from Haven to entertain his heli-skier friends and a bunch of locals had come out to party with the lodge staff. Everyone had been dancing. Nate was one of those rare guys who didn't need a six-pack in him to get on the floor. He loved moving with a beat and Ilke had rhythm. They'd paired up again and again, enjoying the night with everyone else.

Okay, he'd given into an interest that had started last summer and made a solid play for her, but who could blame him? She was gorgeous. Tall, long-legged, and golden from her crown to her eyelashes to her bush, body honed to athletic perfection. When she danced, she mesmerized, hips swinging, precise and graceful.

He'd been with women since his divorce. He kept his prowling to Sacramento, though. Kalispell once or twice. When he had told Eden he didn't mess with locals, that had been the God's honest truth. He didn't want to confuse Aiden. His own life was full enough without adding a relationship that needed nurturing. When it came to women, he kept things long-distance and casual. He sure as hell wouldn't have climbed into bed with one of Rolf's old flames if he'd known.

virtualventures

Not that he'd thought to ask. He'd barely thought at all. He had taken for granted that Ilke wasn't looking for long-term since she was scheduled to leave with everyone else the next day. When she had breathed a humid, "Come to my room," against his ear, the sum total of his hesitation had been to say he needed to swing by his own room on the way.

For condoms.

He'd used his own—which made this more damning on his side than hers—and they had gone at it like porn stars.

Urgency had seemed to grip her the second the door was closed and he was happy to match her pace. They'd barely got their clothes loosened and she had pushed his hand down her pants. She'd been sleek and slippery, coming in a sudden rush with a broken cry that filled his mouth. Their playful evening had quickly turned into sheer, erotic adventure. He couldn't

get enough of getting her off. He'd gone down, then she had. He'd bent her over the desk and exploded when she did.

They'd been sweaty from dancing and sex, lethargic and drunk with climax.

"Shower with me?"

Oh, yes. It had been his pleasure to follow her in there.

She had clicked on the electronic tea light left in all the rooms in case of power outage. They hadn't talked much as they soaped each other under the spray, necking and arousing each other so that when they got back to the bed, he'd been so hard and aroused, he'd felt insane. Her nipples had been poking like shards of glass against his tongue. When he had thrust inside her, she had said, "Do it hard." Her hands had reached to brace against the headboard.

She looked delicate as a snowflake, but she was an athlete, resilient and easily up for his demands. He'd caught his arms under her knees and spread her wide to receive him, slamming into her with blinding ecstasy.

Afterward, she'd chuckled when he'd expressed concern at being so rough, saying she liked it. She had come twice, so he believed her, but still. He'd really let loose, beyond excited at how willing she'd been to take all of him like that. Gratitude and tenderness had had him kissing and nuzzling her for so long, the condom had almost slipped off when he pulled out.

virtualventures

He dropped his arm from his eyes and blinked into the dark. Was that how she wound up pregnant?

Did it matter? She *was*.

No lover in two years? Should he believe that? When she had wrung him dry?

Had she been like that with Rolf? *That* didn't bear thinking about.

Fuck it. He sat up, abandoning hope of getting any sleep, then glared at his cock, stiff and aching in his lap, practically begging like a dog, whimpering as it reminded him she was only *two doors down*. Stupid little fuck.

The clock showed five-thirty. The window was still dark. The days were getting longer, but sunrise wasn't until at least seven this time of year. He could see to shovel under the parking lot lights, though.

He rolled his shoulders. His back was aching from the exertion last night, when he had worked off his shock and adrenaline by throwing all the

snow off the front lot. The operator had taken one look at the tractor when he got back from the service and put in a call to Jimmy, the mechanic in town. Didn't sound like the rig would be running soon. Rolf had that batch of investors going heli-skiing today. They needed to look like they had their act together.

Half an hour later, Nate was sweating under a sky turning silver and thankfully no longer dropping flakes. *Think of it as money,* Rolf had said one morning, when they had been digging out the path into the base office while it snowed faster than they could clear it. Rolf was right. Without heavy snowfalls, this place was nothing.

At six-oh-one, three young laborers appeared, covering their bedheads with thick, Blue Spruce Lodge beanies, yawning as they pulled on gloves.

"I'll get the ute," one said, starting toward the utility ATV parked in a fenced shelter with the company sleds. The ute was the size of a golf cart, had a windshield and a roof, but was otherwise open to the elements. It was used more for quick runs between the lodge and the base in summer, but it had a small blade attachment along with studded snow tires so they could use it for clearing walkways and smaller paths around the site.

virtualventures

"I already called it, son," Nate said. "But nice try. I have to take it down to the base, get started down there. Come down when you've finished here. We have that tour later."

They grumbled, but got on with it.

Technically, Nate didn't have the right to order anyone around. His job was to plan the work, monitor costs and deadlines, and find solutions when snags arose. He never asked for anything that Rolf wouldn't demand himself, though.

Rolf and Ilke. How was he having as much trouble processing that as the fact he was going to become a father again?

She had really given him a one-two kick to the 'nads. When he'd brought up his employer, he'd only been thinking of how her pregnancy put his job in jeopardy. How was he supposed to look Rolf in the eye, though?

As he trekked down the wide lane between the lodge and the base, he acknowledged that half his desire to get down here was to put off seeing Rolf over breakfast. It wasn't just the fact he'd overstepped the bro-code. He was bothered by Rolf and Ilke having history. This feeling wasn't unlike

the angst that had gripped him when he had realized Wanda had stepped out with Frankie. A possessive, *That's mine*.

Green-eyed jealousy, except a surprisingly more visceral brand. He hadn't thought for one second of hitting Frankie for seducing his wife, but he felt a strong desire to elbow Rolf in the face and throw a few heavy boots into his middle. Super enlightened behavior. What he didn't want to do was pretend everything was situation-normal when—

Was that blood staining the snow?

He came out of the lane into the clearing and lifted his foot off the accelerator so the rig ground to an abrupt halt in the heavy accumulation. He stood up at an angle, poking his head out beside the roof, taking in what looked like a crime scene.

It *was* a crime scene. The site trailer was spray-painted with vituperative messages. A string of wild turkeys had been left on the steps. Scavengers—coyotes or wolves—had dragged the birds across the open area, probably within the last couple of hours, judging by the mess of feathers and entrails clearly visible despite a fine dust of flakes.

Swearing, Nate found the can of bear spray in the kit in the back of the ute and held it at the ready, wishing he'd brought his hunting rifle. There was usually enough activity around here, the sounds of engines and voices and Murphy's bark, to keep the wildlife at bay. No one worried too much about predators unless they were hiking up the hill or into the woods, well away from the lodge and base. Even then, bear spray and a radio were more the defense of choice, rather than risking stray bullets.

virtualventures

The sound of the engine had probably scattered any lingering predators, but he didn't want to push forward and risk marking up any tracks that could identify who'd done this.

Why leave the birds? That was just sick.

He took a hard left and slowly trucked along the edge of the site, swearing again when he saw that one of the storage containers had been broken open. It was the one full of skis and other gear that had arrived from Wikinger a week ago. Some were early releases of next year's models.

Nate dropped the bear spray and pulled his phone from his pocket, hitting Rolf's number. Rolf's alarm would have gone off already anyway.

"*Ja*," Rolf answered, sharp and alert.

"You better get down here."

ILKE FINALLY FELL into a heavy sleep around three in the morning. The jarring ring of the telephone on her nightstand woke her. Who even used landlines anymore? Nate?

She rolled over and answered just to make the noise stop. "*Hallå*?"

"Meet me in the lobby." Rolf. So charming. He hung up before she'd finished processing who it was or had the sense to refuse.

It was only seven-thirty. Not an uncivilized time to get up, but she would rather sleep in since she could, for a change.

Was Rolf going to order her out of here? The morning sickness that was becoming all too much a part of her daily existence roiled in full force with a fresh serving of anxiety frothed on top. As awful as her confrontation with Nate had been, he was her lantern right now. She didn't know how to move forward with this baby without his input and guidance.

Oh, she hated relying on anyone! Now she was going to have to petition Rolf so she could stay here and try to hammer out a deal with a man who resented her? Her life just kept getting better and better.

Virtual Ventures

With a groan, she pulled on her clothes from yesterday, brushed her teeth, combed and clipped her hair, and tried not to retch. The closer she got to the lobby, the thicker the air became with the cloying scent of greasy food. Her throat flexed with a muted whimper.

The lobby was a far cry from yesterday's graveyard, abuzz with morning voices. Workers in overalls and safety vests were serving themselves at the buffet in the dining room. A half-dozen people were lined up for coffee at the espresso bar and Marvin was offering the well-groomed investors menu service at the tables in the lounge, delivering mimosas and morning chit-chat.

Vivien was nowhere in sight. Ilke craned her neck, looking for her in the dining room. She couldn't see Rolf, either, and started to pivot back to her room, seriously worried she was going to vomit.

Rolf strode in from the back entrance around the corner from the kitchen at the end of the hall. He wore a ribbed-knit cap with the Wikinger logo and one of their lightweight, quilted Arctic-wear jackets, both in rust red. He saw her and jerked his head to indicate the manager's office.

Such an arrogant jerk. Ilke gritted her teeth and made her way down the hallway to meet him.

Rolf pushed into the office where Glory looked up from the desk. “What time did you get up? Why didn’t you wake me?” Her gaze tracked to Ilke as she came in behind him, then went back to Rolf. “What’s going on?”

“I need to talk to Ilke.”

“And you’re commandeering my office? Wow. The more things change the more they stay the same.”

“Your office is upstairs. But stay. Save me saying this twice.” He closed the door behind Ilke and jerked his head at one of the two chairs in front of the desk, indicating Ilke should take a seat. Then he stood over her with his arms folded like some kind of third-world interrogator.

“Did you go down to the base yesterday?” He drilled her with his gaze.

“No.” Her nausea took a back seat to confusion. She frowned, looking between them, but she could see Glory was as bewildered as she was. “Why would I?”

“That’s why I’m asking. Did you bring anyone here with you?”

“No. I put my things in my room, then sat in the lobby, reading. Your coffee girl brought me tea. Why?” And why did she feel a need to call the girl in here to corroborate?

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“Did you see any vehicles go by? Hear snowmobiles? Anything strange?”

“No.”

“Oh no.” Glory’s voice was weighted with dread. “What happened?”

Rolf was halted from answering by his own phone. He flicked to accept the call.

“Thanks for getting back to me,” Rolf said after a brief greeting, then told his caller, “There’s been some vandalism and a significant theft at the base.” His gaze tracked to the clock on the wall. “Thank you. I’ll see you then.” He ended the call and made a face at Glory. “Last thing I want to do is ask him to come out here the day after he put his wife in the ground, but I have no choice.”

“What’d they take? Computers?” She wrinkled her nose.

“Damn near the whole shipment from the container.” He looked at Ilke again, assessing her.

Her heart took a skip of alarm that widened her eyes. “You think I came here to rob you? I don’t even know what you’re talking about. What was in the container?”

“Gear.”

“Like skis and…” Boards, boots, bindings, and poles.

He nodded.

Some of Wikinger’s high-performance equipment went for thousands. Her nausea came back threefold. A lot of her skis and boots were custom-made these days, which made them all the more valuable to her, but in her early years, she had had to make sacrifices to get what she needed. It meant she was protective of every insulated shirt and pair of goggles she owned.

“I’m really sorry.”

“Insurance will cover it. That’s not the point.”

“Who even knew it was there?” Glory asked.

“Exactly,” he said grimly.

“Inside job?” Glory made a face like she wished she hadn’t said the words aloud.

“They tried to make it look like it was a couple of hunters who took advantage of an opportunity. I’m not buying it.”

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“What about the investors?” Glory waved her hand toward the door. “You were going to outfit them.”

“As a parting gift. They brought their own skis and boards so they wouldn’t have to wait for fittings this morning.”

“So you can still take them up. That’s good.” Glory was trying to find a silver lining, but Rolf continued to glower.

“*I* can’t. I’m meeting with Chief Adams and looking at camera footage.” He nodded at the computer on Glory’s desk.

“Here? Why?”

“I can’t get into the office at the base until they’ve taken photos and dusted for prints. For all I know, the computers are gone, too. Didn’t look like forced entry, though.”

“Well, that’s just awesome, isn’t it?” Glory rubbed her temples, then picked up the folders in front of her and moved them aside with a thump. “What does this mean for the lodge? What are you going to do with the investors?”

Rolf swiveled his flat gaze back to Ilke. “You brought your skis?”

“No.”

“Why the hell not?”

“You want me to guide your tour?” She was tempted to grab the wastebasket and hang her head over it.

“You were here two months ago. You know the terrain. It’s being scouted for avalanche as we speak. Avoid the posted areas. You know the drill.”

It wasn’t an unreasonable request, but: “A minute ago, you thought I was a criminal mastermind.”

“You showed up the day it happened. That’s coincidental enough I had to ask, but you can get free skis with a phone call. You don’t have to go to the trouble of driving all this way.”

Her ability to get freebies was up for debate after her performance in Korea, but not the point right now. She writhed inside at being unable to do a powerful man a favor. In fact, she had to prevail upon him for this thing that was pushing a wash of cold perspiration onto her skin and applying pressure in the back of her throat.

“Even if I had my skis, I couldn’t. I’m pregnant.”

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Silence. Then: “That’s why you bombed in Korea?”

Really? Her cheeks stung. “Yes.”

“Why were you skiing at all?” Glory’s tone was appalled.

“I didn’t know I was pregnant until the games were over,” Ilke defended hotly.

“Oh. Oh God, it’s not Trigg’s, is it? Is that why you’re here?” Glory sat back, jaw hanging open.

“No! Look.” She searched for a prevarication. “It was bad enough I didn’t medal. I don’t need to be crucified by the media for skiing pregnant.” She flicked a hand toward Glory and her judgmental question. “If it’s all the same to you, I want to stay here until I figure some things out.”

There. That explained her presence without bringing Nate into it. If Rolf took offense to her basically saying this place wasn’t on anyone’s radar, so be it. She had a feeling outing Nate would only do more damage to their already contentious relationship.

Rolf made a noise that dismissed her problems as petty when he had bigger ones of his own. He skimmed off his cap and swore. “I guess Nate is conducting the investigation while I go skiing.”

“Some of Devon’s guys have been up there,” Glory reminded him.

Rolf made a face. “We might have to question them. I’ll go tell the investors we’re running late, then I need this computer.”

Glory’s “*Tsk*,” stopped him from leaving. He spun back to Ilke.

“If you’re not able to ski, you must have time to kill? Ask Vivien to show you how to run this place. Glory needs to write.”

“Rolf—” Glory protested on a choke. “It’s not that easy.”

“Ilke is smart enough to stay out of my brother’s bed. That makes her smart enough to learn the rest.” He walked out.

“That man.” Glory shook her head. “You don’t want to do a bunch of office work, do you?”

Ilke was broke, homeless, jobless, and pregnant. “Will you pay me?”

“You’d be working for Dad and, yes, of course. But it’s boring data entry and calling around to place orders. Dad loves the front desk and talking on the phone, but you’d have to cover for him there, which—fair warning—means talking to people who treat you like a peasant.” She slid her gaze toward the door where Rolf had disappeared. “Including *some* people who are permanent residents. Plus, you would have to make up the work schedule each week, which is literally the worst. We only have sixteen employees right now, but Dad is always promising someone a day off and forgetting to write it down. More are being hired to start in the next few weeks, so there’s a bunch of payroll stuff to set up, too.”

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“I worked as a chalet girl for four years.” She’d also been a bartender, a server, a lift attendant, a ski instructor, and a technician in a rental shop. “I’ll change sheets and scrub toilets, if you need me to.” Ilke shrugged. “How much does it pay?”

“Good to know you’re open to anything, but housekeeping is actually in good shape for now. Would you be interested in working for trade, though? Say four hours a day, five days a week and I’ll comp your room? Six, and I’ll throw in a food card.”

“Done.”

“Really?”

“Sure. Can I come back after I shower and eat breakfast?” And throw up again and brush her teeth?

“Ask Vivien to set you up. She’s not usually down until ten. I’ll make some notes for her. Find her when you’re ready.”

Ilke nodded and rose.

“Can I ask—”

“It’s not Rolf’s,” Ilke cut in.

“I would have killed you both already if I thought that was a possibility.” Glory offered a werewolf smile. “But if you don’t want to tell me who the father is, that’s fine.”

It will have to be, Ilke telegraphed with a bland smile of her own.

“Okey-dokey.” Glory touched the file folders and blew out a breath that wafted a stray wisp of hair at her temple.

Ilke started to leave, then was compelled to turn back and say, “I enjoyed your book, by the way. I preordered and read it the day it came out. I think I expected it to read more like one of your mom’s, which would have been nice. I always loved them so much, but yours was fun in its own way. When is your next one coming out?”

Glory often carried a defensive chip on her shoulder, but suddenly looked like a kitten with its paw caught, eyes big and glossy. “July. And oh my God, that’s so nice of you to say. *Thank you*. Stay as long as you like,” she added with a magnanimous, if self-deprecating grin.

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Ilke chuckled, but dryly. No one had ever accused her of being ‘nice.’ She didn’t have the bandwidth to extend herself to others. Mostly, she carried a grudge that life had left her bare-assed to the world with nothing and no one to fall back on. *She* hadn’t had a wealthy father who owned a sporting goods conglomerate. She had had to get as far as she had by shedding blood, sweat, and tears.

And by the way, did Glory not realize she was supposed to despise Ilke on principle for sleeping with Rolf that one time? Instead, *she* was being nice. Not for the first time, either. She’d been quite civil to Ilke every time they had met. Polite and welcoming and now she was even helping her support herself.

Ilke didn’t know how to react to that. It was uncomfortable that she needed a leg-up, but to actually receive it? What was she supposed to do with that?

She managed a nod of thanks and went to her room.

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Chapter Five

VIVIEN WAS SHOWING Ilke around the front desk when Devon came out of the manager's office, moving with her no-nonsense stride. Her expression was bullish despite features that could be feminine and puckish on those rare occasions when she actually smiled.

"Mornin'," she responded flatly to Vivien's greeting, not even looking at her or Ilke and leaving through the front doors.

A *whoosh* of cold air swirled up Vivien's skirt, making her suppress a shiver as she offered a reassuring smile. Not that Ilke scared easily. Apparently, she had informed Rolf she was pregnant and somehow talked him into offering her a job.

Ilke definitely had the brains for this, but it remained to be seen if she had the disposition. Devon was an excellent litmus test. Her titanium spine was exactly the reason Vivien admired her, but it was precisely her refusal to put up with shit that made her a challenge to be around.

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"Devon owns Roadside Renovations. You'll see the logo on the white overalls most of her workers wear. Their time is money so we don't waste it with chit-chat."

"I've met her," Ilke said, tacking on a deadpan, "Briefly."

Vivien smiled. "Occasionally suppliers call the lodge looking for her or someone on her crew. The list of their names is here with her cell number so you can pass along the message."

Marvin came out of the manager's office.

"Good morning." Vivien turned to greet him, preparing to explain Ilke's presence at the desk.

"Yes, uh, good morning, ladies." He scratched what might have been a comb-over if it didn't stick out on both sides and extend from a center part like drapes pulled back on a picture window. "Excuse me. I have to find Glory."

After Devon had marched out looking like a cement mixer with a load to dump?

“Actually, I need to speak with you.” Vivien touched his chest to keep him from brushing past her.

His physique always surprised her, being far firmer than his sloppy sweaters and baggy pants let on.

He looked at her hand. A blush crept into his cheeks.

She flirted with Marvin all the time. Charmed him, she liked to think, as she did with any man. Like most men, he lit up under a woman’s attentions, but with the close quarters of living in the lodge and now starting to work more closely alongside him, she should probably dial it back. She didn’t want to lead him on. She was wily, not wicked, and he seemed to grow flustered enough. He could be nursing a crush already.

Or he might be flustered for some other reason, since he looked beyond her with a distracted expression. “Let me ask Glory to help with something first.”

Marvin leans so hard on Glory he pushes her out the door.

“This can’t wait,” Vivien told him firmly. “Ilke, can you handle the phones for a few minutes? If it’s not something you know how to answer, tell them you’re with a guest and will call them right back, then take their number.”

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Ilke nodded and reached to straighten a few things on the desk.

“Why is Ilke answering the phone?” Marvin cast the young woman a look that sent his bushy eyebrows into combat over his sharp gray eyes.

“Because you need help,” Vivien said, sweeping him back into his office and closing the door.

“Did Rolf say that? I really don’t, Vivien.”

“Devon looked unhappy. Is there a problem?” She glanced at the leather-bound checkbook on his desktop.

Marvin opened his hands. “Her draw didn’t show up in her account. I have no idea…” He waved at the computer. “She’ll quit if she isn’t paid on time. I had to write a check on the spot. She’s running into Haven to deposit it. I know the balance in the account will cover it, but Glory will have to look into it. I don’t want to pay Devon twice.”

Ah, Devon. Vivien had to respect that hard ass of hers.

“Devon will let you know if she is overpaid. Let’s sit.” Vivien gave his upper arm a pat, trying to get him to move behind his desk. She was again surprised by the vitality she found in his muscle tone.

She shouldn’t be that taken aback. He moved cases of wine and boxes of tiles without effort or reluctance, always quick to pitch in with any task. She had never, ever, wanted to marry a man who worked with his hands, but the physical benefits had to be appreciated.

“Rolf told you he asked me to help you?” she began.

Marvin collected himself with a deep breath, then moved to stand behind his desk. “He mentioned something. And if you’re willing to cover the front desk now and again, I won’t turn you down.”

“He wants me to take a more active role.”

“Really not necessary, Vivien. I have everything under control.”

The darling was waiting for her to sit. Such a delight to come across old-world manners like that. She sank into the chair, folding her hands in her lap before looking pointedly at the checkbook, almost sorry she had to draw attention to his struggles.

“It doesn’t sound like *everything* is under control.”

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Another sigh and his chair gave one too as he sank into it. “I can’t help that I’m an old dog. There’s a lot to do and more is added every day. With Macy walking out, a few things slipped through the cracks. But if you’d like to place the ad for a new manager, and help with the interviewing again, I would be grateful.”

“Of course. I’ll do that today,” Vivien said, trying to spare the man’s ego. “This is my fault. The women I keep hiring are book smart and man stupid. My son is the one causing this problem. Let me make it up to you by doing more.”

“I don’t blame you. Or Trigg.”

No, Trigg was the only person who believed Marvin could make a go of this lodge. With Oskar dying when Trigg was so young, and Rolf being so self-involved and contentious, it didn’t surprise her that Trigg appreciated Marvin’s warm, fatherly encouragement. When it came to going after what looked impossible on a wing and a prayer, they were cut from the same cloth. The difference was, Trigg had the tenacious, dynamic personality to turn anything to his favor whereas Marvin was…well, he wasn’t nearly as pigheaded. Not in the right way.

Not that he didn’t try to put her off with a kindly spoken, “You already have a lot to do with planning the wedding.”

“I do,” she agreed. “Number one is to ensure the venue will be ready. Rolf is concerned and has a right to be.”

“Devon will get it done.” Marvin tugged his ear. “It’s not like we don’t have the money. I checked. I signed off on all the month’s bills. Macy was supposed to make the payments happen. I guess she didn’t push the button before she left. I’ve settled up with Devon and need Glory to show me what to do about the rest.”

“You managed last fall, when Glory disappeared to Seattle,” she reminded him. “You don’t need her today.”

He opened his mouth.

“Marvin,” she cut in firmly, debating the most diplomatic way to frame this, then chose to be expedient rather than tactful. “We both know we have to pick our battles when it comes to refusing Rolf. Let’s not start with one we’ll lose.”

“It’s this new system. If I didn’t have so many balls in the air, I could take the time to learn it, but right now it would be faster if Glory did it.”

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“Please. Allow me. I’ve never had any complaints about the way I handle balls.” It was one more dry, suggestive comment to go with the thousands of others she had used in four decades of maintaining the upper hand with a man.

Marvin blushed and cleared his throat, proving it had worked.

But, oddly, she felt embarrassed at resorting to it. Like she was issuing bigger checks than she had any intention of cashing. Her cheeks grew hot with chagrin—not her usual color.

“We’re on the same team,” she said, trying to neutralize the sexual awareness. “We both want the wedding to go off without a hitch. I’ll place the ad, then make a call to the software company. I’m sure customer service can walk us through what to do.”

“Fine. Go place the ad.” He gave his scalp a distressed scrabble with his fingers, which was part of the problem with the hair. He might have run a comb through it this morning, but any sense of order was long gone.

Something in her panged as she watched him make a face at the checkbook and the computer monitor. It wasn’t maternal. It wasn’t sexual. It was an empathy that came from being someone who had been surrounded

her whole life by strong personalities and tasks that were a tiny bit beyond her. She had developed ways to deal with all of that, but Marvin's way of dealing with it—with her—was a smile and a promise of assurance while he tried to get rid of her so he could worry about the problem on his own.

"It will be all right, Marvin. If you let me help you," she told him.

"Of course, it will." He straightened in a way that told her his male pride was stung.

"Let's start with the call to the software company, then. Do you have the number?"

"I can manage this," he insisted, but she only held his gaze, silently telling him she wasn't leaving the room.

After holding his breath a long few seconds, he expelled it and his shoulders fell. "Fine. I have the number written here somewhere."

On a piece of paper? She mentally sighed.

"There's usually something under the help section. Is the program open? Let's start there."

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NATE SHOWERED AND headed downstairs to meet Rolf. He'd been at the base all day, first blocking off access with a snow fence, then eventually getting into the office trailer once Chief Adams arrived and had a look around.

He and the laborers had managed to cover the worst of the turkey kill with a tarp before the helicopter took off. The chopper had been diverted to pick up the skiers from the parking lot of the lodge, rather than coming down here for a look at the modest, yet growing heart of the resort's operations.

Eventually the mess outside had been cleaned up and the stained snow pushed to a spot under some tree boughs. Nate had then sent one of the laborers to spray-paint over the profanities on the office trailer. It was presentable, at least.

Now he was supposed to dine and mingle with the investors, answering questions about the project, but Rolf had radioed earlier to say he wanted an update on the investigation first.

The skiers always finished their day by coming back via the run that angled off the resort hill, behind the pond, and into the back of the lodge. Nate had heard voices and stomping feet on the balcony below his as he'd been dressing. He expected Rolf was here on the ground floor, looking for him.

When he got to the lobby, however, the sight of Ilke behind the reception desk halted him. She had her blonde hair loose, but tucked behind her ears. She held a highlighter pen in her hand and frowned at a piece of paper she held.

Sexual need kicked him hard. There was no big mystery over how he'd got her pregnant. She was so stunning, it strummed through him like a musical chord.

When was the last time you *had sex?*

When she had thrown that at him last night, he'd realized very uncomfortably that she had been his most recent lover. He was a man with a healthy sexual appetite, but even though he'd had an overnight errand in Billings a few weeks ago, he hadn't seen anyone in the hotel bar who'd measured up to what he was looking for.

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He hadn't seen *her*. *She* was what he had unconsciously been searching for.

No. That was his inner sex fiend thinking every night with a woman should be an endurance event. It wasn't, didn't have to be, and for all he knew, Trigg had spiked the champagne with Spanish fly that night, making his libido unstoppable.

Even so, Nate could usually keep it in his pants around even the most well-endowed and scantily dressed women. Today, one glimpse of Ilke's tongue poking out the corner of her mouth and he started growing wood. It was annoying as hell, which put a gruff edge on his tone.

"What are you doing?" He had really hoped she had decided not to stick around.

She started, pulled from deep concentration. As their eyes met, a pretty flush went over her features, one that signaled a reciprocation of physical reaction and dialed his own internal thermostat up a few more notches. Which irritated. He'd been busy as hell today, bordering on relieved to have a crisis filling up his head since it hadn't left any room for dwelling on the crisis she represented.

But damned if she wasn't a problem he had no idea how to solve.

The frustration in his expression caused the color in her to fade as quickly as it rose. Her mouth pursed in a hint of hurt, but then a cool stiffness swept over her features. Her gaze went to the paper in her hand. Her gaze became flat and standoffish.

"Apparently every sack of coffee and case of toilet paper that comes into this building is counted. If the numbers received match the invoice, it should be approved for payment."

"You're working?" How the hell had that happened? She couldn't stay here, waistline slowly expanding into the flagship on the armada of his questionable decisions.

"I am," she confirmed. "But only until Trigg seduces me. He's not due back for a few days, though, so…"

"Hilarious." He grew even more testy at the idea of her with Trigg. Rolf was bad enough. Infuriating.

"How was your day?" Ilke asked, but facetiously.

"Lousy."

"I heard."

Virtualventures

There was genuine empathy in her gaze as she said that. "I don't know much about it, but…" She pointed at the spot where she stood. "Could it have been the woman who quit?"

He gave the back of his head a rub and glanced around. The place was enough of a rumor mill without fueling it by speaking out of turn.

"She's on the list, but quit a few days ago and wasn't really the type to get her hands dirty. She'll get a call from the police, but it's pretty likely she left for personal reasons."

A small crash in the dining room had him glancing in that direction.

The dinner smells were making his stomach cramp. He was starving, having missed lunch, and would kill for a beer. Marvin was behind the bar. He should go get one, but for some reason, his feet didn't move. He brought his gaze back to hers, finding her watching him with apprehensive shadows in her eyes.

"Nate." Rolf appeared in the hall behind her from the kitchen entrance, still in his ski suit.

Nate brushed by her, aware of the pull it caused within him to walk past and away from her, but he followed Rolf into the manager's office and shut

the door behind them.

“How’d it go with Kurt?” Rolf took the chair behind the desk, pulling off his cap. His hair was flattened by sweat. His cheeks were still ruddy with exertion.

The chief of police had smelled hungover, but Nate kept that to himself. The man shouldn’t have had to work at all today.

“He brought his deputy, made a bunch of notes. Aside from the turkeys and the paint, the ‘perps’—” Nate put air quotes around the word “—didn’t bother trying to get into the office to steal anything. They knew what they were after and came prepared. When we looked at the footage, we saw four sleds, each towing a moose tub. Everyone was in balaclavas. They were in and out and brought enough rope to keep the boxes secured. Kurt figures they knew everyone had the day off, including the security guard.”

“And knew they would hear the tractor if it headed down.” That’s why Rolf had taken the chance of letting even the guard have the day off. He’d been sure the plowing patrols would be enough. No one was supposed to even know the shipment was there.

“Or they made sure it wouldn’t run. Someone put gas in it.” The tractor was a diesel engine and it hadn’t taken long for the thing to start smoking.

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“Who the fuck did that?”

“Operator logged that it needed fuel the night before and the kid who ran it first thing yesterday said it was full when he got in. I questioned everyone who touches it and they all looked genuinely shocked. Aside from a couple of jerry cans for emergencies, which are still full, we don’t even keep gasoline on site. Everything we run is either diesel, natural gas, or electric. Jimmy says the tractor needs a new engine.”

“Of course, it does.” Rolf bared his teeth at the window.

“Locks were cut off all the storage containers. They helped themselves to a few power tools, but that was pure opportunity. They went hard for the sports equipment and took everything they could carry. Came and went the back way, over the old gravel pit.”

It was a well-worn route taken by Haven’s various ATV, snowmobiling, and hunting clubs. For the fifteen years the resort had been mothballed, the town had used these peaks and valleys as their personal playground. Eventually, Rolf hoped to buy up the gravel pit as a lower parking lot and

build a gondola to the base village. His vision for the mountain was all people, minimal cars.

Signs were posted there that this was private property and monitored with cameras. Locals had mostly stopped trespassing, but it was still a process of retraining out-of-towners to stay off the work site.

“Kurt asked how many people knew that shipment was coming. It’s a pretty short list.” Nate had only been told because it had been scheduled to arrive while Rolf was in Korea, watching Trigg race. “I told him you’d get back to him with the heli-skiers and anyone at Wikinger who might be of interest.”

“Yeah, the board is going to love this.”

“Devon was very unthrilled that some of her crew was questioned. Three of her guys stayed back yesterday. She responded about as well as you can imagine to their being called in by Kurt.”

Her team was working diligently on restoring the lodge and she had another crew coming back as soon as the snow melted, to continue building the staff quarters. The glare Devon had given Nate, for daring to think of accusing any of her team of wrongdoing, had nearly turned him to stone.

Virtualventures

“I expect she gave Marvin an earful today,” Nate added.

“I’ll talk to her.”

Good luck. Devon probably wouldn’t talk to any of them for days. Weeks, probably. Not that she was friendly as a rule. She checked in with Nate daily to share equipment and coordinate things like power outages, but otherwise they stuck to mowing their own lawns.

“What was with the birds?” Rolf asked.

“Kurt thought that was purely for cover, so they could claim to be hunters if anyone stopped them.”

“While dragging moose tubs out of season.”

“Yep.”

“Can he get membership lists from the local clubs? I’d like to know who was at the service and who wasn’t.”

“Long shot and we don’t *know* it was locals.”

“Fuck,” Rolf muttered under his breath.

“I can’t help thinking the turkeys and the paint were meant to put off your investors. That this is another attempt to stop Whiskey Jack from coming back online, or at least slow it down.”

“Same ‘perps’ as who started the fire last year?” A pair of locals had been fired from their jobs for that, arrested, released on bail, and hadn’t been seen since. “Or someone else?”

“That is the question, isn’t it?”

MARVIN MOVED INTO the position he loved even more than the front desk—behind the bar. In another lifetime, he would have been born an Irish pub owner. He would have had a dozen children, burly working-class boys who farmed potatoes and hammered horseshoes and girls who cooked hearty stews and sold eggs.

A sexist vision, to be sure, but he would have had a few scholars in the bunch and all of them would have been happy slinging beer, contributing to the family fortunes.

Instead, he had one daughter whom he loved as if she were a hundred offspring. Yet, as she came into the lounge and a little scowl pulled between her brows, making her look every inch her mother as she scanned his appearance, he worried that he was barely half the parent she wanted him to be.

Virtual Ventures

“That is *not* the cardigan *I* gave you?”

“For Christmas a few years ago. Yes.” He smoothed it to ensure all the buttons were still on. They were, neatly fastened.

“I was thirteen. There’s a moth hole in the shoulder.”

“It hasn’t been that long,” he scoffed.

“It most definitely has. When are you going to go shopping for new clothes? Nothing fits you these days. The pants you were wearing earlier looked like you were choking off a paper bag.”

“These ones?” He lifted the cardigan to reveal he’d had resorted to drawing belt loops together and securing them with twine.

“Seriously?”

“I’ve been meaning to punch another hole in my belt, but I haven’t had time.” He’d been showing more underwear than a pubescent skateboarder. This jerry-rigging was a last resort, but perfectly effective.

“I’m starting to worry about how much weight you’ve lost. Did you see the doctor?”

“I did and I’m fine. He adjusted my blood pressure medication. Says the weight loss is because I’m more active.” And less inclined to snack, thanks to a more optimistic outlook and a lack of access to his wife’s medical marijuana. “I’ll pick up some new pants when I rent my tux for the wedding.”

“Vivien has a tailor coming to measure all of you for wedding suits once Trigg gets back. I want you to order at least three extra suits. Maybe five. Lots of extra shirts. You’re a proprietor now.”

“That doesn’t mean I should look like a dandy.” He had never been a debonair sort of man. Certainly not a ladies’ man and never one to live up to the hype of being the husband of a romance author.

How he’d wound up with Glory’s mother remained a mystery. She had been a student, a mature one for the time, but their getting together was more an indication of her willingness to experiment than his looks or prowess at seduction. He knew full well she never would’ve married him if she hadn’t become pregnant.

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Once they’d tied the knot, he had been prepared to have his dozen children. Kathleen had found *one* to be overwhelming and her interest in him had waned very quickly. Their initial passion had quickly become a routine appointment once a week then once a month and eventually, off the calendar completely.

He hadn’t bemoaned it too much. His young daughter had kept him busy and she lavished him with affection. Being loved in the purest, most unconditional way had been new for him and filled him up for years. Slowly, however, Glory had grown up and apart from him. He knew it was natural for a young woman to need her mother more than her father, but as the two women grew closer, he had been edged out.

He was still trying to recover that distance.

“*You* look nice,” he told her. Glory knew how to turn herself out pretty as a picture, not that she made the effort unless she had to. Tonight, she had dolled up with something that turned her frizzy hair into ringlets and accented her eyes with a smudge of greenish blue. “You look like your mother.”

“Oh, Dad.” She grew soft at the compliment. “Thank you.”

It was true. She had Kathleen's lovely skin, quick wit, and terrific laugh. She had her mother's drive, too. He was incredibly proud of her, even if she was pushing forward on her own path, not the one he would have chosen for her.

"This is what I'm serving tonight." He showed her the label on the wine he had ordered in for the investors. "I can open something else for you, though."

"That will do, thanks." She craned her neck to look toward the lobby as Rolf strode through, heading upstairs to dress for dinner.

Marvin suffered mixed feelings every time he saw the way she followed that man with such unguarded adoration in her eyes. He was happy for her, finding a man she loved so deeply, but he worried. Rolf was not an easy man. At least his aggression was always turned outward in protection of Glory, never against her.

In fact, he'd never seen anything like their close and passionate connection, and he'd watched a constant parade of mating rituals when he'd been a college professor.

The entire procedure had always baffled him. He couldn't even remember what romantic love felt like. For two and a half decades, he'd been a married man surrounded by young students who were off-limits. The few women in his age bracket, mostly on the faculty, were not the type to fool around with a married man or even a recent widower. He wasn't the type to do it either.

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He had stopped thinking of himself as an eligible man long ago. Even in the first year after Kathleen was gone, it hadn't occurred to him that he could seek comfort of the physical kind. It wasn't until very, very recently that he began to imagine finding companionship again.

"Vivien will class the place up," Glory said as Vivien walked in with her usual flair for making an elegant entrance. She wore a flowing pantsuit along with her many rings, all winking diamonds. Her frosted hair was just so, her makeup perfect. She was one of those lovely winter models for women's calcium ads.

Heat kindled in the pit of his belly every time he saw her, much to his chagrin.

"Thank you, Marvin, dear," she said with sultry appreciation as he poured a second glass of wine.

It wasn’t as if he hadn’t dealt with his share of women who laid on the charm to get what they wanted. Young female students had been notorious for low necklines and hair flips when they came to his office to discuss a less-than-stellar grade. He’d always taken that sort of flirtation with a grain of salt, but Vivien’s efforts had lately begun eliciting a visceral response in him.

Part of him was thrilled to discover the wire still had a few jolts of electricity in it. But he shouldn’t be responding to her. It was especially annoying when she had spent the day asking probing questions about his finances and what the staff did, as if he and his employees weren’t working hard enough by her standards. She acted like an old hand with running a business, which made him feel like an idiot for not knowing as much as she did.

“I asked Eden to do the cake,” Glory told Vivien. “She said she would give you a call. Thanks for getting Ilke set up this morning.” They put their heads together with wedding plans.

And that was another thing. Vivien seemed to be filling the role of mother-of-the-bride very easily for his daughter, edging him out of all the spaces that might have been open to him. But what could he do about it? Nothing.

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Disgruntled, he smiled at Nate as he arrived and poured the man a beer that was gratefully accepted.

VIVIEN ROPED ILKE into agreeing to join the investors for dinner after the heli-skiing. “You need to eat and Rolf needs some extra shine on this event after the difficult start this morning.”

Ilke choked on that. Her vivacity had been flushed down the toilet twice today and might still again before she finished putting on her makeup, but okay. She put on the best clothes she had with her, which was only a pair of black velvet pants and a turquoise top of eyelet lace that looked pretty over a black tube-top.

She’d been training so much leading up to the games, tying up her hair and shoving it under a hat, she hadn’t had a haircut in ages. Her last proper

cut had been last year, when Vivien had treated her to a spa day in Queenstown. Ilke had opted for a sleek bob that had turned out to be subtle extortion. A few days later, she had found herself renting a car in Billings, playing chauffeur for Vivien who was headed here.

What if that hadn't happened? She wouldn't have come back in December, and wouldn't be here now, which made her heart teeter to think about.

Vivien had only been providing Ilke an excuse to get away from her mother last year, first with the spa day, then by cutting short Ilke's stay altogether.

Ilke had gone to New Zealand to train, then wound up at her mother's purely out of guilt—and a latent, unrealistic desire to believe her mother was under some kind of spell that would magically break. She always thought, *This time will be different. If I just give her one more chance*.

The end of December was another time when a flickering hope for miracles always got the better of her. She told herself she was only seeking the sun on her mother's pool, despite the fact it forced her into her stepfather's orbit. The truth was, she was always jealous of the rest of the world as they gathered with family.

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Her mother was her family. Why didn't she feel like it?

Maybe Vivien knew how lonely that time was for Ilke because she had invited Ilke to come here through those days after Christmas. Ilke had leapt on the invitation because, *skiing*. She *needed* to ski. That's where she *belonged*.

Had she somehow willed this baby into existence to give herself an anchor here, though? She spent half her year on airplanes and in cramped hotel rooms, but after this, she would know where she was supposed to return to. It was such a profound, reassuring thought, her hand went to her abdomen.

Oh, don't get syrupy, she quickly chided herself, reaching for her brush to stroke it through her hair until the blonde waves crackled. She flipped her hair behind her shoulders and reminded herself that, like every other choice she made, settling here would be a *practical* choice.

She dashed on mascara and pink gloss, then went downstairs to the lounge.

Glory was already in the lounge, looking about as happy to be wearing heels as Ilke was, which was to say her expression resembled the dog's when Nate's little boy had put a hat on him last summer.

"Thanks for doing this," Glory said in greeting. "I never know what to say to these guys."

A group of people stood with Nate across the room, but Glory was hanging back near the bar. She wore a really cute dress with an ivory bodice and a flared skirt in panels of ivory and midnight blue. She was usually very down-to-earth, minimal makeup and frizzy hair in a fat braid down the back of her neck. Tonight, loose red-gold ringlets framed her oval face. Diamonds winked from her ears and the rock in her engagement ring had to weigh two carats.

And Ilke was supposed to be the sparkling conversationalist? She found people draining at the best of times and was still coming to terms with her pregnancy. She kept trying to envision how her life would look and couldn't see it, which made her anxious. Nate's enmity when he'd caught her *working*—gasp!—as though she ought to take her shunned self into her room and close the blinds, left her raw and at more of a loss. The fact she'd had to reveal her unplanned pregnancy to Glory and Rolf put her totally on the defensive.

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Had Nate talked to Rolf about it, she wondered?

She was trying not to look at Nate, but he was ultra-sexy in a dark gray cardigan buttoned over a white shirt and silver tie. Casual, yet the knit clung across the bulk of his muscled shoulders, accenting the taper of his back and his insanely nice ass in black trousers.

She couldn't help listening as he described the phases of the plan.

"We have the budget for two buildings this year: the operations office, which will have guest services, and the ski patrol which is also first aid. With additional capital, we could get the other two buildings started this summer. Obviously, our first season would attract more users if the day lodge with the restaurant and bar were open. There's space for retail under this end. That side will be change rooms and lockers. This fourth building is trickier. These three sections are for the rental shop, the winter sports school, and the fitness and day spa."

The way Nate quietly commanded the guests as he pointed to the poster on the wall was enthralling. The drawing was an illustration of the finished

resort super-imposed on an aerial photograph of the hill. He didn't come across as conducting a class or demanding attention. His subtle power came from something else. His voice, maybe. His tone was like velvet, soothing, yet stimulating. Like cocoa holding a shot of liqueur, sliding through her, warming her blood, making her feel lazy and horny at once.

Vivien slid her a soda water before taking a highball to some overweight businessman listening intently to Nate. Ilke picked up the glass so no one would notice she wasn't drinking.

"Does Vivien know?" Glory asked, burying her voice in her glass of wine.

"Yes, but please don't mention it to anyone else."

"Of course not."

"Have you and Rolf talked about having kids?" Ilke didn't know why she asked. Maybe because she felt so isolated and wanted company in this weird limbo state of putting her life on hold while knowing it was pushing forward in a way that was beyond comprehending or controlling.

"Only to say eventually, but not yet. I mean, we have a wedding to plan." Glory held up her left hand. "Not to mention a ski hill to build, a lodge to finish, and a book to write. Two books. One is almost done."

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"When is the wedding?"

"July fourth."

"Here?"

"Yes. And the lodge had better be ready because all the rooms are booked. Don't ask me by whom. I don't have any friends. I'd elope, given my druthers. Rolf would take me to the courthouse, but it's good publicity for the lodge and the hill. Also, Dad *really* wants to give me away and Vivien is dying to make our wedding the lodge's first historic event. Trigg, big surprise, is amped about planning the bachelor party."

"Therefore, Rolf made Nate his best man?"

Glory threw back her head in a laugh of great enjoyment.

"That would be just like him, wouldn't it? I'm not even going to tell Rolf you said that. He would totally do it. Oh!" Glory reached for the phone on the edge of the bar. "But I will tell Trigg that's what he's done. Thank you. I've been looking for a way to kick that man in the butt. We'll see if he dares seduce another manager."

Her thumbs worked fast before a whooshing sound indicated her message had been sent. She slapped the phone onto the bar again. “He’ll be fit to be tied. Love it.”

“Who?” Rolf was the last to arrive. He smelled of aftershave and wore a suit and tie. He set his hand on Glory’s waist, exchanged a light kiss with her, then nodded at Marvin that he would have what she was drinking.

“It’s a secret, but expect an outraged text from Trigg.”

“That’s all he sends. Listen.” He included Marvin in his quiet announcement. “The official statement is that there was a theft and some vandalism at the base. Police are investigating. I’ll fill you in later, but that’s all we’re saying for now. We should mingle.”

“Yes, dear.” Glory made a face, then batted her eyes at him.

Rolf drew her across to introduce her to the people he’d taken skiing. Ilke joined Vivien, who was holding court with a couple of women.

Only half a dozen people had actually gone up in the helicopter today—four men and two women along with Rolf and someone from the local search and rescue as a precaution.

Three women, spouses of the investors, had gone into Haven with Vivien midday. They had poked around the art gallery and the limited shopping, coming back with hand-painted scarves and carved bowls, all content with their day-trip. Two other couples had arrived an hour ago for the dinner and would spend the night, but didn’t ski.

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Three round tables were set up here in the lounge. Rolf and Glory hosted one, Vivien and Marvin another. Ilke wound up at the third table, partnered with Nate, which she should have seen coming. Her whole body tensed and tingled when he held her chair then sat beside her. She could swear she felt the heat radiating off his body.

Probably hostility.

Aside from making sure everyone had been introduced, he didn’t acknowledge her, leaving her to converse with Dirk Basco, the man on her other side. He was fifty or so, decent-looking for his age, and eager to impress her. He claimed to be a local, since he had owned property in the area for years, but his ex-wife and children lived in Missoula.

Dirk had interests all over Montana and the rest of the western states. His name had been on the helicopter. She hadn’t seen it? He ran a charter service out of the airport in Kalispell and owned the construction company

knocking together all the buildings Rolf was putting up. *And* he was a real estate developer. He'd been buying up land for years around the resort, well ahead of the curve. He had known the previous owners of the hill and had met Oskar Johansson several times. Advised the man on this very purchase.

"I knew someone would eventually jab this area in the arm. I'll make a killing in the next few years, when people started flocking here, looking for vacation homes."

Ilke worked really hard, for the sake of Nate and Rolf and her precarious position here, to pretend she admired Dirk's foresight. In reality, Dirk's hurry to congratulate himself reminded her of her stepfather, which turned her stomach. It took all her effort to keep her revulsion from her face.

Which caused Dirk to nudge her with his elbow. "*Smile*," he ordered.

Die, she nearly retorted.

"Still jet-lagged?" Nate said, head coming around so quickly she had to control a start. It was almost as if he had been monitoring their conversation the whole time. "You're lucky she's not yawning," Nate said, tone mild, but she thought she caught a glimpse of contempt in his eyes as he met Dirk's gaze. "How's everyone's drink?" Nate asked in the next blink. "Looks like we need another bottle of red."

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He rose and she watched him move to the bar.

Had he just come to her defense? She didn't need a man to make excuses for her. She could tell guys like Dirk to fuck off all by herself. But she found herself fighting back the smile Dirk had wanted. She may not need a man to stand up for her, but it felt awfully nice that Nate had.

Had he? He returned to top up a couple of glasses, then sat down to ignore her again. Maybe he was just keeping the dinner party convivial. Doing his job.

Weirdly bereft, she tried not to tense when people asked where she was from and how she'd come to be staying here.

"Vivien is a friend of my mother's." She skipped the part where she skied competitively. Rolf was the household name along with his brother. If anyone recognized her, it would be because the sportscasters had made such a big deal out of her 'upset' and how she had disappointed *everyone*. Theories as to why were all over social media. Or rather, painted into the

gossipy corners reserved for mentions of female athletes—mostly so they could be detracted.

Nate offered her the basket of dinner rolls. His gaze held a question, as if he was wondering why she wasn't talking about her aspirations.

She felt naked in that flash of his glance. Completely defenseless. Obvious in her failure. For one moment of supreme self-pity, she even asked herself why any man would *want* someone who'd screwed up this bad.

It was all she could do to shove that negative self-talk out of her head and hide how shaken she was that, apparently, she was just like her mother and needed a man's approval to validate her.

She asked how the skiing had been and pretended not to be bilious with envy when the powder was waxed over as superb.

"Sorry we missed the tour of the site, though," someone said. "Will we have time to see it tomorrow morning?"

"With the snow, there's not much to see," Nate said. "Flat spots where we poured the foundations last year. The office trailer looks pretty much like any other. It will eventually become a break room for our equipment operators and lifties, moved closer to where the equipment shed will go in."

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"What about day care? We used to have to take turns, didn't we, dear?" one of the wives said to her husband. "One of us always had to sit in the chalet with the baby, until all the children were old enough to ski. All the big resorts offer day care now, though. Our daughter and her husband enjoy the slopes together."

Ilke snapped a look at Nate. She hadn't thought of that, but it wasn't unusual for resort staff to enroll their children in on-site care where their children mingled with those of families leaving their smaller children while they skied for the day.

Nate's profile stiffened, but she was probably the only one who noticed it, since she was watching him so closely.

"It's certainly on the list of wants," he answered blandly. "We've allowed a space for it in the operations lodge. Staffing of specialty positions is a challenge with our remote location, but staff housing has been started and with the right investors—" he winked "—we'll quickly build our own village here and be able to offer things like day care. This year, putting in the first lift is our top priority, as well as clearing and grooming the runs."

Everyone chuckled, agreeing that was certainly job one.

Nate didn't look at her and she wondered why she was waiting for him to do so. She looked to her plate and picked at the grass-fed steak that everyone else had finished.

Was this how their relationship would be going forward? Her trying to resist his effect on her, aching for some sign of softening in him, while he resented her for daring to be fertile? Both of them pretending they were only casually acquainted when they had a child between them?

"Did you grow up here, Nate?" one of the women asked. "Are you an avid skier?"

"Sacramento," he replied. "I didn't try snow sports until last spring."

"Really?" Ilke couldn't help asking. He was so well built and athletic. "I assumed you must love to ski, otherwise why would you take this job?"

"Because I love building stuff," he replied dryly.

"But what about now? Do you ski? Do you like it?" *Love what I love*, she silently urged.

Their gazes snagged and his mouth quirked. "I grew up on a skateboard. Trigg gave me a board and that felt more natural."

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"Blasphemy!"

"You sound like Rolf." His gaze warmed with humor.

"Next you'll tell me you prefer Microsoft over Apple products."

"Did you bump your head? Of course, MS."

"Enjoy your viruses."

For a few seconds, they were grinning at each other the way they'd been that special night. Electricity crackled like a live wire between them.

She saw when he remembered she was pregnant. That this evening was a pantomime for guests. Maybe he even watched the way her thoughts clouded with her own helplessness that they couldn't be the easygoing couple who had enjoyed each other's bodies, but had to reckon with the reality that they were grown-up strangers with a very real issue between them.

"Is there some sort of rivalry between skiers and snowboarders?" someone asked, forcing them to break eye contact.

It physically hurt her in the chest to lose his attention, which was so disconcerting, she hardly kept it from her face.

“Skiing is very disciplined and technical,” she managed to explain. “Alpine, anyway. Freestyle is more like snowboarding. Looser. Reacting and expressing. But then you also have your cross-country enthusiasts who think everyone else is going too fast, failing to appreciate their surroundings.”

“I don’t ski,” Dirk announced. “Except off the back of my boat.”

Ugh.

A discussion of boats ensued and her moment with Nate was firmly quashed. Still, Ilke found herself watching him, hoping for another smile, another glimpse of affinity that would make her breathless all over again.

He didn’t look her way again and she eventually realized she was behaving like a cocker spaniel. She let the server take her barely touched plate, feigned interest when Dirk told her that he had attended one of those ten-thousand-dollar-a-plate dinners for a candidate once, and left for her room as soon as she politely could.

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Chapter Six

SUNDAYS WERE NATE'S day with Aiden. He usually picked him up on Saturday afternoon, working overtime at the site in the morning if Aiden happened to have a playdate in town, which he did today.

"Frankie is getting him on her way home from the clinic," Wanda told him when he arrived. "Should be here any minute. Want a coffee? It's fresh."

He preferred when their exchange was a handoff of Aiden's backpack and a polite few words, leaving him on the porch for three minutes, max. Stepping into the house and sitting at the kitchen table grated. It wasn't contempt or anger or thoughts of Wanda and Frankie having sex. He *never* thought about that.

No, it was the warmth of the home that Wanda was making with her lover that got under his skin. He took in the periodic table for a placemat that was obviously Aiden's spot, and the Christmas cactus blooming on the windowsill, and the fact the house smelled like coffee and bread and something flowery, like the pleasant scent that hit on walking into a natural food store.

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It grated to see her building the life he had expected she would build with him. He felt so lied to by the pictures she had once painted, he was trying to convince himself he'd never wanted that scene in the first place.

But when he sat down and fingered through the seed packets on the table, he knew there was a part of him that still wanted this.

"You're finally getting your garden," he said.

"The greenhouse is on order. I'm starting those in egg cartons on the landing upstairs. There's a good window for it." She brought him a mug of coffee that tasted poignantly familiar. It was the brew they used to sip on lazy Saturday mornings while playing with their new baby and planning their weekend.

Apparently, he'd be back to that soon, minus the partner. It had been three loaded days and he hadn't begun to wrap his brain around it. Nevertheless—

"I should tell you—"

"I wanted to ask—"

"What?" they said together.

Wanda shifted to lean on her elbows, cup suspended in her fingertips the way she always did with a hot mug, blowing across the top. "You go first. What's up?"

He tensed, guarded around her these days, mostly because they were rarely alone. Frankie was inevitably in earshot or Aiden underfoot. They hadn't sat alone and talked about anything except their son and the logistics of shared custody for months. A year, probably.

In this quiet kitchen, however, looking into features as familiar as his own, he relaxed. He'd known her since high school and aside from her hair —which she was always cutting close, growing out, dying bright red, bleaching, braiding, and straightening—she never changed. Didn't age. Her skin was fine-grained, her cheeks round. She had long-lashed doe eyes that children trusted on sight. Her smile was wide and her voice soft.

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She might no longer be his wife, but she was still the trusted friend who was the mother of his child. Words that should have been difficult to dredge up rolled out the way he might have confessed an old transgression like forgetting her birthday.

"I got someone pregnant."

Her jaw dropped. Her coffee went down to the table with a sharp, *thunk*. She blinked once, twice, three times.

"*Who*?"

"No one you know." *He* barely knew her. "She's not from here. I'm only telling you because it's going to affect Aiden. Eventually. September." It was barely March, but summer would fly by in a blur of overtime. By the time his son was starting his final year of preschool, Nate would be holding a new baby.

He rubbed his damp palm on his thigh.

"She's having it? What are you going to do?"

"Hell if I know." He was so desperate for someone to tell him what to think or how to react, he was opening up to his ex-wife. But Wanda knew

him better than anyone. He honestly couldn't think of anyone else to talk to.

"Are you going to marry her?"

He snorted. You could take the lesbian out of the pastor's house, but you couldn't take his firmly instilled values out of her reflexive responses.

"No." Ilke wasn't going to *be* here.

"But she'll give you access. Please say you'll share custody. Where does she live? Where will *they* live?" There was the mama bear he had married.

"Apparently, I'll have primary custody." He set down his own cup and gave her a minute to absorb the full force of his bemused outrage.

"Are you serious?" She sat back, as incredulous as he still was. "Well, that's good. For you. And the baby. And Aiden."

Kind of her to say, but did anyone besides his boss understand what he was trying to do on that mountain? How it was a house of cards and if one fell, they all did? Some of those investors last night had expressed real interest. Nate might soon be erecting four buildings this summer, instead of the two they could currently afford. His workload would double. Newborns were more work than all of that combined.

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Wanda was biting her lip, frowning deeply as she gazed out at the empty driveway. Worrying how it would affect Aiden, no doubt.

"It's next to impossible," he said, needing to get this much off his chest. "What am I going to do? Hire a nanny to live at the lodge with us? I keep thinking…" He dug his thumb and fingertip into his eye sockets, unable to believe he was about to say this. "Eden said the other day that you mentioned you want another baby."

"She told you that?" Her voice held enough freak-out, and she jerked back in her chair with enough apprehension, he knew the news had been relayed out of turn.

His gut tensed with foreboding, but he made himself speak the crazy thought that had been dancing in the back of his mind.

"What I'm saying is, if you're looking for sleepless nights and diapers…" He showed her his empty palm. "I'm going to need help. This is the only way I can see to keep the baby and my job. It'll be Aiden's half-brother or sister. The more time they spend together, the better, right?"

Here's what's left of my pride. Finish wiping your feet on it.

She bit her lip, staring at the driveway again. He couldn't tell if she was willing Frankie and Aiden to show up or fretting that they would arrive in the middle of this conversation.

"I'm not asking for a decision right now. I'm just looking for options, wondering if you'd even consider it."

Her brow wrinkled hard. She wasn't meeting his gaze, but he could see the troubled shadows in her eyes.

"Oh, Christ, you're not already pregnant, are you?"

"No! Heavens, no. Is my head in a toilet? No, I wouldn't do that again for anything." She tilted her head with a hint of remorse. "I mean, I love Aiden. And yes, I would love another child, but you remember how sick I was."

It had been pretty awful. She had wound up on bed rest for the last two months. He wondered how Ilke was feeling. He should have asked. He would, but right now his insides were flopping and gasping like a fish in the sand as he realized there was someone else who could be pregnant.

"Frankie?"

"Not, um, yet." She kept her chin tucked, eyes big and wary.

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"She wants to be," he presumed.

"Yes."

"Are *you two* getting married?"

"That's a cheap shot." She scowled.

"It wasn't meant to be. I only said it because you did."

He could see why she took offense, though. Her father had married them and didn't even recognize their divorce. He wouldn't show up to so much as give her away if she remarried a man, let alone condone her marrying a woman.

"And come on. This relationship of yours is still pretty fresh for planning a baby together."

"We've been together nearly three years. Exactly as long as you and I were married before we got pregnant with Aiden. At least we live together. That's more than you're doing with *your* baby mama."

Fair point, but he didn't know what choice he would make even if he had one. Ilke had other priorities and he had been there, done that. He refused to commit to someone who wasn't as committed as he was. Not after going all-in with the woman sitting across a kitchen table she shared

with someone else. She had left him pretty cynical about relationships in general and women in particular.

“Who would she be having the baby for?”

“Both of us,” Wanda asserted firmly. “Of course, she wants to have a baby. So much I couldn’t stop her even if I wanted to, which I don’t. I want a baby in the house. Aiden deserves a sibling. I think we can all agree on that.”

He scratched his throat and stared at the ceiling. When she started building consensus, he knew she was maneuvering him toward something.

“Aiden is going to have a sibling,” he reminded her. “That’s what I’m saying. If you want a baby, I can give you one.”

She started to say something and caught it back at the last second, winding up with tightly closed lips. She exhaled with deliberation. But as she shifted on her chair, folding her knees beneath her, and her jaw twitched, searching for words, it struck him what she was trying not to say.

Or was trying to work up the courage to ask.

“You have *got* to be kidding.”

She flicked her gaze at the driveway, which was still empty.

virtualventures

“You want me to knock up your girlfriend? Are you out of your mind?” He went cold all over. Then hot with rage.

She flashed him a wary look. “Be a donor. Not actually, you know, sleep with her.”

“You have got a set of balls, Wanda. Well, actually, that’s why you need me, isn’t it?” He rose.

“It’s not as crazy as it sounds. At least listen.” She held up a staying hand. “We know you’re healthy and we already have a custody situation that works—”

“I’m going to wait in my truck.” He started for the door.

“This way it would be Aiden’s half-brother or sister.” She scrambled to follow him. “You just said that’s a good thing.”

“Before I say something that could harm our otherwise functioning co-parent relationship…” He stepped onto the porch.

“Nate.”

“Even if I didn’t have my own situation to deal with, the answer would be a hard no.” As he started down the steps he heard the pit-pit of studded

tires rolling over packed snow. “And don’t tell her why I refused. It’s private. You owe me that much.”

VIVIEN HAD TOLD Ilke to take weekends off, but Ilke went down to breakfast Sunday morning hoping to ask Glory for something to do. There were too many hours in the day otherwise. Too many thoughts to think, all of them causing her to freak the hell out.

She had downloaded a couple of books on pregnancy. That was her first mistake. It was not a magical, natural process like she’d been led to believe. It was terrifying. Things were going to happen that she couldn’t hope to control.

It’s not too late…

It was way too late to change her mind. She wasn’t ready to think of the baby as much more than the strawberry it was supposedly the size of, but she intended to leave that strawberry to become an avocado and eventually a spaghetti squash and a watermelon. A small watermelon, please God.

Virtualventures

The few times she had let herself wallow in the idea of becoming a mother, all she could picture were those harried women who seemed to need ten hands. They never combed their hair and were impervious to screams and mucus. That wasn’t her. She barely tolerated the roar of spectators and giving blood made her light-headed. Her tolerance level for people touching her without asking was zero.

Last night, in desperation, she had looked up articles on how to cope with an unexpected pregnancy. “Surround yourself with support,” had been the number one piece of advice.

Ha ha ha ha ha. The Internet was hilarious.

Vivien was all the support Ilke had and when she had asked the older woman what plans she had made when she discovered she was pregnant, Vivien had given her a vague, “I didn’t have to think much about anything except staying off the sauce. Oskar took care of finding me an apartment and a doctor, hired all the staff. Aside from the birth, it was quite painless.”

Fabulous.

“Continue to pursue your dreams and interests,” was another brilliant suggestion in the article. *I’ll get right on that*, Ilke had mentally muttered. Along with, “Focusing on the positive,” and “Educating herself on what to expect.” Far as she could tell, those were mutually exclusive. She could do one or the other, not both.

About the only advice that helped the tiniest bit was, “Give yourself time.”

That permission to be ambivalent was deeply relieving. She didn’t know how she would get used to the idea, but thought it would help if Nate would talk to her and help her figure out what their future would look like. She hadn’t seen him since the dinner with the investors and couldn’t really blame him if he was too busy to speak to her, she supposed. Rolf was stomping around, growling about his brother not being home yet. Even Marvin, The Ever Cheerful, seemed to be wearing his bushy brows in a gray unibrow of concern over the theft and vandalism at the base.

Oh God, the smell of this dining room in the morning. She halted in the lobby to press her bent finger to the indent below her nose, trying to stave off the wave of nausea that hit with the scent of pork sausage and scrambled eggs. Toast and a fruit cup might stay down if she took it to her room, but she was really hoping to catch Glory.

VirtualVentures

Most mornings the room was abuzz with people in work gear grabbing food, shoveling it in, chasing it with coffee, and hurrying away to whatever their task of the day entailed.

The atmosphere was different today. The crowd was much thinner, everyone wore street clothes, and the general mood was relaxed. Fresh snow was falling outside, but weak sunlight filtered through it.

Spring skiing. She suppressed a sob of longing and turned to the buffet that was always set up along the back wall.

Nate was already there, making her heart wobble, even though his back was to her. He was talking to his son who held a plate in two hands.

“Sausage?” Nate asked.

“Two.”

“Yeah? You’re hungry enough to eat both?”

Aiden nodded. His blond-tipped Afro was so long, it wafted with the movement.

Ilke hadn’t looked closely at children since she’d been one, but she had a sudden, ridiculous urge to cup that little boy’s face and gaze on his nutmeg-brown skin, those round cheeks and bright eyes, his sweetly formed mouth that was a perfect miniature of Nate’s. His black brows had Nate’s same skeptical peak in the arch, and he gave the sausages Nate’s approving nod as they arrived on his plate.

Her strawberry wasn’t big enough for her to feel it move, but a fluttery sensation tickled inside her abdomen. Would their child look like Aiden? Like Nate?

It was the first time she had tried to picture their baby and it made her throat close.

“We gotta get you a haircut before we go to Sacramento.” Nate’s hand splayed over the boy’s puffy hair so it poked up between his fingers like dandelion fluff.

“No.” Aiden’s mouth pursed in a stern pout. “Mama said I don’t have to.”

“Well, she has to deal with it the most, I suppose, but Grammy is going to have an opinion when we see her, especially since it’s Grandad’s birthday.”

Virtualventures

“Grammy is a lady. Miss Eden says ladies like boys with long hair, ’specially in a rock band.”

“You’re in a rock band? With who? Miss Eden?”

“And Zuzu and Will.” He nodded.

“Yeah? You guys got a name?”

“Puppy Guppies.”

Ilke couldn’t hold back any longer. She laughed.

Nate turned and his head went back as he recognized her. Something indefinable and fierce flashed across his expression before he schooled himself and gave her a stiff nod.

“Good morning,” he said almost begrudgingly.

“Good morning.” Her chest got tight.

The ache grew as he placed a protective hand on his boy’s shoulder.

“I like that name for a band,” she told Aiden.

Aiden took a shy step toward his father and tilted his head upward to check in.

“This is Miss Ilke. Say hello.” Nate was so guarded in the way he spoke and subtly held her off.

Ilke saw the invisible wall, clear and tall and thick, that he planted firmly around his son, warning her to keep her distance. It stung, making her feel not good enough. Unwanted. Locked out.

“’Lo, Miss Ilke.”

“Nice to meet you.” He had both hands gripping his plate so she didn’t offer to shake, but her heart was racing like she was in the presence of a real rock star—none of which had ever done much for her.

It was so silly. She stared at Aiden, wanting to say something else, something to prove to Nate she wasn’t a threat. She wanted him to give her a tour of the inside workings of the family he already had, to help her inch her way forward with the one they were creating, but finding the words was like reaching for a foreign language she barely knew.

“Here comes trouble,” Nate said, looking beyond Ilke, but down toward the floor. “I told you he was with Trigg.”

Aiden lit up. “Murphy!”

A flash of black-and-white fur brushed by her leg. The mutt greeted a beaming Aiden with a lick on his cheek and a nudge of his black nose against the plate he held.

virtualventures

“Let me take that,” Nate said, quickly lifting away the plate so Aiden could throw his arms around the dog’s neck.

The dog wiggled with excitement, tail wagging hard, but he didn’t stop walking despite Aiden’s hug. He circled through the dining room, sniffing and greeting everyone while Aiden stumbled alongside him, trying to push, pull, and drag him.

“Go to your mat,” Aiden ordered, trying to muscle the dog toward a door off the end of the dining room. “You’re not allowed to be in here. Miss Glory will have an opinion.”

He made it sound like an opinion was a conniption fit.

“You tell him, kid,” Trigg, Rolf’s brother and the current snowboard gold medalist, chuckled over Aiden’s struggle to discipline his dog.

A handful of diners called out greetings and belated congratulations to Trigg. He slapped his hand to the chest emblem of his Wikinger hoodie, dipping his head in appreciation.

He deserved his victory lap. He was five years older than her, almost thirty, and they had both gone at their respective disciplines with equal fervor. She knew he had worked every bit as hard as she had to earn his place on the podium, but she still wanted to slink away before he noticed her.

She had to stand there and wait for him to acknowledge her, though, so she could congratulate him on achieving what she had failed to. There was no room for envy, even though the words were already a fishbone stuck in the base of her throat before he gave her a look of mild surprise.

“What are you doing here? Where the hell were you in Korea?”

Seriously? She drew back the hand she had started to offer in greeting, body flushing hot all over with public humiliation. ‘Friends’ was an overstatement. Trigg was Trigg. *Jerk.*

“What?” he said of her scowl. “You should have swept it and you totally choked. *What happened*?”

She slid a look at Nate, but when she saw only a stiff blankness, as if he was bracing himself for her to blurt out their special news, she turned her back on both of them and threw her slice of white bread into the toaster. Then she scrabbled through the cups of yogurt in the tub of melting ice, looking for a plain one.

virtualventures

She was *not* going to cry.

“Can I feed him?” Aiden called.

“I’ll scoop and you can pour it in his dish,” Trigg said, crossing to where Aiden had herded the dog into the adjacent room.

“Then wash your hands and come eat,” Nate said to Aiden.

Ilke’s toast popped and she threw it on a plate, collected her silverware and waited for Nate to move along so she could get to the fruit cups.

He stood in her way until she looked up at him.

He was looking at her plate. When his eyes lifted to hers, his gaze was full of questions. His lips parted as if he wanted to say something.

“Excuse me,” she said, then circled around to grab what she wanted.

A fresh group of people came in, clogging up her path to the exit as Trigg came back and exchanged greetings with them.

Annoyed and trapped, she sat down at the nearest empty table and dipped the crust of her unbuttered toast in the juice from her fruit cup, pretending to be absorbed in her phone.

She listened to Nate with his son as Aiden came back and Nate let the boy pick the table they sat at and promised to share a waffle with him if Aiden ate all his eggs.

“I really want to know.” Trigg invited himself to sit at her table by setting down a heaping pile of scrambled hash and dark brew coffee. “Let’s deconstruct it so you can gain back some ground at the Cup.”

“I withdrew.”

“That was stupid. Why?”

Really?

“Can I have your number?” she asked.

“You don’t have it? Sure.” He rattled it off.

She punched it into her phone, then sent him a text. *Fuck off.*

He glanced to read it and snorted. “You’re not that sensitive. Tell me what happened. Let’s deconstruct it so you bounce back next season.”

She wanted to say, *You don’t know me*, but the truth was, she never *used to be* sensitive. She had known Trigg for close to fifteen years. She often crossed paths with him. They had worked out together in the gym of this lodge last summer and often traded good-natured insults. That was Trigg’s idea of friendship and about the only kind she was comfortable with.

virtualventures

So she shouldn’t be taking his blunt criticism so hard.

She barely knew herself anymore, though, and it was unnerving. Favoring an injury was something she could understand. Being totally off in ways she couldn’t explain hadn’t made sense. It had done a number on her confidence. Maybe it would have been different if this baby was a planned event, or even a welcome surprise, but it had thrown her on every level.

“Enough sulking.” Trigg jabbed his fork in the air between them. “It’s been a week. Let’s fix whatever hamstrung you—That doesn’t sound right. Was that the problem, though? You pull a hammy?”

God in heaven. She looked for escape and caught Nate watching them.

She scowled, blaming him for her pregnancy, her failure, and now this public denouncement.

Trigg was actually successful enough, and influential enough, that his wanting to help her was the kind of thing other athletes would wet themselves over. It was just so lowering to have it be like this, when her

career was benched and she ought to have managed the wins on her own. When she couldn't even take advantage of the hand he was extending.

"Maybe it's time for some staffing changes? Who's your coach these days?"

"Can we not do this right now?"

"Coach Wurgler used to say every day you lose takes two to get back," he reminded her. "Start now and you'll be that much further ahead sooner."

"Trigg—" Nate said.

But as Trigg turned his head in Nate's direction, his gaze was snagged by someone entering the dining room. "*You*." He dropped his fork with a clank and pointed a furious finger at Glory.

She grinned broadly as she walked right by him to pick up two plates and begin filling them. "Well, look who's back."

He hooked his arm on the back of his chair to twist and face her. "I honestly thought he'd given the bachelor party to Mr. Home By Nine On A School Night over there." Trigg thumbed in Nate's direction.

Rolf joined Glory at the buffet, coffee in each hand, and nodded to indicate he wanted more eggs.

virtualventures

"I let the dog pee on your carpet this morning," Trigg told Glory. "What do you think of that?"

"I let him pee in your bed when you're not here." Glory paused by Nate's table to tilt a look at Aiden. "We're just teasing. You know that, right?"

Aiden grinned around the fork in his mouth.

Ilke sat straight and feigned boredom, but her eyes felt hot. It was the same sort of trash talk that Trigg had thrown at her, but there was an undeniable warmth of affection and friendship underlying their banter, closing her out of their inner circle.

"So much for the matinee reservations I made at the medieval jousting restaurant," Nate said to Rolf. "Sorry, man. I know you were looking forward to it."

"I don't even know what that is, but I already know I would prefer it." Rolf followed Glory to the table where Trigg sat with Ilke.

Glory slid in beside her and Rolf sat next to his brother.

Now she was trapped. Stockholm, with its expensive real estate and abundance of unemployed yet qualified workers, suddenly seemed like a

brilliant place to be homeless and jobless.

“How do you feel about running into Haven with bank deposits and other errands?” Glory asked her. “You can use the lodge vehicle if you don’t want to put miles on your rental.”

“Can I run my own errands while I’m there and turn in my rental?”

“Sure. In fact, use mine. Rolf wants to buy me a new one, but I never use the one I have. Borrow it anytime, just top up the tank on your way back here.”

“Thanks. I was going to ask if there was anything I could do here this morning, but maybe I’ll run the car back, if I can figure out how to get back here.”

“Oh, Nate will probably go to Haven later.” Glory twisted. “Are you dropping Aiden this afternoon? Could you run to—Where do you have to drop the car?”

Ilke opened her mouth, but a bubble of panic kept her words trapped in her throat.

“Airport,” Rolf provided between bites of food.

“I’ll have to check,” Ilke said, but already knew Rolf was right.

virualventures

“In Kalispell? That’s only forty minutes from Haven. Could you do that, Nate? I will, if you can’t.”

“I usually take Aiden back for bedtime, but I’ll call Wanda, see if I can drop him early.”

If he looked at her, Ilke missed it. She only dared one brief glance in his direction, though. Should she say something about what a bad idea it was? Why didn’t he?

“Done. And good, because I don’t want you to work weekends. I told you that.” Glory’s gaze swept over Ilke’s face with something that almost resembled concern.

This pallid complexion was more than morning sickness. She was going cold inside at the thought of being trapped in a vehicle with Nate.

“Are you working here?” Trigg asked her. “*Why*?”

“Because your tomcatting left me without a manager,” Glory shot at him with blistering accusation. “*Again*.”

“So you recruited a world-class athlete to answer phones? Who’s shoveling the parking lot? The NHL? She needs to be working on her skills. You’re supporting this?” Trigg swiveled in his chair to confront his brother.

“I asked Vivien to hire someone.” Rolf didn’t lift his gaze from his phone. “Ilke is filling in until that happens.”

“Your mom left me a couple of résumés to look over,” Glory said, affecting sweetness as she batted her lashes at Trigg. “Do you want to look at their qualifications? Give me a one-to-ten scale on your sexual interest so I don’t have to do this ever again?”

“You don’t have to do it now,” Rolf said, eating with one hand, still reading the phone he held in the other.

“Maybe not, if I hire a *guy*. Or is even that too much for your libido to resist?”

“You know what I mean,” Rolf said before Trigg could reply. He sounded bored, as if he was barely half-listening to her.

Glory scowled at him. “You want it to be that simple, but it’s not. You —” she said to Trigg “—need to control yourself. I can’t drop everything and run this place every time you’re too lazy to drive into town for some action.”

“She asked me to show her how Tinder works. What was I supposed to do?”

Virtualventures

“Set her parameters beyond a five-inch radius!”

“Eight inches. Please,” Trigg said with a pained look.

“Size doesn’t matter. Take it off property.”

“Glory.” Rolf looked up from his phone. “Do you want to manage this lodge? If you do, do it. Otherwise leave it alone. I’ll support you either way, but shit or get off the pot.”

“Mr. Rolf said a bad word,” Aiden told Nate at the other table.

“I’ll talk to him later,” Nate said.

Glory narrowed her eyes and set down her fork.

“Uh-oh. Honeymoon’s over. Look for me when you’re ready to move on,” Trigg told Glory. “My handle is RUboard.”

Glory wasn’t acknowledging him, too busy staring down her husband-to-be. She kept her voice low, so it didn’t go much further than their table.

“You want it to be that easy, but it’s not. I’m already impacting Dad’s income by writing under my own name. If the lodge fails—”

“If the lodge runs into trouble, I’ll bail out your father and blame him.” Rolf jerked his thumb toward Trigg. “For partnering with someone who wasn’t up to the task.”

“Marvin is not going to fail. You guys never give him enough credit,” Trigg argued.

“Says the guy who keeps sleeping with Dad’s managers, setting him up for failure.” Glory picked up her fork and eyed Rolf. “I’m not marrying you for your money.”

“Is it his charm?” Trigg asked, expression deeply skeptical.

“The sex, if you want the truth. In a minute, he’s going to offer an erotic spanking. Hopefully to me, but we’ll see.”

Rolf sighed, lifting a gaze of exasperated affection. “You’re worse than him.”

“I love you,” she said with tender vehemence. “I don’t want this place to come between us.”

“Are you listening? I won’t let it.”

They shared a super-sexy look that was so full of promise and soul connection, Ilke had to look into her fruit cup, but her weak appetite was gone. It was so dumb to be jealous of *that*. Teasing and intimacy and even the spat they were having over which one of them would help her father.

Then, breaking one of those lulls of conversation that sometimes hit a room, Aiden asked with supreme innocence, “What’s a neh-rotic spanking?”

virtualventures

“Oh my God.” Glory face-palmed and hung her head while the whole room lost it. Trigg nearly laughed himself out of his chair.

Nate offered a deeply sarcastic, “Thanks a bunch,” while even Rolf let amusement crack a smirk into his hard face.

Ilke wanted to laugh, too, but kind of wanted to cry at the same time. It was so *nice*.

“I’ll go call the rental company,” she murmured, and slithered behind Glory’s chair, throat tight. She avoided Nate’s gaze as she left the dining room.

TWO HOURS LATER, Ilke turned in her car at the Kalispell airport, used the first bathroom she could find, then glanced at the board to see where the next available flight might take her. She was willing to go just about

anywhere, rather than stick around to meet up with Nate in a few hours like they'd planned—with the briefest possible exchange of texts.

Spokane? Where was that?

Of course, she'd only brought her purse, not her luggage, and half her clothes were beginning to feel, maybe not tight, but not right. She was continuing to work out, mostly walking on the treadmill and yoga, cutting her weight load in half when she lifted. She threw up most of what she ate, and hadn't really gained anything, but she felt bloated and soft. Her breasts hurt *all the time*. She wanted to unbutton her jeans as she climbed into the Uber that took her to the nearest big-box store and how did even her *socks* feel like the elastic in them was too strong?

She wasn't ready for maternity wear, but browsed it anyway. She was generally a picky shopper, buying classic, top-quality pieces that would last. The department store selection was affordable and boring as hell but not awful. Just a limited selection of tented tops and jersey dresses in purple, khaki, black, or red. She found some black jeans with an elastic waistband that would stretch all the way up to her ribs. Was she really going to have a giant belly to fill that out?

Virtualventures

She didn't have a lot in this life, but her looks and her skill on skis had always been there for her, providing confidence. She had lost one and wasn't ready to lose the other. She enjoyed feeling attractive and sexy. When she had slept with Nate, she had needed every advantage she possessed. He had completely disarmed her, making her crave his touch by kissing and caressing her all over until she was so sensitized and ready, she had thought she would catch fire.

She had never experienced anything like it. Sex for her was like dessert. Mostly she avoided empty calories, but sometimes she was in the mood for a crème brûlée and indulged herself. That's what her night with Nate was supposed to have been. Sweet, momentary indulgence.

It had been that and so much more. She kept blaming her hormones for her powerful response, but Nate was different from other men in her sphere. Most people she knew were as self-involved as she was, which was fine. After her first boyfriend threw her completely off her game, she had veered toward partners who didn't impact her emotions. She couldn't afford the hand-wringing that was consuming her right now.

Dancing with Nate, seeing the heat of attraction in his eyes, she had thought he was like all the rest. He wasn't, though. Once alone and kissing, she'd discovered he wasn't a taker. He was a giver. His focus on her had been incredibly seductive, completely different from the times where she happened to orgasm beneath someone while his penis was inside her.

With Nate, the goal had been pleasure, not peak—which only caused the peaks to be that much higher and sharper and more breathtakingly satisfying. They hadn't talked much, but he hadn't been shy about exploring and asking if she liked something, as if learning her body was important to him. As if he would need to know it for future reference.

He had kissed her a lot, everywhere, which had made her feel adored and worshipped, overcoming her ingrained reserve. When he had looked into her eyes as he pressed inside her, it had felt incredibly intimate, making her so vulnerable she hurt, but it was the sting of a muscle when it was stretched. A good, necessary pain that allowed for growth.

She kept trying to dismiss that night as the same old sex, but the act itself, fierce and fast, lazy and slow… No matter the different ways they'd done it, it had all felt like *lovemaking*.

virtualventures

She hadn't been able to put him out of her mind afterward. She'd found herself thinking about him, looking him up on social media, tempted to send a friend request.

Why? They occupied two different worlds. She had known they didn't have a future. She barely knew him. He was a father with responsibilities and a job he couldn't leave. She hadn't had any intention of becoming a mother. She had goals she needed to pursue elsewhere.

Which was why her brain couldn't comprehend that she was standing at a sale rack in small-town America looking at nursing bras, wondering if her baby's skin would be the color of hers or Nate's or somewhere in between. When she tried to picture him holding their infant in his big hands, a lump formed in her throat.

She took some items into a change room just for the privacy to pull herself together.

Part of her had thought a day of browsing and taking herself out to lunch was exactly what she needed. At the lodge, she was continually on guard, ready to be exposed any second. She was always holding her breath

for Nate to walk by, anxious for what he might say to her—or that he would ignore her altogether, which was somehow far worse.

This was why she didn't have relationships! She hated obsessing over a man. She mostly loathed and resented them for their power and the way they always seemed to objectify her.

She had thought time away today would help her relax, but now she was way too deep in her head, hating herself for counting the minutes until she met up with Nate, dreading the drive at the same time. She *hated* the wave of censure she felt coming off him every time she was near him, as if this was all her fault.

She used to feel that way with her stepfather and she damned well knew who the victim had been in that instance.

After choking down a big salad and a cup of soup, she found a movie theater with a romcom on matinee and gratefully lost herself in the antics of a free-spirited California girl pretending to be the fiancée of an uptight English lord.

She left a bright summer's day on a Malibu beach to hunch against a biting wind that was scraping drifts from the hard-packed snow through the dusk. As she clicked on her phone, she saw Nate had texted several times. The first was an hour ago. He was early, he said, but was grabbing some things for Aiden at the supercenter where they had arranged to meet. More texts followed, growing closer in intervals.

virtualventures

Are you here?

I'm ready when you are.

Where are you? Drop me a pin if you're lost.

Are you okay?

She had missed two calls from him. He called again as she was trying to share her location.

"Hi," she said breathlessly, walking fast to get back to the supercenter. "I was in a movie. I'll be there in a few minutes."

"It's icy. Stay at the theater. I'll come get you." He hung up, not giving her any choice but to turn and walk back toward the entrance to the cinema where he would be able to find her.

His first words when he pulled up at the sidewalk and came around to open the door were, "You saw a movie alone?"

She did everything alone. And no man had ever, in her life, taken her shopping bag out of her hand and tried to help her into a vehicle. It was one of those oversized pickup trucks that could drag a yacht, so yeah, it was a climb, but she was five-ten and her thigh muscles were strong as a thoroughbred's. She didn't need help.

He set a bracing hand under her elbow anyway.

She shivered as she settled on the seat, even though it was pretty warm in here, heater running on high. The imprint of Nate's touch lingered as a tingle under her skin. It was exhausting to be this attuned to him, it really was.

He set the bag at her feet and closed her door, coming around to climb behind the wheel and look at her, clearly expecting an answer.

"I wasn't on a date, if that's what you're asking." Pregnant, remember?

"What did you see?"

"*Duchess of Malibu*."

He made a noise, pointed out the button to start her seat warmer, then buckled in and put the truck into gear. He started weaving his way out of the parking lot.

Virtualventures

"Aiden wants to see *Otter Be Home Soon*. If I'd known you were going to see a movie, I would have brought him."

"I saw the preview for that one." The lost young otter swept away by a current who had to find his way home had seemed cute, but she didn't do cartoons as a rule. Also, she had found herself ridiculously anxious for the completely fictional baby otter who was lost and afraid, and his mother, who was anxious and teary, but couldn't leave her other cubs to go find him.

She couldn't sit through ninety minutes of that heart-punching torture.

"I didn't know I was going to the cinema. I finished shopping and…" She sighed, hearing herself trying to make excuses. "Do I really owe you explanations for how I fill my days?"

What were the rules here?

The ensuing silence seemed to have layers of grit and gray, matching the dull light fading on the landscape, the pale glow of the dash on the charcoal interior of his truck.

"No." His hand worked the steering wheel. "Maybe. Hell, I don't know. I didn't know what to think when you didn't answer my texts."

Had he been worried? For her? Or the baby he didn't want?

"I should have asked this already, but how is everything going? With the pregnancy, I mean. My ex was sick as a dog with Aiden."

"Two for two on that." She dug in her purse for the digestive biscuits that helped settle her stomach between meals. "I read it might be the prenatal vitamins I was taking. I bought some different ones today."

"Have you seen a doctor?"

"I have an appointment in Haven this week." Did he want to come? She didn't have the nerve to ask. When had she become a full fledged coward?

He clicked on his headlights as he turned onto the main highway toward Haven and the lodge.

"So, you're planning to stay here until the baby is born? Why don't you go back to Sweden? Do you even have health coverage here?"

"I travel so much I have a plan that covers me almost anywhere." She looked out her side window so he wouldn't see how much it hurt that he wanted her to leave. "What part of my being here bothers you? Because people are going to find out eventually."

"I just don't know why you would want to stay. What do you expect from me? I can't—My job is very demanding. Wouldn't you be more comfortable around your family? Where are your parents?"

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And didn't that say everything about how little they knew each other.

"My father died when I was five. My mother lives in New Zealand and isn't the maternal type. Bit of a child herself, actually." Ilke had been thinking about telling her and lost her nerve every time she so much as glanced for her phone. "She'd prefer a cancer diagnosis than to hear she'll be a grandmother."

"Are you serious?"

She shrugged. "My father wanted kids so she got pregnant, but hated how her body changed." The few occasions when her mother talked about Ilke's father, and how he had doted on Ilke, she always sounded resentful. Jealous, even. "Mostly I had nannies growing up. It was fine. She hated when I turned into a teenager, though. That made her feel old."

The part where Ilke had looked like a twenty-three-year-old supermodel at fourteen had made her livid. It had been a particularly confusing time because Ilke had looked to her mother for guidance on handling the sudden attention from not just boys, but grown men. Her mother not only didn't

have sympathy, she'd also been bitter that Ilke garnered that attention at all. Blamed her and made her feel like a harlot.

"No brothers and sisters?"

"Two cousins who ask me for tickets to events sometimes. That's the only time I hear from them. Maybe I'll ask one of them to rub my feet while I gestate your baby."

Silence.

She bit back a sigh. "Do you have siblings?"

"One sister."

"Are you close?"

"Yeah." He said it like that should be obvious because it was totally common to have a sibling and be friends with them. "She's in Sacramento. I see her when I go back to visit our grandparents. We try to get our kids together as much as possible."

Would he take *their* child to integrate into that snug family dynamic? Ilke picked at the zipper tab on her purse. "Have you told her—"

"No." Blunt and unequivocal. "Have you told anyone?"

"Vivien guessed. Rolf and Glory know."

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"Since when?" He shot her a look.

"Since he asked if I broke into a container and stole a bunch of skis. I had to explain my presence here. No one knows you're the father."

He took his time pondering that. She let her gaze follow the ribbon of highway before them as it snaked into the mountains. The peaks grew higher in front of the truck's nose while his profile stayed sharp and unreadable.

"Have *you* told anyone?"

"My ex."

Why did that go through her like a spear, leaving an open wound in its wake?

"Not that you're the mother, just that there's a baby." Now he sounded painfully stilted. *Averse*. "Look, if no one knows… Maybe you should go back to Sweden to have it. When the baby is born, I'll…" He trailed off.

She didn't know what would happen, either. *That was the reason she was here*.

"I don't have anywhere to live there. I gave up my apartment."

"Why?"

“It was too expensive.” She had looked online for a few places, but now she could stay here in trade for repeating a spiel over the phone to inquiring callers and punching bookings into a computer.

“Do you need money?” He sounded surprised.

“Everyone needs money.” There was always government assistance, of course, but that was her last resort.

“I mean, what do you usually do for rent and groceries? I thought you had, like, sponsorships or something.”

“I had to withdraw from the World Cup. I won’t see any of the prize money I was hoping for. As for sponsorships, those tend to come in three levels: gold, silver, and bronze.” She put up her fingers: one, two, three. “None of which I attained. I’ve been informed that my previous arrangements will not be renewed. I doubt I’ll top anyone’s list once I’m a single mother, not unless I’m killing it in qualifiers. Even then, how many single moms do you see hawking big-name products?” She didn’t even know how she would afford to get herself and her equipment onto the slopes to train, let alone to the races. Those expenses burned through savings *fast*.

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“Am I supposed to feel guilty?”

“I’m just saying, yours isn’t the only life being ruined.”

It’s not too late…

She held her breath hoping he would argue that this baby wasn’t ruining either of their lives. She had to quit thinking it was ruining hers. That’s how her mother had viewed *her* and she was still trying to prove her worth.

She felt so unwanted and isolated right now. How was she supposed to be a decent mother? She didn’t know how. *She needed him*.

Nate wasn’t saying anything, which rubbed further against the raw spot behind her heart. She so needed him to accept this baby. To help her raise it. To show her how.

“Look,” he finally said. “When it comes to my kid, I’m going to look after it. If you need me to cover some bills, say so. I’ll do what I can. If you need to work at the lodge, I guess I can’t stop you, but it’s going to be a helluva busy summer. Don’t expect much from me.”

As she absorbed that, she realized what was wearing this hollow spot in her. It wasn’t fear of him rejecting the baby. He seemed to want it, which

was a relief. But it didn’t alleviate the pain at all. Because he *was* rejecting *her*.

And that hurt something awful.

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Chapter Seven

ILKE LIKED THE three o'clock hour. Workers had usually taken their afternoon break and were back at their tasks, trying to finish before it was time to clean up and knock off. Around this time, the dining room staff moved into the kitchen to help with dinner prep. Fewer people came and went through the lobby, and even the phones stopped ringing. Marvin usually went for a nap before opening the bar at five and Vivien retreated to her room to rest before dressing for dinner.

Since Nate rarely came back from the base before five-thirty, Ilke didn't even have to worry about bumping into him and suffering whatever shade of antipathy he was throwing her way. She could concentrate on what she was doing. Today, she was sorting emails and responding to inquiries.

After a week, it was all growing pretty routine, but one email jumped out at her. It was a confirmation from the company that covered the employee health benefits. Ilke glanced at the cover letter, saw it instructed her to print the attachment for company records, and did. She plucked it off the printer a minute later and moved to file it.

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It was probably a privacy violation that she read it, but she was just making sure she didn't need to do anything else. Then she stood there puzzled because, huh. Her predecessor in this job, Macy, had a dependent. Not a child, either. A common-law spouse.

Trigg was an unrepentant man-whore who made zero promises to the women he slept with, but they were always single and up for it. He had *some* standards. He wasn't a home-wrecker. So why had he slept with someone in a committed relationship?

She wandered down to the kitchen and found the barista, Lina. She was ignoring the dishes in the sink, talking to the line cook.

"Do you mind watching the desk? I have to run up and talk to Glory about something."

"Sure."

Ilke jogged up all six flights of the back stairs, printed page clutched in her hand. She felt the lack of proper cardio, panting as she hurried down the hall and knocked on Glory's door.

Glory took a minute to answer and was surprised to see her, but gave her a relaxed smile. "Hi. You know we have things called telephones that save you running up three floors?"

"Are you busy?"

"Just hanging out with Eden." Glory stepped back to wave an invitation into her room. "Have you two met? Eden's a friend from town. Her mother owned the bistro and she and her sister are keeping it going. We're talking cakes and catering. Ilke's working our front desk until we find a new manager."

"I didn't mean to interrupt, but I wanted to show you this. It's super weird and maybe not something I should be talking about at the front desk." Ilke offered the page as she walked in, but was immediately pulled up short by the mess. The room was a big corner one, like Vivien's, but it wasn't properly finished and looked like a book-bomb had gone off.

"Don't ask," Glory muttered as she closed the door. "We're actually sleeping in Rolf's old room across the hall because I've got so much going on in here."

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Ilke had been in here once, last summer. She'd had a bit of a fangirl moment because Glory's mother, Kathleen Cormer, had always been one of her favorite romance authors. Glory had given her a signed copy of one of her mother's most popular books.

Ilke had stored it at her mother's with her medals from Worlds. Not because she was sentimental, but because she had actually read that particular book between the races that had won her those medals. Romance novels were her drug of choice for taking her out of the daily grind. The plucky heroines who dusted themselves off after a blow were keeping her sane every night, these days, encouraging her to stay on her own feet and fight the good fight, despite the odds.

Glory still ran the business side of her deceased mother's bestselling career by republishing the books online. She had also spent last year quietly writing her own book. She was now starting her own romance career and that appeared to be a disorganized process. Her desk was in the corner under the windows, overlooking the expansive view, but it was littered with

papers and folders, pens and notebooks along with dirty dishes and a half-full glass of wine.

The bed was covered in boxes of books, the floor littered with wicker baskets and bins with pens and notepads and other swag. The bright yellow shelves that had held her mother's collection of author copies was now overflowing with stacks of reference books and romances by other authors.

Most surprisingly, the wall where her dresser and television had been was now a gaping hole into the adjacent room. A plastic sheet hung from the ceiling to curtain it off.

A young woman sat in an armchair in front of it. She had long brown hair that was dyed blue on the ends.

"Hi," Eden greeted her. "I saw you at the New Year's party. I thought you were a skier."

"You sang a couple of songs, didn't you? You have a great voice." Ilke ignored the remark about being a skier.

"I'm okay." Eden shrugged that off. "Do you want a drink? It's not the good stuff that Glory pours. I brought it and the best we can say is that it's drinkable."

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"No, thanks, I'm just here to show Glory…"

Glory lifted her gaze off the sheet she held, wide-eyed with disbelief. She turned the page over a couple of times. "For real? Serge is the pilot who takes all our heli-tours."

"Oh. I guess I remember that now, but I just thought it was weird—"

"Super weird," Glory agreed. "I have to tell Rolf." She looked for her phone.

"Tell him what?" Eden asked with sharp curiosity.

"There might be privacy concerns," Ilke said quickly, glancing at Glory.

"Eden's dad is the police chief. Actually, give him a call," she said to Eden. "Let Ilke tell him about this while I tell Rolf."

Eden reached for her phone and dialed with a couple of swipes. "Hey, Dad. No, I'm fine. Just out at the lodge. Something has come up that you're supposed to hear about. This is Ilke. She's working the front desk."

Ilke took the phone and explained what she had been doing and how she had seen Serge's name attached to Macy's.

As she spoke, Eden's eyes widened and her jaw dropped. Behind her, Glory said, "Rolf wants Kurt to call him as soon as you're done, Ilke."

Ilke nodded and relayed the message, then agreed to come sign a statement when she was next in town.

When she hung up, Eden said, “Oh. My. Gawd.”

“Yeah, that’s a pretty big Holy Fuck. Can you hear that explosion in the distance? That’s my man, going off,” Glory said with a point toward the window.

“Not a good day for this, then,” Eden said, tilting her wineglass.

“’Fraid not.”

“Bummer. Sure you don’t want to get hammered?” she asked Ilke.

“I would love to,” Ilke said wryly. “But I’m actually working and should get back to it.”

Glory stopped her on the way to the door. “Seriously, Ilke. Thank you. This is huge.”

She shrugged it off, never having receiving much praise from anyone for anything, except maybe a few admiring words for a nice turn or a fast finish. Glory’s gratitude made her feel self-conscious and appreciated. Like she had come through for her team.

Which they weren’t.

Virtualventures

“No problem,” she mumbled, and got the hell out.

NATE VEERED TOWARD Ilke’s room on his way down to dinner and knocked, not even sure if she was in there. He hadn’t seen her much since their drive back from Kalispell, but she’d sure been the topic of the day at the base.

She cracked the door and peeked around it so only her face showed. Her hair was in a messy ball on top of her head. “Yes?”

She was giving the impression she was naked behind the door and his dick twitched in response. He ignored it.

“Nice catch today.”

“Oh. I was wondering what came of that.” She backed up and opened the door to invite him in.

A yoga mat was open on the floor alongside the bed. The lamp on the nightstand cast a golden glow over it.

Behind the closing door, she was shrugging into the robe she'd plucked from the hook, but she might as well have been wearing her birthday suit. Her halter-style sports bra and skin-tight yoga shorts kicked him in the libido. Damn, that was a lot of smooth skin over lithe muscle.

"How, uh…" He lost the plot. It was really hot in here. Except it wasn't. He distantly felt a chill in the air, but the fire of sexual hunger took hold in his jeans, making the underside of his skin sizzle and feel too tight all over his entire body.

"I was doing some stretches." She closed the robe and knotted the belt.

"Why don't you go to the gym?" What a stupid thing to say. He didn't want any other man seeing her like this. Her breasts were even more spectacular than he remembered and he recalled them as the nicest pair he'd ever had the privilege to caress. The room was full of the light, heady scent of her that had lingered in his memory for weeks. He wanted all of this to be his alone to appreciate.

It was a stunning realization when he'd been trying so damned hard to think of her as a stranger who happened to be carrying his child. A problem that needed solving, not a woman who had rocked his world.

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Yet it only took being alone with her like this and he was barely staying inside his own body. His cock was protesting the press of his fly, threatening to embarrass him. His hands were dying to roam her waist and cruise down to cup the curve of her ass. Everything in him was going lizard brained. All he could think about was the way she'd felt when he'd been inside her. Like liquid silk, hot and ecstatically perfect, taking all of him with luxurious moans of pleasure. It had been intoxicating.

Hadn't it?

He found himself delving into the blue pools surrounded by pale lashes, willing her to confirm that. *Remember*.

A pretty blush rose in her cheeks and her gaze skittered away. His scalp prickled while she folded her arms and looked away, profile struggling to find a neutral expression.

Don't be shy, he wanted to say. He ached to reach out and pull her close and remind her that they had been spectacular together.

Her pretty lips, which always looked as though they were pursing for a kiss, pulled flat with dismay. "People talk to me when I'm there."

"Where?"

“The gym.” She frowned.

“Oh. Right.” *Get a grip, Nathaniel*. He ran a hand down his face.

“Trigg saw me and said I wasn’t working hard enough.” She folded her arms. “And one of these days I’ll start to show, so…” She shrugged. “I’d rather do my own thing in here.”

Show. He might have stopped breathing because his vision blurred and his ears rang. He definitely wanted the right to touch her and map her body as it changed. As his baby grew inside her.

No matter how he tried, he reacted to her in ways that transcended a one-nighter. Why the hell did this have to be so complicated?

“So, um, this Macy person really slept with Trigg just to have a reason to quit that wasn’t suspicious? I mean…” Ilke tucked her hair behind her ear. “Trigg’s hot, but…”

Nate frowned, annoyed to hear she thought Trigg was ‘hot,’ but it snapped him back to all that had happened today and why he was here.

“Actually.” He scratched his hair and made a face. “Turns out his pillow talk includes whether he could get her free skis and *when*.”

Finally, she met his gaze again, her own wide with shock. “Trigg told her the container was coming?”

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“Told her when.” He tilted his head in agreement. “It’s not clear how she knew it was planned. Rolf has been keeping that shipment need-to-know. Maybe Serge overheard something, because Rolf promised the investors new skis when he started making arrangements for their tour back in January. Somehow Macy knew a shipment was on its way because she asked Trigg about it.”

“When? Wasn’t he away?”

“She got with him the one night he was here between training and leaving for the games. He promised her new skis as soon as he got back. If I had to make a guess, I would say they were hoping to empty it while Rolf and Trigg were in Korea, because I remember seeing tracks with a tub the day before it arrived. It arrived a day late. The next day, we had cross-country skiers take over the place through most of February. And with the time shift, and people watching the live coverage of the games through the night, things were pretty lively here around the clock. Whatever the plan was, when the funeral came up, they must have seen their chance.”

“But for her to quit the day it happened? That’s so suspicious.”

“No, she left three days before,” he reminded her. “There’s no proof she told anyone anything, though. She was at the service the day of the theft. Perfect alibi.”

“So, no arrests?”

“They’ll both be questioned again, but no. Nothing so far. The best Rolf could do was cancel his bookings with Serge. He’s pissed right off that he’ll lose his deposit because he doesn’t have cause, but he’s convinced Serge is in on it. He doesn’t want to take any chances.”

“What did Trigg say?”

“Plenty. So did Rolf,” Nate said dryly. He did his level best to stay out of any disagreements between those two, though. Rolf was his boss and Nate liked his no-bullshit, decisive personality, but the guy could learn some people skills. Trigg was his friend, smart and funny and resourceful, but he didn’t know when to quit, especially when it came to a power struggle with his brother. “I thought I’d be cleaning up more than turkey blood this time.”

She snorted. “They *are* a pair of turkeys.”

“True dat. Although, I sometimes wonder if I would have turned into something like them if I’d had a brother, rather than a sister. I get pretty competitive with my cousin.”

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“I’m horribly competitive.” She wrinkled her nose. “I probably would have killed and eaten a sibling if I had one.”

He barked out a laugh. She was way too angelic-looking to say something like that, let alone do it.

“It’s true.” She played with the tail on her robe tie, a smirk hovering on her pink lips.

“Yeah?” He really didn’t know enough about what kind of person she was under that perfect-as-a-snowflake exterior. *And whose fault was that*? “Lemme buy you dinner,” he said. “As a thank you for flagging that connection today.”

“Be seen with you? What would people think?” She might have meant it as a joke, but it was a little too truthful and fell flat.

He sighed, wishing things weren’t so…

“You know—” He pushed his fists into his jean pockets, heart in a knot because he couldn’t say it wouldn’t bother him if people found out about

the baby. At the same time, he didn't want her to think he was a complete heel. "It's not just you. You know my ex-wife lives with a woman, right?"

She kept her head down, but went very still. Her gaze came up, cautious, but not surprised. "I heard that, yes," she said carefully.

"Yeah, well, Trigg told me a few weeks ago that the locals refer to them as my 'California marriage.'" It was meant as a joke, not a cruelty, but it left a scald under his breastbone all the same. He'd grown up so determined to have a 'real' marriage. A conventional, nuclear family. "This…" He waved at her. "People are going to say I'm going full European ménage."

"And you care what strangers think?"

He folded his arms. "They're not strangers, are they? They're co-workers and neighbors. Friends." Small fucking town. "I'm a perfectionist. I'm supposed to be the guy everyone can rely on. I *hate* when I fuck up. And…" He hesitated, then went for it because his conscience had been churning like knives in his gut. "The truth is, it's killing me that you should have been able to count on me *not* to get you pregnant."

"Oh." She was nothing but round eyes and round mouth and pale, round face. Then she blinked a few times, eyes shiny, if still shadowed. She swallowed and her lashes swept down to hide her eyes. "I'm beating myself up pretty bad, too." Her mouth pouted with self-disgust. "Which is why I'd rather stay in here. I'm like you and prefer to be alone, not have people look at me sideways because I messed up. I'll go down later, when the dining room has cleared out."

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He frowned. He wasn't a loner. He was a pack animal, built to be part of a tribe or a squad. That's what he meant about wanting people to know they could rely on him.

"Well, for what it's worth, you're not alone. Obviously, we did this together. I should have said this before now, but ask me for anything. 'Kay?"

"Sure. Thanks." She shrugged it off in the way that said she thought he was being polite and wouldn't ask him for a damned thing.

That free pass should have been a relief, but as he walked downstairs and into the din of voices, he rubbed the middle of his chest where a hole had opened up.

FOR MOST OF her life, Ilke's world had been training and competing. Winners didn't sit around complaining about how hard it was. They got off their butts and did the work. As for trading war stories about the female experience, complaining about sexism and being hit on when male attention wasn't welcomed, she'd learned early she needed to suck that up, because no one was interested in a pretty girl's problems with being pretty.

So she wasn't one to vent or ask for help and she rarely went the other way and offered a shoulder or a hand. Being on her own for so long, she had to look after herself first anyway. As for fellow competitors, why would she bolster them when it was all she could do to keep her own spirits up?

Since seeking and offering support was the basis of friendship, she had never really pursued that animal. Working at the lodge was no exception. She fell into a routine of treadmill, eat, throw up, work, yoga, eat some more, read, and sleep until she did it all again. Boring and *not* lonely because she could have substituted 'train' for 'work' and her days would have looked much as they had for years. She was trying to get to where she needed to be so she could get to the next step after that, same as always.

Virtualventures

Which was why she was so surprised when Glory included her in a lunch date.

Somehow, a vote had been cast behind her back and she wasn't allowed to work weekends. At all. So, as her third one here approached, she decided to run into Haven, just to get out of her room without bumping into anyone.

When she asked Glory if she could use her car, however, Glory said, "I need it. It's Nordic Fest and the library asked me to sign some books. We can drive in together, though. I'm meeting Eden for lunch. Join us."

Biting back a dumbfounded, *Why?*, Ilke asked instead, "What's Nordic Fest?"

"A celebration of the town's Nordic roots. A bunch of the town's founding families were from Norway and Sweden. I missed it last year, but I guess there are crafts and folk singing, axe throwing and wife carrying. You know, all the classic Nordic stuff."

"Right. We marry young so we can start training early. You and Rolf aren't competing?"

“Maybe next year when we’re actually married. He’s a stickler for rules.”

“I’m sure.”

Glory laughed, seeming to appreciate the idea of Rolf following rules when he clearly made his own. Then she sobered and wrinkled her nose.

“Actually, he’s staying back to rebook all the heli-tour charters. He’s still pretty grumpy so I wouldn’t trust him with an axe right now.”

Ilke was surprised Rolf wasn’t planning to stand over Glory anyway, while she autographed books. For all his disinterest in anything that wasn’t directly related to himself, he seemed to turn to pudding when it came to supporting his fiancée, especially where her writing was concerned.

What was that even like? Ilke had tried, briefly, and failed, spectacularly, at romantic relationships. It had turned into yet another reason she preferred to focus on skiing. Snow could be hard and unforgiving, but it didn’t play mind games. Human interaction baffled her.

Like Nate. What had he wanted the other night, coming in to chat like that, then inviting her to dinner, even as he made it clear why he preferred to keep things on the down-low? He had said she should lean on him if she needed something, but she didn’t understand what that meant. Money? She was getting by so what else would she need?

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Then he had basically said he was sorry that he hadn’t prevented the pregnancy, which had been kind of really nice, even as it confused her. Did that mean he had stopped blaming her? Was it another way of saying he regretted that she was having his child? Or was he forgiving her? Was she supposed to stop resenting him, now?

Despite all that, for a few seconds, she had felt like they found some kind of alignment. Yet chickened out on dinner and kicked herself the rest of the night for not going, since they might have found…she didn’t know what. They didn’t have common ground. That was the problem.

Oh, who needed their head clogged with this much man-angst? *Not her*.

So she went to town with Glory purely as a distraction.

“Eden is running one of the food tents,” Glory told her as they left the lodge. “She and her sister have been making their grandmother’s recipes all week. Prune tarts and pickled fish. Sorry.” Glory swung her a look. “Does that turn your stomach?”

It didn’t, which wasn’t to say the smell wouldn’t knock her flat when it hit her, but the lack of desire to retch had Ilke searching for the roil that had been such a constant since before Korea, when she had put it down to nerves for the upcoming games.

The nausea wasn’t there.

Huh. She was still in her first trimester, but two weeks from the end of it. Was this a sign the morning sickness was finally letting up?

She puzzled over it while they drove, only half listening to Glory bring her up to speed on the hotel staffing.

“Dad and Vivien have some people starting Monday. One is a consultant who is working jointly with Rolf. All his accounting has been done out of Germany so far, but the lodge and the ski resort are both starting to need their own bookkeepers on site. They’re going to try to put together a team to cover both, so if someone vacations or quits, they’re not in the lurch. Rolf has an HR manager who will be here, soon, too. His first push is hiring for the summer erection—I like to call it that, mostly because Rolf looks at me like I’m too juvenile for words. They’re going to ask him to help with staffing up the lodge, too. What I’m saying is, Vivien will probably ask you to start training some people, but it doesn’t mean you’re out of a job if you still want one.”

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Glory parked behind the library and Ilke moved to help her unload the back.

“Oh, gosh, no. You don’t need to lift these. I’ve been doing this so long, I have a whole system.” She pulled out a collapsible dolly to stack and move the boxes.

Glory had organized her mother’s book tours, Ilke recalled, so let her do her thing, but mostly she was distracted by a feeling that lifting those boxes would be okay.

She was really becoming aware of feeling distinctly different today. It was disturbing in a way she didn’t want to think about, but couldn’t help acknowledge. She felt normal. Like her old self.

Or put another way, she felt ‘not pregnant.’

She absorbed that like a sonic boom, insides shuddering.

Glory said she would be tied up for an hour and told Ilke to check out the tents, but it was all dissonant words that she only obeyed so she could

be alone with her thoughts. As she wandered, she tried to take a reading on her body, tried to connect with the baby.

The festival was set up in the park adjacent to the library with a couple of dozen tents, all containing colorful displays of crafts and woodworking, treats and clothes from around the world. Because cotton sarongs screamed arctic culture, she thought with a mental eye-roll. She watched a guy use a chainsaw to turn a stump into a beaver. The pungent scent of chipped wood got into her nostrils, but was almost pleasant. He started on a block of ice and it soon became a howling wolf.

She didn't bother visiting the food tents yet, strolling instead to the far end of the park. The playground was set furthest from the road. Children played on teeter-totters and swings dug out from the snow. She recognized Aiden in his blue jacket. He was with a woman she presumed was his mom, Nate's ex-wife. She was pretty with a round face that perma-smiled at all the children, causing a weird pang in Ilke's breastbone.

So comfortable as a mom, watching over not just her own child, but a handful of extras as well.

That capability made Ilke feel really down on herself. She hugged herself and realized her breasts weren't sore. Her whole body felt as though a bubble had burst and she was left with a deflated feeling. The sense of pressure inside her had dissipated. It was a lot like when her period arrived. In fact, she had a dull ache in the small of her back.

Virtualventures

Oh no.

With a thorny feeling in her chest, she went back to the library. She waved faintly at Glory, who was smiling and chatting with someone, pen poised.

Inside a stall, Ilke yanked down her pants and saw the bloodstain on her underwear. Quite a bit of it. She sat down.

For several minutes, she sat there with her corduroy pants around her knees, her bare ass in the oval of the toilet, her throat aching with a howl she kept trapped in her chest. She was that wolf carved from ice, frozen in silence, but transparent. Empty inside.

When she heard someone come in to the second stall, she folded a few squares of toilet paper into a pad and stuffed it into the crotch of her underpants, even though they were already ruined. Then she very calmly went out to where Glory was speaking to the last few people in line. Her

head didn’t feel attached to the rest of her. She almost felt as though she looked down on this entire tableau.

“Did you see Eden?” Glory asked after the last person wandered away. She was smiling. Happy.

It was surreal. Everything was carrying on as normal. The librarian was opening covers of books, scanning them. A father was reading to his toddler over on a beanbag chair in the children’s section. A pair of teenagers were whispering in front of a computer screen and a senior was browsing in the stacks.

“She was busy,” Ilke said dumbly. *The world is ending. Didn’t anyone realize that?*

“We’ll walk over and see if she can take a break. Let me put this in the car first.” Glory packed the few remaining books into a box.

Ilke waited until they were at the car to say, “Could you drop me at the hospital?”

Glory straightened in surprise, hand on the open hatch over her head. “What’s wrong?”

“I’m bleeding.” She managed to say it without much inflection. *This was a good thing*. If she kept telling herself that, she might even believe it.

virtualventures

Glory looked from one of her eyes to the other, sounding really earnest when she said, “Sometimes there’s spotting and it doesn’t mean anything, just that the placenta moved.”

A tiny sliver of hope tingled. “How do you know that?”

Glory smiled an apology. “You wouldn’t believe the number of plot twists that involve a miscarriage that doesn’t happen. It might be okay.”

The flicker in Ilke died as quickly as it had sparked. This wasn’t okay. She knew it in her soul. She was losing the baby.

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Chapter Eight

"It's just a clinic, not a proper hospital," Glory warned as she drove to the other side of town. "One doctor and three nurses. I think one is a certified midwife, though."

"Frankie." Ilke's voice sounded hollow even to her own ears.

"Right. I forgot you'd been here for prenatal. We might have to call the number on the door to get someone to come in since it's Sat—Oh. Looks like it's open."

"It could be a while before anyone can see me. You don't have to stay."

"Of course, I'll stay. I'll just text Eden that we can't meet her." Glory trailed behind her, head bent over her phone as they entered the waiting room.

The door had a chime that drew the clerk from the back. Her name was Karen Something, Ilke recalled. She smiled and greeted Ilke by name. "We're only taking emergencies today." She thumbed toward the back. "Came in for one." She didn't make it sound life-threatening.

Virtualventures

Ilke set a light hand on the counter, not ready to make this real, but she had to say the word. "I think I'm having a miscarriage."

"Oh dear," Karen breathed. "Take a seat. It will be a few minutes."

In the back, a child cried then stopped, then cried again. Ilke felt Glory's gaze on her profile.

"I want to say something pat, like try not to worry until you know you have something to worry about."

Ilke shrugged. There wasn't anything to say or do. She thought about texting Nate, but only sat there with her phone clutched between two hands in her lap.

It was a new experience to have someone sit vigil with her. She had broken an ankle and a collarbone on two separate occasions and was in the hospital alone both times. Her coach had come by once, after she'd been treated, to check on her prognosis, but that was it.

Glory didn't look to her phone for distraction. She sat in patient silence as the sound of doors slamming and voices grew. A family came out. The dad carried a child who had his arm in a sling and a fat bottom lip and a scrape over his eye. The man took the boy out to the car while the mom waited at the counter to sign some papers.

"I'll be with you in a moment," Karen told the woman. "Ilke, do you want to come through?"

No.

Glory rose, but Ilke waved her back. "It's okay. You can go."

"I'll wait."

"You don't have to," she insisted, but Glory sat down again.

A few minutes later, the doctor used a stethoscope and then held a little machine against her abdomen. The machine was supposed to amplify the heartbeat, but there was nothing to hear. The nurse-midwife, Frankie, held her hand the whole time.

Ilke couldn't remember a time when she'd held a woman's hand for any reason beyond maybe grasping a gloved hand that helped pull her up from the snow. It felt so peculiar, she didn't know what to do so let her hand lie there in Frankie's warm hold.

virtualventures

"At this point, we usually recommend an ultrasound in Kalispell," the doctor said, stepping back in a way that seemed terribly final. "If they confirm the lack of heartbeat, they'll either give you a prescription or suggest a procedure. Some women come home the same day. You may have to stay overnight at the hospital or in a hotel, then have a check-up the next morning."

"This happens so often you have a protocol?"

The doctor's pained smile was kind enough, but his words were still brutal. "It does."

"Do you have someone who can drive you?" Frankie asked. "Can I ask Glory to come in?"

"Thanks." Ilke sat up on the edge of the bed and looked at her clothes. If Glory let her borrow her car, how would Glory get back to the lodge? Maybe Eden could drive her?

"You're not driving yourself," Glory said when Ilke suggested it. She sounded appalled. "Anything could happen. No, I'll call Rolf and tell him I'm taking you…" She bit her lip as she looked at her phone. "What do you

want me to tell him? That you need a test or something? They might be wrong, Ilke."

Ilke shook her head, already knowing they weren't. She didn't feel pregnant. And she appreciated Glory's attempt to protect her privacy, but…

"Tell him the truth. And…" She clenched her fists in the paper beneath her hemorrhaging pelvis. "Tell him to tell Nate."

NATE WAS BRAIN deep in scheduling software. The other two buildings were a go, thanks to new investors. Bids had been accepted and now the milestones for both buildings had to be integrated into the schedule he'd already hammered out for the operations and ski patrol—

"Nate." Rolf put down his landline hard enough to cut short whatever Trigg was saying to the consultants he'd brought in to start designing the snow park.

The men turned from the laminated wall poster of the resort they were marking up. Even the dog lifted his head with a surprised jangle of his collar.

Virtualventures

Nate leaned past his monitor the way he did a hundred times a day and looked through the open door of Rolf's office to where Rolf stood behind his deck. "Yeah?"

Rolf jerked his head, silently ordering him front and center.

That didn't bode well. It sounded so serious, Trigg pointed his dry erase pen at his own chest, silently asking if his presence was required.

"*Nein,*" Rolf said, earning a narrow-eyed look of dark suspicion from Trigg.

The two were barely talking, thanks to Trigg's loose tongue going along with his loose fly, but Nate was so used to the tension, he easily ignored it.

When Rolf's hard-ass tone came his way, though, it riled him. He hit save and locked his screen out of habit, then walked past the stares of the three men into Rolf's office, hackles rising.

"Close the door."

He did, with a firm snap. He was as much a perfectionist as Rolf was. Worse. Whatever fuck-up had occurred, it would be dealt with. Rolf must

know that.

“What happened?”

Rolf was looking at him in a way that made the hair stand up on the back of his neck.

“That was Glory.” Rolf nodded at his phone and stayed on his feet. “Ilke’s at the clinic and needs a ride into Kalispell to have an ultrasound. Sounds like she’s having a miscarriage. She said you don’t have to take her, but she wanted you to know.”

The news hit like an invisible force. Nate wasn’t aware of stepping back, but the door was unexpectedly clapping against the back of his skull. It probably should have hurt. He ran his hand over his face, but it didn’t feel like his. He had gone numb all over.

“Glory said she’ll take her if you can’t.” Rolf’s expression was hard and alert, searching his.

Nate’s brain could barely grasp that words were being said let alone make sense of them. “Are they sure?”

“That’s why they need the test. Glory said they couldn’t find a heartbeat. I’m sorry. I knew Ilke was pregnant. I didn’t know it was yours.”

Virtualventures

Was.

He couldn’t look at Rolf. Shame was closing his throat. Not because he’d got a woman pregnant out of wedlock, but because he’d had such mixed feelings about it. He felt really fucking small right now. Something was shriveling inside his chest and hurt like hell. Like unbearable hell.

“Can you drive?” Rolf asked.

“Of course.” Nate tried to pull himself together. “Tell her I’m leaving right now.”

“I mean, I can drive you into Haven.” Nate had never heard that tone from Rolf. He barked like a Rottweiler most of the time. Compassion wasn’t in his repertoire and his quiet concern made this moment that much harder to endure, leaving a blistered feeling in his ears. “Glory and I can take both of you.”

“No, it’s fine.” It wasn’t fine. Nate pinched the bridge of his nose, tried to take it in. “I can do it.”

“Use the company card for anything you need.”

Nate nodded dumbly and walked out.

“Jesus,” Trigg said as Nate left Rolf’s office. “What’s wrong? Your kid okay?”

“Personal matter,” Nate heard Rolf say behind him as he left.

Deeply personal, but something Nate suddenly wished he hadn’t kept so private. His kid wasn’t okay and deserved better than to be treated as a disgraceful secret.

NATE DIDN’T REMEMBER the drive from the lodge. Everything went blank and didn’t come back into focus until he walked in the doors of the clinic. Frankie happened to be behind the administrative counter, writing in a folder. She looked up and mild surprise blanked her face.

“Hi, Nate.” She wore the expression halfway between guilt and wariness that he always saw on her. He wouldn’t allow his son to be around someone who was morally bankrupt, which she wasn’t, but she *had* slept with his wife while they were still married. For Aiden’s sake, he had tried to forgive Wanda, but all of his conversations with Frankie tended to be strained and kept as short as possible, at least on his end.

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Not that he had anything to say to her right now beyond, “I’m here for Ilke.”

“Sure—” Frankie did a double-take. Her jaw loosened and she blinked, asking point-blank, “You mean—*Does Wanda know*?”

“Yes.” He felt like a zombie, speaking without any emotions or even physical awareness of his body. “Should I go through?” He needed to see her. That much he knew.

Frankie hovered one more second before she shook herself out of whatever shock she was processing and disappeared through the door into the back. A few moments later, Ilke and Glory walked out.

Ilke stopped when she saw him. Emotions flickered across her face—caution, chagrin, despair. She ducked her chin and zipped her jacket, hiding her expression.

“Thanks for coming.”

If he hadn’t seen that brief flash of anguish in her pale blue eyes, he would have thought her completely unaffected. He might even have thought

this was a dark blessing, but what he realized then was, she kept her emotions even more tightly under wraps than he did. In fact, she was so tense with trying to hold herself in control, her normally coordinated movements were off. She couldn't seem to match one edge of her jacket zipper to the other. They were like two magnets with the wrong poles, refusing to meet. A tiny choke sounded in her throat.

"Are you guys okay? I can drive," Glory offered, forestalling Nate from moving forward and helping Ilke.

"I got it. Thanks, Glory."

She squeezed his arm. "Text me and let me know how it goes, 'kay? It might be nothing."

It was kind of her to say, but he could tell by the way everyone was acting that they already knew it was the wrong kind of nothing.

Frankie came out behind Ilke and handed her some absorbent pads. "You'll want to sit on these, just in case."

His heart fell right through the souls of his shoes. He barely comprehended what Frankie said next.

"I'll tell Wanda you had to run out of town. Don't worry about Aiden."

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Right. It was Saturday. "Thanks." His voice was strained and came from somewhere beyond him. He was inside a bubble, waiting for Ilke's gaze to come up to his again.

"The hospital is expecting you," Frankie told Ilke.

She nodded and Nate reached to open the door for her, only realizing as she went through ahead of him and moved beyond his touch that his hand had automatically set itself in the middle of her back. He wanted to pull her in close, as if that could somehow protect all three of them from what was happening.

Walking across the parking lot was like walking through molasses. His feet felt heavy and sticky. He couldn't think a clear thought. He opened the door for her and set the pads on the seat, then helped her into it.

"Are you in pain?" he asked as he got in on his side.

"They gave me something." Her voice was disembodied. "It was your night with your son. I didn't realize. I shouldn't have asked you to take me."

"Of course, you should." The sunshine, dipping toward the peaks of the mountains because it was late in the afternoon, cut straight between his

eyes, sharp as a migraine.

“Frankie knows your ex-wife?”

“That’s who Wanda lives with.”

“Oh. I saw her today.” Her voice sounded disembodied. “Aiden was at the playground with some other children. All the kids seemed to like her. They were having fun.”

“She runs the local preschool. She asked to keep him late today, so she could take him to the festival.”

Their child would never go to festivals. He swallowed.

“Did something happen? Did you slip or something?”

“No.” Her voice seemed to come from really far away, like she was lost in a house of mirrors. “It just stopped.”

“What did?”

“The pregnancy. I realized it this morning, as we were driving in here. I didn’t feel pregnant anymore. Then the bleeding started.”

That sounded bad. Hopeless bad.

He took his hand off the wheel and reached to cover hers. For a minute, her loose fist remained lifeless under his. Then slowly, she unfurled until her palm was under his and her fingers curled to hold on to his.

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THIS WAS THE worst day of his life.

They didn’t speak again until they reached the hospital. It was a small relief to be seen so quickly, but ultimately cruel to have their hopes dashed so quickly.

“Do you want me to come in with you?”

“Do you want to?”

“I do.”

She nodded permission and disappeared to change into a gown.

He remembered how much anticipation and excitement he had felt seeing the ghostly shape of Aiden inside Wanda’s womb. The astonishing magic of seeing his tiny heartbeat fluttering.

Today, that same procedure was a dreadful thing. The glow inside the darkened room was cold and gray, the stillness soul-shattering.

After a brief consultation, Ilke opted for a procedure that took about ten minutes. He sat with her afterward as she lay quiet in the recovery bed, only the blink of her lashes telling him she was conscious and alive.

He might have thought she was at peace with all of this except she clung to his hand again, fingers cold but gripping firm. She swallowed convulsively a few times. He was surprised she didn't cry. His own eyes were hot, but he just ran his thumb along the bumps of her knuckles, trying not to feel.

When she was discharged, they drove the two hours back to the lodge in dense silence.

He parked in the staff lot and came around to open her door. She was already sliding to the ground. "You should have picked up Aiden. Now you'll have to go back."

"Wanda is keeping him. I wasn't sure how long we'd be."

"Oh. I'm sorry."

He followed her into the lodge through the kitchen entrance. They went up the back stairs and her room came up before his.

"What are you doing?" she asked as he followed her into it.

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He closed the door and searched her pale, blank expression. "I don't think you should be alone." *He* didn't want to be alone. That was the naked truth.

"I'M FINE," ILKE insisted, skimming off her jacket and throwing it on the foot of the bed. "It's for the best, don't you think?" She was shaking the way she did when she had had a fall that had scared her. Fine trembles originated in her organs and left the rest of her quivering like a dry leaf.

"No."

She looked at him, unable to process that response. Any of this. Through her whole life, she had felt some kind of pain every single day and ignored it. Whether it was disappointment in herself for not performing to perfection, or the ache of taxed muscles, sore feet, or cold air in her lungs, or even old psychic scars of exploitation and abandonment, she simply blocked it out.

This, however, was fresh and raw and completely unexpected. These last three weeks, as she had looked into the future, she hadn't known what it held for her, but she had known that *she* would hold a *baby*.

That had scared the hell out of her, but it had also held a strange draw. She hadn't just warmed to see Nate with his son and think of him bestowing that affection on their baby. She had begun to see herself embracing a little body and seeing a round face grin up at her with something she barely understood—unconditional love.

Now that was gone. All that was left was a sensation of such grave emptiness she could hardly breathe.

Nate was standing there as if he expected something from her, but she had nothing. In fact, as she contemplated that she had failed to win a race, failed to win a man, and failed to carry her baby to term, she realized that she *was* nothing.

The shivering inside her grew worse.

"I keep thinking it's my fault." The ache in her throat spread to her chest and cheeks, making her feel compressed and stretched at once. The pain was suffocating. Her eyes stung unbearably. Even her ears felt plugged with pressure. "If I hadn't been so ambivalent, maybe it would have been okay."

Virtualventures

"I thought it was going to be—" His voice broke, which fractured a huge crack behind her breastbone.

She lifted her head.

He was looking toward the window. It was curtained against the night. No stars to offer hope, no soothing fall of snow. Not even a glimmer of moonlight, just the harsh glare of the overhead light leaving not even one shadowed corner for pain to hide. His expression was ravaged, his eyes wet.

"I thought it was going to be Aiden's little brother or sister." His voice was choked. "I'm so angry with myself. I should have been grateful from the second you told me." He scraped his sleeve across his eyes.

"Are you crying?"

"Yes. I'm devastated."

"I want to cry, but I don't know how." Her shaking was becoming a terrible shudder, though. Her whole being was flooded with deep grief. As she looked into his tormented eyes, she realized that the hot tickle on her cheek was a tear overflowing from the corner of her own eye. She felt the

drop fall from her chin, and caught it only to stare at her trembling fingers. “I haven’t cried since I was a child.”

“Come here.” He gathered her into his front, inside his open jacket.

She was tall. Her forehead went into the crook of his neck while the size and heat and strength in him shook apart the last of her defenses. As waves of anguish broke over her, through her, she wrapped her arms around his waist and huddled inside the shelter of his jacket, holding on tight.

“I really wanted our baby,” she admitted, and it was like opening a gate. Like she unlatched a door to all the pain she had ever felt in her lifetime. It poured through her afresh, demanding she feel it and acknowledge it and live it.

It was too much, too much. She clung hard as anguish wracked her, making her sob at the massive wrench of it. She had never let go like this and would have come apart at the seams if he hadn’t held her together with strong arms and firm hands.

He only let her go long enough to reach one arm to hit the light, then he stood there in the dark, holding her while she shuddered and keened and muffled her wail against his throat.

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He shook just as hard, breaths choked and labored, saying, “Me too. I wanted it, too.”

The intimacy would have been more than she could bear if not for the fact he shared her pain so exactly. Which made this hurt even worse because she had failed him.

But he held her anyway and that meant everything.

HER ROOM WAS gloomy when she woke. There was light beyond the curtains but they were still closed. She wore her clothes from yesterday and had a dull headache. Her eyes felt gritty as sandpaper.

Nate had tucked her in after a long while, when the tears had run their course and leveled into jagged breaths and sniffles. They’d both needed to retreat after the storm. She’d felt terribly exposed and half relieved when he had cupped her face and kissed her forehead, then told her to get some rest.

“Text me when you wake up. I want to know you’re okay,” he said before walking out.

She rolled to look at the other pillow, telling herself this would only be awkward if he’d slept here. Alone was easier. Better.

She closed her eyes, trying not to think, dimly aware that she would have to make some decisions now, but it all seemed really overwhelming. Those memes about adulting always made her roll her eyes at Millennials, but she had to turn back into a grown-up now.

She didn’t know how in hell to manage it.

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Virtualventures

Chapter Nine

"DUDE," TRIGG SAID Monday morning when he caught up to Nate over breakfast. "What happened? Why'd you leave? Where you been?"

Leave it to Trigg to put him on the spot in a packed dining room.

"Family matter." Nate made the split-second decision to take a grab-and-go breakfast sandwich. The coffeemaker at the base wasn't as good as the espresso bar, but he wasn't as fussy as *some* people.

"Get one of those for me," Rolf said, nodding at Nate's sandwich as he came in and cut the line to set his Thermos cup on the counter.

Rolf was the only person who could get away with that and even so, Lina was quick to remind him, "Punch your card or Glory will—"

"I need a new one. I'll come back for it." He left his used card on the counter and followed Nate out the back.

Virtualventures

Nate had remote-started his truck and it hadn't snowed overnight so he only had to unplug the block heater.

"I have to take this," Rolf said of a call that buzzed his phone as they climbed into the cab. He spoke German all the way to the base, mixing in enough technical language that Nate knew it had something to do with the quad lift they were installing this summer.

"Everything okay?" Nate asked when Rolf hung up.

They were in the three-room trailer by then. Nate finished the last bite of his sandwich and pushed the button on the coffeemaker.

"That's what I wanted to ask you." Rolf stood in the door of his office, stretching one arm against the top of the doorjamb.

Nate had texted Glory from Kalispell. Rolf knew Ilke had lost the baby. He could see it in the watchful way he was behaving.

"I saw you answered a bunch of emails yesterday. You didn't have to," Rolf added.

Nate shrugged. He'd been alone in his room, trying to keep himself from brooding or going to Ilke. They'd cried and it had been cathartic, but

now what? She had said it was a blessing. He presumed she would go back to her regular programming.

"How is she?" Rolf unwrapped his sandwich.

"Wrecked." Nate had been astonished by the depth of her pain. It had transcended his own, which was bone fucking deep.

"Take a few days if you need to."

"I'd rather stay busy. I'm taking Friday and Monday. Grandad's birthday," he reminded Rolf. He was trying to decide if he should invite Ilke to come with him.

"If you're sure."

"Hundred percent."

"Good, because…" And another demanding day started.

Meet me for lunch? Nate texted.

Resting, Ilke sent back.

Dinner? he invited a while later.

Virtualventures

Had a late lunch. It was a lie. She just wanted to be left alone.

He sent her another string of texts before bed, explaining how he was trying to get ahead at the base because he was taking off with his son this coming weekend, to see his family for his grandfather's eightieth birthday.

Text me if you need anything. Let me know how you're doing.

K. I'm fine, she lied, because she needed to put her life back on its rails, but that wasn't anything he could do for her. *She* didn't know how to do it.

Or rather, she did, but couldn't find the energy to start. Or even leave, which she really wanted to do because people here were incredibly intrusive and annoying. Vivien came by with soup and sympathy. "Don't worry about the desk. Just look after yourself right now."

"I will," Ilke lied.

Glory brought her a stack of romance novels and a bottle of wine.

Romance is a lie, Ilke wanted to yell at her. Not everyone found love. It didn't matter how hard you tried to reach your heart's desire. Sometimes life handed you a basket of lemons and they rotted into a blue, furry mess. The end.

“Thanks,” she mumbled, and got rid of her.

The whole week went along like that. Nate even went so far as to invite her to go to Sacramento with him.

I need to organize some things, she prevaricated. She had devolved into a troll who didn’t even bother getting dressed. Why on earth would she want to go to Sacramento and meet his family? Maybe if they had a child together, that would make sense, but they had *nothing*.

Are you going back to Sweden?

Yes, she replied. Soon as she finished staring at the wall with her knees to her chest and the covers pulled over her ears, she would be on her way.

I’ll come say goodbye before I leave.

Please don’t. She pulled the covers right over her head.

He didn’t, and she hated him for that. Hated the whole fucking world.

MARVIN HAD A busy week and an even busier weekend, not taking a breath until the latest group of telemark skiers had checked out on Monday morning. Even then, he still had paperwork to sign, orders to prepare, and a bar to run—not that anyone was in here looking thirsty. The lounge was empty, which was a blessing when he was playing catch-up.

Virtualventures

He set himself up on a stool at the end of the bar, opened his folder and tablet, then glanced into his notebook for the step-by-step instructions he’d been given by Yolanda, the consulting accountant Rolf had hired. She was a plump, middle-aged, high-energy woman with a self-proclaimed “fetish for order.” She was dividing her time between the lodge and the base, setting up parallel systems and helping with hiring so both teams would be ready and able to work together when the resort came online this fall.

Marvin hadn’t liked paying someone to bully him into change. There were plenty willing to do that for free. Glory sided with Rolf in almost everything these days and Vivien was so annoyingly capable of talking him into things. *Just meet with her,* had turned into, *You can’t do everything yourself so stop trying to*.

Then Yolanda had schmoozed a schmoozer and one week in, Marvin was privately thinking she might be worth every penny he had agreed to

pay toward her fee.

“Yolanda just texted me,” Vivien said as she entered the empty lounge.

The way her voice and sudden appearance could make his blood jangle made him feel like a schoolboy. *That* was why he blushed nearly every time he saw her these days, he told himself. It wasn’t attraction, for God’s sake. He found her intrusive, bossy, and superior.

Her words penetrated and he frowned in dread. Yolanda was actually willing to take time to show him things. He wasn’t losing her already, was he?

“About?” he prompted.

“She found a place to rent short-term in Haven so she doesn’t need a room. She’d rather be in town so her daughter can go to school there.”

“Oh. Of course.” He sipped the beer he had poured for himself. “You scared me.”

“Sweet on her, are you?” Vivien helped herself to a glass of wine, rings flashing, eyeliner accentuating the way she slid him a sharp glance.

This woman disconcerted him on so many levels and he didn’t even *have* levels. But she spoke for Rolf—which really grabbed Marvin by the short and curlies—and had a better grasp of business dealings than he did. She was also rich and pithy about the lodge, as if it was beneath her. Now she was suggesting he had a thing for the woman she had insisted he hire and work with? All of it put him on his back foot.

Virtualventures

“Seems more in Trigg’s age bracket,” he retorted.

Her elegant brows lifted. “She’s forty-three.”

“I’m pushing sixty.”

“When were you born?”

“Sixty-one.”

“You’re only a year older than me and I am nowhere *near* sixty,” Vivien informed haughtily. “You’re always talking about how old you are. Stop it. We’re barely middle-aged.”

He chuckled, surprised he’d got a rise out of her, and sipped again. “You don’t look a day over forty. I mean that.”

She gave a little, “*Hmmph*,” but her mouth softened. Her gaze slid toward him again. “She’s working out, though?”

“Who?”

“Yolanda?”

“Please don’t gloat, Vivien.”

She set down her glass. “I’m not. I’m trying to help you. I want to know that I *am* helping.”

If he didn’t know better, he would think she sounded hurt.

“Of course, you’re helping,” he said. “Yolanda wants to make all these changes, which I hate, but she’s willing to show me how to adapt, so you were right, if you want to hear it. Hiring her was a good thing.”

“I’m not doing it so I can say, ‘I’m right.’ I want you to succeed, Marvin. We all do.”

“I know.” He frowned at the bills in front of him with Ilke’s initials indicating they’d been checked. Things were ticking along, but he was a little wistful for last year, when Glory had been scribbling on everything. She’d done it resentfully, sure, but at least they’d been a partnership. “I just wish Glory had wanted this as well.”

“We don’t have them so they’ll live our lives. They have to live their own,” she said gently.

“I know. But you must have felt something like this with the boys. Did they gravitate to your husband after a certain age?”

VirtualVentures

“Oh, my situation was different. Rolf was so angry with all of us, he gravitated to the yetis and disappeared into the snow.”

Marvin chuckled. So that was what had happened to his daughter. She’d been kidnapped by a yeti.

“Oskar wasn’t a hands-on father. It was all I could do to get him to watch the boys compete. He loved them, was terribly proud of them, but he was a workaholic. Whether she realizes it or not, Glory is really lucky that you’ve always wanted to spend time with her.”

He felt himself blushing again, responding to her praise like a damned orphan finally getting a warm meal.

“I think—” He cleared his throat and shook his head. “Forget it.”

“What?”

“Sometimes I think I put too much on her. My marriage was not…” He picked up his beer to wet his dry throat. He shouldn’t have started this, but he was here now and forced himself to finish his confession.

“Kathleen and I were like roommates. You want to talk about a workaholic. She was obsessive when it came to her writing. The only way

Glory got into the door of her office was by working for her. I'm glad that she had that. I am."

He glanced toward the entrance of the lounge, ensuring his daughter wasn't sneaking up to hear him criticize her mother.

"But in the early days, Glory was as disenfranchised as I was. We needed each other. I wasn't about to look elsewhere for companionship. I didn't want a divorce. I wanted to be married. But ours wasn't a great marriage. You kind of let hope carry you along, thinking it will improve, and suddenly two decades have gone by and your wife is sick and… This is my first one, I swear." He indicated his half-finished beer, truly embarrassed now. "Something about sitting on this side of the bar, I suppose."

"No, it's fine. I guess I imagined that your life must have been like one of her books, that you were living happily ever after."

"No," he said disdainfully. "Nothing like that."

"I'm sorry." She touched his wrist and her gaze was so full of compassion, it bordered on pity.

He carefully drew his arm away. "In any case, I think I put too much pressure on Glory to fill the gap. I wanted her to want this." He let his glance flicker around to the beams and old-world décor that filled him with such pride. "At least she's here. And happy. But it feels very much as though I will be giving her away with the wedding." His voice cracked and he grew misty.

Virtual Ventures

"Oh, Marvin." Vivien rushed around the end of the bar and threw her arm around him, pressing her breast into his shoulder and surrounding him in her warm, floral fragrance. "It will be fine. I promise."

"Please," he protested, completely embarrassed, especially because his lap was springing to life.

"Oh shit. Sorry—!"

VIVIEN JERKED FROM embracing Marvin to see Nate's back retreating from the lounge.

“Oh, Nate! Come back. I need to speak to you.” She was flustered, though, having just thrown herself across Marvin like she was taking a bullet for him.

But a man in touch with his emotions? She’d been a moth to a flame.

Nate reluctantly came back, gaze averted to the ceiling, hands in his pockets. “I just got back. Thought I’d grab a beer and unpack. I didn’t mean __”

“That was a friendly hug. We’re commiserating on growing old. Forget it.” She didn’t look at Marvin to see how he was reacting.

Nate’s chin-dip assured her he would scrub the incident from his mind as quickly and thoroughly as possible.

“Did you have a nice trip? How was the party?” she hurried to ask.

“Good. Typical trip. Ate too much.” He slapped his flat belly. “Aiden got into the last of the cake first thing this morning, had a nuclear meltdown on the plane. We’re probably barred for life. What did you want to talk to me about?”

Right. It was a delicate matter.

“Let me show you.” She drew him away from Marvin, toward the doors to the patio. “I know this isn’t your area of expertise, but we can’t fit everyone inside the dining room or lounge for the wedding dinner. We’ll need to do it outdoors. Can you organize equipment to clear a space by the pond for a tent? Otherwise, it will be the front parking lot.”

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It was pitch black outside and cold as a witch’s tit, but she opened the door and dragged him onto the patio. It was kept shoveled, but they both halted under the overhang.

“Um, sure,” he said as the door slammed behind them. “But we don’t need to be out here. We can talk about it in the morning.” He folded his arms, breath fogging in the light cast from inside the lounge.

“I’m worried about Ilke,” she stated bluntly. “She barely leaves her room.”

“She’s still here?” He sounded shocked. “She told me she was going back to Sweden. I thought she must be traveling and that’s why she wasn’t answering my texts.”

“No.” She hugged herself, shuddering against the wind that tried to cut her in half. “I tried to coax her out and she said she might go to her

mother's, but—" Vivien had put the kibosh on that. "I told her to stay here, but I don't think she's eating the food I bring her."

"Oh, fuck," he breathed, adding a muttered, "Sorry."

"I haven't had a chance to say how sorry I am, Nate." She squeezed his wrist. "I'm sure some amount of depression is normal, but—"

Marvin swung the lounge door open to give them a look that suggested they needed their heads examined. "What are you two doing out here? You'll catch your death."

Vivien shot into the lounge, shivering convulsively.

Nate followed, expression grave. "Leave that with me," he said. "I'll see what I can do."

"Thank you." As she watched him go, something warm draped over her shoulders. Marvin's cardigan. It was a scratchy wool that held the scent of his aftershave and the heat of his body. The weight was comforting, the old-fashioned gesture more so.

"I've already talked to Rolf about buying a tent," Marvin said with a hint of affront. "We'll need one for future weddings. You should have asked me first."

Virtualventures

Oh, this man and his extremely tender pride. She wanted to hug him all over again.

Which was so disconcerting, she blushed and made an excuse about going to her room, completely forgetting to give him back his cardigan.

THE KNOCK ON her door didn't sound like Vivien's gentle request for entry or the polite inquiry from housekeeping. It was way too early for either of them, anyway.

Ilke rolled onto her back and stared at the ceiling.

"Ilke," Nate said, voice a command.

She ignored him, just as she had his text last night that had read, "You up?" and the one from this morning that said, "Meet me for breakfast."

"Speak. Give me proof of life, at least," he said through the door.

"I'm sleeping."

"Let me in."

“I’m sleeping,” she insisted.

A key sounded in the lock.

She lifted her head off the pillow. “How—You can’t do that.” She sat up and pulled the covers up to her chin.

He flashed her a dark glare of frustrated impatience. Then he scanned her room, the one housekeeping hadn’t been allowed to enter. She hadn’t put her dishes in the hallway lately so they were littering the floor and night table. Laundry was something else she was putting off, which was why she was in leggings and a T-shirt under the blankets. Her pajamas were on the floor with her jeans and all the underwear she owned.

He sighed, gaze snagging on the stack of clean towels she’d taken from housekeeping, but hadn’t used because she hadn’t showered in a couple of days. Maybe more than that.

She had been convinced it didn’t matter, but now she was really embarrassed of her greasy hair and body odor.

“Get out,” she said.

“Get dressed.”

“Why?”

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“I want to show you something.”

“What?”

“Anything but these four walls.”

“I’m good.”

“You are *not* good.” He dipped his chin, brows stern.

She scratched the side of her face, shoving a hank of hair behind her ear. “There’s nothing wrong with binge-watching sitcoms for a few days. It’s called ‘self-care.’”

“Is that what this is?” His lip curled as he glanced into a bowl that she may or may not have tasted. She definitely couldn’t remember what it contained.

“Okay, it’s a pity-party.” She knew she was a mess. Every time she tried to pull herself together, she grew so tired and overwhelmed and scared, she couldn’t face any of it. “I’m allowed one.”

“You are,” he agreed. “But the police just arrived and the party’s over. Get dressed.”

“Nate—”

“Ilke,” he said in a voice halfway between angry and tender. If she didn’t know better, she would call it tough love. Whatever it was, it made her heart tremble like a brittle leaf under the heat of the sun. “This sucks. Wall-to-wall sucks. But there is no other way through it except through it. You get back to whatever you were doing before it happened, even if you’re only going through the motions.”

She swallowed. “I can’t.” Saying it aloud made her throat burn. No one was going to want her. The thing that she’d been doing, the thing that she loved, was nothing but closed doors. It didn’t want her.

“Do you need me to help you?” The steel underlying his tone made it more threat than kindness.

Her lips wouldn’t stay steady. “You can’t.” She hugged her knees, dropping her forehead onto them, hiding from the wasteland that her life had become.

He dragged at the blankets, jostling her into lifting her head. Then he took her by the arm.

“Don’t.” She shook him off. Part of it was reflex. She didn’t let men touch her unless she wanted them too, but Nate was different. He broke all her rules. He was the *exception* to them, and she hadn’t found a way to deal with that. All she knew was that rather than being repelled by his touch, which was why she normally would have jerked away from a man, today it was the other way around. “I’m disgusting.”

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“Shower, then. I’ll wait.”

She saw nothing but patient determination in his gaze. This was probably how he looked when Aiden kicked up a fuss. If she had had it in her, she might have tried a tantrum, but there was nothing in her. No fight. She sighed, but it was more of a sob, then she climbed from the bed.

She didn’t want to draw this out. She skipped the shower and washed her face, brushed her teeth, then combed her stringy hair off her face.

Walking out to the bedroom, she saw he’d stacked the dishes and set them outside the door and gathered her laundry into a pile. She dug through it for her hat, to hide her hair, then pulled on dirty socks and zipped a hoodie over her T-shirt without bothering with a bra.

“I’m not hungry,” she informed him. Maybe she was. Mostly she was starving for hope and those cupboards were bare.

“Jeans,” he said. “And boots.”

She sighed, feeling persecuted. Hadn't life kicked her around enough lately? She didn't even bother taking off her leggings, just stepped into her rumpled jeans and let him know with a look how beleaguered she felt.

He nodded as if to say, "That'll do," and took her jacket off the back of the door then held the door open.

She hesitated. He didn't understand. Leaving this room wouldn't help. She had *nothing*.

He touched her shoulder, lightly pushing her across the threshold, then crowded her all the way out, closing the door behind them. Catching her hand, he dragged her toward the stairs and down them.

She shook off his hold, finding it too disturbing. Too easy to cling to when she'd been feeling neglected by him and rejected by their baby and dejected by the sport that had always been her salvation.

He paused at the lobby desk where Paula was covering for Marvin. Vivien had told Ilke she wasn't needed, which Ilke knew deep down was meant as a kindness. Vivien was giving her time to grieve and recover, but the net result had been one more rebuff.

"Thanks, Paula." Nate handed in the key he'd stolen. "Can you see that Ilke's room gets some attention this morning?"

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"Of course." She followed them with a curious gaze as Nate led Ilke down the hall and into the kitchen where he asked if they had any leftover breakfast sandwiches.

"I'm not hungry," Ilke insisted, but he nodded agreement that a piece of sourdough cut in half and filled with scrambled eggs and a slice of cheddar was fine.

Nate handed it to her and said, "Eat."

She munched on what tasted like sawdust as she followed him outside.

It was a stunning day of scudding clouds against a true-blue sky, incredibly inviting, but an April Fool's joke, because it might be above freezing, but that was an arctic outflow wind. It was so cold, her nostrils stung and her eyes watered. Her fingers started to hurt.

"Need this?" He held her jacket for her and she threaded one arm in, then the other, moving the sandwich back and forth. She dug for the gloves she usually left in her jacket pockets.

"Be right back," he said, and disappeared down the stairs into the lodge basement. He was gone long enough for her to throw away the rest of her

sandwich and put on her gloves, then zip her jacket.

He came out with two pairs of snowshoes. Not old-fashioned tennis rackets, but sleek modern red things with sharp, bright green teeth on the underside.

“What are you going to do? Walk me into the woods and leave me there to find my way back?” She should have kept that sandwich for a trail of crumbs. Although, getting lost and dying in the snow sounded fantastic. She wished she had thought of it sooner.

He led her across the parking lot to where the snowmobiles were parked inside a locked enclosure. He started the sled and muscled it out, then locked up and sat down again. He looked at her.

She sighed and threw her leg over, nestling in behind him. When he started forward, she instinctively clung around his waist.

She had held on to this strapping man a week ago while her world caved in. Then he’d put her to bed and the void inside her had been growing bigger and bigger every day. The expanse of that nothing had her holding tighter and tighter as he circled the pond and climbed the slope behind it, until they were on the edge of the resort’s main bowl. She glanced back to see Blue Spruce Lodge nestled against the pond tracked by deer and cross-country ski tracks. It made such a quaint picture, she took a mental photograph before it was out of sight.

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He kept climbing, stopping at an old lift shed. He parked at the bottom of the stairs and kicked through the snow on the steps, then opened the little cage that protected the camera that was mounted under a corner against the stilts. He exchanged the battery and closed it back in again.

Before she could decide if she was supposed to join him, he was back and taking off again. He went through the trees where the lack of sunlight made it extra cold. She huddled even closer against him to stay warm. He paused at the base of a tree and stood on the seat to do that camera, then brushed the snow off the seat and sat again.

As they came out above the tree line, she rested her head between his shoulder blades, using him as a buffer against the wind while gazing on the view opening across the horizon.

He ran along a ledge, eventually stopping near a neon-orange flag. He turned off the engine and the silence was absolute. Even the wind seemed to

let up so it was utterly still and peaceful. Reluctantly, she released him and sat up.

“I stopped here when I came with the heli-group in January.” She recognized the view of peaks jutting above pure wilderness, wisps of clouds caught like cotton in distant valleys. “I thought it looked like heaven.”

Her heart jerked inside her chest. She pushed back so she wasn’t touching him at all. She refused to cry again. That’s pretty much all she’d done this week. He was right. Enough was enough.

He indicated the snowshoes in the cargo basket. She handed him the bigger pair and they worked in silence to tighten the buckles over their boots.

“That flag’s planted about ten feet this side of the cliff’s edge. The rest is cornice. Stay back.”

She nodded and walked with him as far as they dared. They looked out on the view that was bleak and stunning and eternal.

“It’s okay that you’re blue,” he said, setting his arm around her. “I’m barely keeping it together myself.” His hand pressed in at her waist as he looked down at her. “But you can’t let it eat you alive.”

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“I know.” Her chest ached with cold air and despondency. “But the only thing I’ve ever wanted that bad, or loved even close to that much, was skiing.” And even that was getting further and further away. “Wanting to go back to racing seems like a betrayal. Like I don’t care that I lost the baby. But I don’t know how to cope any other way and even at that—” Despite her best efforts, her voice caught.

“Ah, babe.” His arm tightened. He used a gloved finger to brush at her cheek. “Don’t cry. You’ll chap.”

The sting on her face barely penetrated past the ache in her heart.

“I’m trying not to. I know you’re right. I have to make myself move forward, but…” It all seemed so big and impossible. Hopeless.

“One step at a time. That’s all you need to do,” he promised, then bent and touched his lips to the half-numb skin on her cheekbone. It was a tender touch that was so sweet, she closed her eyes to savor it.

His mouth moved to her temple in another comforting kiss. He drew her a little closer and pressed his cheek to hers, warming her skin. It wasn’t a sexual embrace, but as she slid her arms around his waist, hugging him

back, her face tilted up, seeking more contact. More affection and soothing touch.

His head only had to turn a little and his mouth touched hers.

For a second, that's all it was, the graze of lips. Then he settled with a little more pressure, testing. Achingly gentle. Comforting. Healing.

It was the balm she needed. They rubbed their cold lips together like that a moment, warming, soothing. Then a hint of something more crept in. Something she barely tasted long enough to identify before he lifted away, but only so he could look into the eyes she blinked open.

His eyes were dark and depthless and filled with turmoil. Conflict and pain and hunger. Desire firmly held in check.

It was like looking directly into the uncertainty and longing that gripped her. In her head, she was thinking it was the wrong thing to do, but her soul yearned. She wanted to touch his. Needed to. It was the only way to close up the rends and tears in hers.

A helpless noise escaped her throat. She lifted her parted lips in offering.

His mouth crashed onto hers, this time open and without restraint. He kissed her deeply. Thoroughly. Ravenously. Like he'd been waiting eons to do it. His mouth lifted and returned, then did it again and again, as though he kept trying to pull away and couldn't resist coming back.

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The greedy crush and pull of his lips filled up the chasm inside her. She reveled in the sweep of his tongue and the hard dig of his fingers through her jacket and into her back. She welcomed each savage rake of his mouth against hers with a clinging draw of her own, wanting to keep him kissing her forever. He was burning away all the hurt with delicious streaks of pleasure, building a bonfire inside her that might keep her alive after all. Light was pushing back the darkness. She wanted to meld herself into him through their insulated clothes and all the way inside his skin. She took a step to get as close as possible—

—and remembered too late that they wore snowshoes.

Hers went onto his as she pressed her weight into him. His shoe caught under hers as he tried to catch his balance, but that only threw off *her* balance. With a surprised cry, they began to tip, couldn't untangle their feet, and went down in a tangle of kicking legs with nothing to grab on to but each other.

The snow was so deep and dry, they plunged into a well that collapsed on top of them, half burying them as they landed. They both lay there in surprise, blanketed by clumps of snow, staring at the sky through powdered lashes.

Hello, old friend, Ilke thought as she brushed the snow off her face and looked at the high, white walls around them. She inhaled the sweet, frosted scent and licked her lips, tasting tiny, pristine flakes that melted on contact with her tongue. Like sugar, but cold and clean and pure.

“This is going to be fun,” Nate said, still not moving.

“Maybe the baby wanted us to make an angel.” She rolled away enough to stretch out her arm and arc it through the snow, which was more like swimming than sweeping. Like one of those underground creatures that left a trail of disturbed soil on the surface without actually breaking through. Moving her feet was mostly impossible. Her snowshoe was caked. She gave it a try only to feel immediate resistance, like pressing her leg against concrete.

She looked at Nate. He wore a bemused expression.

“What?” she said sheepishly. “I like playing in snow.” She tried to sit up, but she was turtled on her back. This *was* going to be fun.

Virtualventures

“Oh!” His hands got under her shoulder, then he cupped her butt and shoved her onto her feet.

She staggered a little, blinking at the snow that cascaded off her hat and into her face. She brushed off her clothes and shook each of her shoes.

She grinned at him sitting there in their deep depression, then offered a hand.

He dropped back and gave a haphazard sweep of his arm through the snow first, forming the other wing on the angel before he sat up again and accepted her hand.

She crouched low, pulling, pulling… Oh, shoot. He was going to drag her back in—

He sprang onto his feet beside her and they both gave a little, “Ha!” of achievement.

He took off his hat and slapped it against his thigh while she brushed the snow from his shoulders and back.

He put his hat back on and they looked at the impression they’d left in the snow. The lump returned to her throat. The angel was messy and broken

and obviously the product of two people who'd landed there by accident.

"I never even wanted a baby. I don't know why I wanted ours so bad or why it's killing me that I lost it. I think I just wanted…"

He looked at her, waiting. Maybe the first person in the world who had ever looked at her with that much desire to understand her deepest agony.

She swallowed and shrugged, self-conscious. "Someone."

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Chapter Ten

NATE'S LUNGS BURNED as he watched her scuff back to the snowmobile in steps that kicked up little clouds of snow.

He should have brought her to Sacramento with him. She had made it sound like she preferred to go back to Sweden. He hadn't been able to force her to come, but he had thought about her constantly, even telling his grandmother what had happened. She had known something was weighing on him and it had felt good to talk about it. He hadn't been able to articulate why he was so disappointed she was going back to Sweden though.

Then Vivien had astounded him by revealing that Ilke was still here. His heart had done a few somersaults of mixed emotion. She wasn't gone, but she wasn't even leaving her room. Vivien had been right to be worried. And yes, some depression was to be expected. Her hormones had to be out of whack, too, not that he was stupid enough to say anything to that effect to any woman.

VirtualAventures

Still, he'd seen the beginning of a spiral into despair in that room full of unchanged bedsheets and caked-on dishes.

Each time he had to face how shattered she was, he realized there were depths in her he hadn't even suspected. She was like a tree covered in freezing rain and frosted snow. Pretty as hell to look at, but easily mistaken for dead beneath the glittering shell. Instead, there was a mysterious stir deep in her center that he thought might flourish if given the chance. Offered enough light and warmth.

The only thing I've ever wanted that bad, or loved even close to that much, was skiing.

Those words had made his heart swerve. He loved his job, but it was a distant second to his family. Love wasn't a comfortable emotion, though. He still felt a form of it for his ex-wife and almost wished he didn't because that relationship was nothing but potholes. One of the reasons he'd held Ilke off while she was pregnant was because he didn't want her in his heart,

bending it when their unborn baby was already an easy handle to grip and twist.

Her heart wasn't as stiff and narrow as he had imagined, though. In fact, he was coming to see it as broad, but so very thin-skinned. Easily torn open. He feared this miscarriage might leave that hollow look in her eyes forever.

He followed her and they sat on the seat of the sled, side by side, facing opposite directions as they took off their snowshoes.

"Why did you say you were going back to Sweden?"

She paused briefly, then shrugged. "Because that's where I should be, I guess. The problem is, I withdrew from everything. All my training camps and clubs. I thought I'd be out for a year." She twisted to secure her snowshoes into the cargo basket, then put her gloves back on. "It's an expensive sport at the best of times and I missed out on a bunch of money because I didn't place, so it's not like I can just jump back in. The group I usually travel with has filled my spot anyway and my coach—" She made a face.

"What?"

She shrugged. "I told him what happened and he said I should have felt like I could tell him what was going on. He said I didn't trust him and I guess that's true. So we've parted ways."

VirtualVentures

Nate took in that her life had been fully dismantled. No wonder she was hiding in her room. "What are you going to do?"

"Plan A was to binge-watch garbage television while starving to death. I don't have a Plan B." She flicked him a baleful look.

"I have a reputation for being a killjoy." He touched the patch on the shoulder of his jacket. The top one read, 'Project Manager,' but beneath it was another that read, 'Health and Safety Officer.'

"Are those, like, merit badges? Were you a Boy Scout?"

"I was."

"Did you get all their badges?"

"They have over a hundred." He had a streak of OCD, but it wasn't that wide. "I got a couple dozen."

"For?"

He shook his head. "Can't remember. Animal studies, I think? That interested me." He closed one eye. "Definitely one for home repair. Got that

by helping my uncle retrofit the house for my grandfather's wheelchair. Survival, shooting, things like that."

"Why is your grandfather in a wheelchair?"

"Accident at work. He operated heavy machinery for the city. That's where I got my bug for construction. Depending where he was working, sometimes I'd walk over and wait for him after school, watch him work. One day an embankment gave way. I wasn't there. His excavator tipped and crushed his pelvis. He never got his legs back."

"That's awful."

"It was a rough year. He's okay now. I mean, still in a wheelchair, but fine other than that."

"And he turned eighty this weekend? Are they your mom's parents or your dad's?"

"Mom's." He leaned his elbows on his knees, bemused by her sudden interest. "They're pretty much my parents. I never knew my father or his family. I was a teen pregnancy and he went into the service straight out of high school, died in combat. Mom was killed when I was five."

"That's sad. What happened? I'm sorry, is that too nosy?"

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"She went to a protest march during the L.A. riots. Got hit by a stray bullet."

"Oh. I'm really sorry."

"Me, too. And you're not being too nosy, but you're shivering." Her lips were turning blue and he could feel the damp starting to penetrate his clothes from the snow they'd fallen into. "We should go."

She shifted so she straddled the seat, then hitched herself backward, making room for him to settle in front of her. Her arms curled around him and her splayed legs came alongside the outsides of his thighs. Her crotch nestled against his butt, warming him by stoking a heat that started in his balls and radiated outward.

"Thank you for bringing me here," she said, folding her gloved hands across his stomach. "Now, when I think about the baby, I'll picture this and know it's in a good place."

What was she trying to do to him? Break him wide open? He covered her hands with his own for one second, heart lodged sideways in his throat. Then he wordlessly started the engine and steered them down to the other two cameras he had to change out.

When he got to the base, he stopped outside the office trailer and looked over his shoulder. “Do you know how to drive one of these? Can you get yourself back to the lodge?”

She gave him a pithy look.

“That’s what I thought.” He bit back a grin and climbed off.

She slid up and set her hands on the grips.

“You want to work out before or after dinner?” he asked.

“What are you saying?” Her gaze came up from reading the gauges, eyes narrowed with enough insult he knew she was rallying.

He grinned. “I’m saying I haven’t worked out in a week. Thought you might be ready to hit the gym, too. That’s all.”

Her expression turned sheepish, but kind of defensive, too. “I’ll shower when I get back. Eat. Ask Vivien if she has some work for me. You don’t have to worry about me.”

Oh, it was far too late for that. “I’ll text you when I’m finished here, see what you want to do.”

“Suit yourself.” She released the hand brake and started forward, picked up speed fast and fishtailed.

Virtualventures

She caught back control as quickly as his heart leapt, then skidded again before his pulse had a chance to settle.

She was doing it on purpose, he realized. She did like to play in the snow, the little nutcase.

He climbed the half-dozen steps onto the porch, still grinning as he stomped his feet, and stepped into the stuffy interior of the base office.

“What the actual fuck was that?” Trigg asked from his desk beside the window.

“Check the footage on camera four. There were some tracks around it that looked like lynx. Quinn might want it for the documentary.”

“Pretty sure there’s a cougar joke there, but I’m going to resist. Since when are you and Ilke a thing?”

Nate hung his coat, planning to ignore Trigg unless he went for a pussy joke, at which point he’d put him through the window.

“Come on, tiger,” Trigg coaxed, then shrugged off the pun with a cocky grin. “Couldn’t keep that one in.”

Nate shook his head. He liked Trigg, but that man pushed and pushed. That’s why he was a champion—Nate understood that, but it still made

Trigg a giant pain in the ass sometimes. He completely understood how Rolf had lost patience a decade ago.

"How is she even still here? I haven't seen her all week." Trigg waited, then, when Nate didn't respond, goaded, "Dude."

"What?"

"The witness is being combative," Trigg said, glancing toward Rolf, then making a surly face as he remembered they were on each other's shit list.

Rolf was giving zero fucks about anything his brother said, not even lifting his head from whatever he was reading.

"Do I have to ask Glory how long you've been boning Ilke?" Trigg's hand went to his phone.

Nate pulled out his chair and clicked on his computer. "Remember that time with the thing that I promised I'd never talk about in front of your brother?" He was lying. There was no 'thing.' He was fucking with Trigg because he wanted to shut him up. "It's like that."

"What thing?" Rolf said promptly.

"What thing?" Trigg scowled. "There's no thing."

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"Trigg," Rolf's head came up along with his hackles.

"Are you kidding me?" Trigg said to Nate, then twisted to look at his brother. "I'm not twelve. I don't hide shit from you. He's throwing me under an imaginary bus because he doesn't want to talk about Ilke."

"Then shut up and leave him alone. Learn to read a fucking room."

Trigg sent Nate a disgruntled look, muttering, "Asshole."

It was a toss-up if he meant Nate, Rolf, or the both of them. Either way, Trigg left him alone. Hashtag winning.

MARVIN HAD RENTED a tuxedo for his own wedding and could barely fathom buying one outright for his daughter's. When would he ever wear it again?

Nevertheless, he found himself herded into one of two rooms Vivien had appropriated for the tailor and his assistant. They'd flown in from *Milan*, for God's sake. Apparently, Giovanni made all the Johansson suits. Vivien's husband had been buried in one of his finest.

Marvin privately thought the tailor must have started out as a migrant fruit-picker, the way he was so eager to get up in the crook of the tree and fondle the plums and banana. He couldn't say he hadn't been warned, though. Trigg had said, "He won't even buy you dinner first."

Marvin only flinched a little, but that was hardly the most awkward and uncomfortable part. As they finished up, he broached the subject of cost and was told it was taken care of.

No. He would not allow his future son-in-law to buy his clothes. He went to find Vivien, who was in the next room, sifting through fabric samples and pocket squares, setting them on folded shirts in a variety of pastels, some with contrasting collars, others holding a subtle stripe.

"I was just going to ask you to come see me before you go back downstairs. Glory said you want to order a few extra suits along with the tuxedo."

"Yes, about the tux. Giovanni said Rolf is paying for it? I can't allow that. I'm not an usher. I'm the father of the bride."

"I'll let you work that out with Rolf," she said absently, critical eye on the swatch of crimson silk she held near his cheek. "You seem to favor browns and beige. I think you should try at least one suit in charcoal. Definitely a navy."

Virtualventures

"Not necessary, Vivien. I was going to run into Kalispell one of these days and pick up a few things at the department store. I just haven't found the time—"

"Marvin." She took hold of his upper arms. For one heart-stopping second, he thought she was going to hug him again. "You are the owner of a luxury chalet at a prestigious resort. You've seen the guest list. This is your first impression with your future clientele. Most of them will be here all week. You can't wear an off-the-rack sport coat made in Bangladesh with a big box label. It's time to dress the part. What size is that shirt you're wearing?"

She gave him a little spin, then made him hunker so she could turn up the back of his collar. Her fingertips tickled against his neck, sending a shiver down his spine. He started to blush.

"I'll see about getting a barber in right before the wedding." Her breath moved the hair by his ears, stimulating him even further.

“There’s one in town. I tried to get a haircut last week, but there were too many people waiting.” He regretted hurrying back here now, but there was always so much to do.

He turned back to her, tugging at his collar under his tie, feeling entirely too warm, certain he looked like he was suffering an asthma attack.

She misunderstood his motion and said, “Oh, yes. Take it off.” She began sorting through the shirts. “Let’s go down a few sizes, see how these fit. Once we have your proper size, Giovanni can send more. I think this stripe would be quite smart on you.”

“It’s pink.” He hesitated to undress. The door to the hall wasn’t even shut all the way.

“Merlot. Oh, don’t be shy, Marvin.” She waved a hand at him and went back to looking at the sizes on the shirts. “This navy stripe? Is that better?”

She was removing pins and not even looking at him. He glanced at the open door and loosened his tie, then flicked open his buttons before dragging his shirt from his pants and shrugging it off.

Vivien shook out the shirt and held it out as she turned with a smile. Her eyes widened and her smile faded.

virtualventures

“What?” He set a hand in the middle of the white pelt across his chest. He’d overheard the young men these days. Manscaping, it was called, and he didn’t know the first thing about how to do it. This was all natural. Offensive?

“You’re really—I mean—” She touched her throat and blushed and turned away. “This one will be too big.” Her gaze slid back to his chest. “I didn’t realize you were quite so trim.”

He dropped his hand to his belly, which had firmed considerably over the last year of working alongside the young folk pulling carpet, shoveling snow, and shifting boxes. He even went down to the gym a couple of mornings a week, finding it improved his sleep.

Something else was firming up regularly and he gave a surreptitious brush of his hand over his fly, trying not to spring a boner.

Vivien handed him the shirt she called ‘merlot’ and stood in front of him while he put it on, lashes batting so she looked about fourteen while he felt about fifteen, awkward and fearful she would notice his stiffy.

“That’s, um… It’s a good fit, don’t you think?” Her hands were all over him like little birds scattering and landing and flitting and swooping,

grazing his shoulder and tugging near his hip, drawing the front closed and bumping into his as he tried to fasten the buttons.

He'd always thought Vivien smelled like something too expensive for words and the scent now filled his head. Her gaze was climbing to his and her cheeks looked soft as baby powder. She licked her lips and he grew a full salute, tall and strong, like it was the first time in his life. His blood pooled so fast and hard behind his fly, he felt light-headed. At the same time, a rush of startling hunger went through him. A weird confidence that made his hand go to her waist while he lowered his head.

"Vivien—"

She pressed into him and lifted her mouth, just as if they'd been coming together like this for a lifetime.

He kissed her. He didn't mean to, but her mouth was right there under his and he just did it. In the back of his mind, he quite expected her to slap him down, but her eyes fluttered closed. She made a little sound as his mouth touched hers like she was succumbing to something. That murmur was music. The way flowers must sound to bees.

A distant noise came to his ears. A footstep maybe and the creak of the door, but he didn't want to stop kissing her to check. This was too enthralling. She was right. They weren't old. Her lips felt plump and sexy, her shape firm and womanly. His whole body caught fire in the way it had back when he'd been full of sap and barely able to grow a whisker. He wanted to hold on to her like this forever.

Virtualventures

When he finally made himself lift his head, there was no one at the door.

Even so, chagrin at hauling her into his embrace struck very belatedly. "I shouldn't have—"

"No, no, I—" She was flushed and sparkly-eyed, fingers touching her hair.

His stomach was full of butterflies, his pulse still in the red zone. They turned away from one another and he gave himself a brief squeeze through his fly. *Good for you, you little son of a bitch*. Who knew he still had *that* in him?

Except now he didn't know what to do with himself except pretend it hadn't happened.

“I, um, this seems perfect.” He fastened the cuff of his shirt and stretched his arm. The shirt pulled at his shoulder, but not uncomfortably. It fit perfectly.

“I agree. And maybe this silver tie?” Her voice was high, striving for normalcy. She held the tie out at the end of her fully extended arm.

He only went as close as he needed to catch it from her fingers, then quickly tied it.

“Oh, double Windsor, Marvin. It’s so much smarter-looking. And look at this lighter gray for the jacket and pants.” She set the swatch across his shoulder.

He moved to the mirror. His face was superimposed on another man’s body, one who was ten years younger and infinitely more stylish. His cheeks had a better color than he’d had in years. His eyes were bright and his pecker still firm.

“I’m going to tell Giovanni you’ll keep all the shirts in that size and he should send ten more. Then I’ll hunt down Trigg. He has to be measured before he leaves tomorrow.”

“Where’s he going?”

Virtualventures

“Meetings about the terrain park, then Whistler for some off-season training.”

“Right, right.”

She smiled and hurried away on flustered feet, causing him a pang of loss, but at least he began to calm the hell down.

NATE DIDN’T SEE Ilke in the lobby and she didn’t answer his knock. He went to his room and texted her. *Work out?*

Did already, she replied promptly.

Dinner? He preferred to sweat, shower, then eat, but he’d make an exception.

Doing my laundry. Someone’s waiting.

It could get pretty cutthroat in there. He’d had his underwear dumped on the floor more than once.

Lemme know when you’re done. I’ll be in the gym.

K.

He changed, then swung by the laundry room on his way, peeking in the window. The machines were mostly reserved for use by housekeeping, which put them at a premium for staff. Ilke was sitting on a washer, nose in a book that had a man's naked chest on the cover.

Her hair was in a ponytail, but clean and combed and glossy. Her bare ankles were crossed. She wore a zipped hoodie over her velvet pants and he would bet nothing underneath, which was cute and sexy at the same time.

In the weeks since she'd arrived so unexpectedly, he'd tried really effing hard to believe whatever attraction he'd felt in January had been a fluke. Then he'd kissed her today and his head had been buzzing ever since. His whole body was still sparking and zinging. That's why he needed to work out, not stand here fantasizing about going in there, pushing her knees apart, and feeling her heels dig into his ass as he ground himself against her.

He shot down the stairs into the basement gym. He'd always been a Y-guy, and still went there when he was visiting family, but he was turning into a snob for this fancy-ass, semi-private facility. It was clean and bright with mirrored walls and a bank of narrow windows along the ceiling that could be opened to offer some fresh air when required—which a gym often did. It had a full complement of Wikinger's best equipment and all the satellite channels on three different televisions.

Virtualventures

Paula and Lina came out of the women's change room, waving at Nate as they left. Trigg was on the treadmill, but straddled the belt and hit the stop button, when he saw him. He muted the replay on the television.

"Thought you'd be getting your Swedish on."

"Thought you'd be packing."

"Yeah, I'm leaving at ugly-dark-thirty." Trigg glanced at the clock. "The tailor took his time giving me a hand job, so I'm running late. Literally. You want this?" He stepped off the tread.

"Nah, I'm—" He didn't bother to explain he was keeping his workout short 'cause he had a date. Sort of. He picked up a rubber strap and used it to give his shoulders a flex to warm them before he started working them.

Trigg moved to the low-row bench and leaned to move a pin in the weights. "But since it's just us girls here, why don't you tell me what's going on with you and the blonde bombshell."

“Your dog doesn’t shove his nose this high up my crotch, you know that?”

“So you admit you’re having sex with her.”

Nate shook his head and hung the strap, moving to grasp the overhead bar for a few pull-ups.

“Dude. For serious.” Trigg leaned his elbows on his splayed thighs. “She had a shitty games. We would all need a kiss and a cuddle after that, but what is she doing? Quitting?”

“Jesus, man.”

Nate dropped onto his feet and hooked his hands on his hips. He was a private person and this was the sort of pain he wouldn’t normally share, but he was still hating himself over not being as happy as he should have been in the first place. Ilke wasn’t the only one fearing bad mojo had caused them to lose that baby.

“She was pregnant, okay? But she lost it. That’s why I ran out that day.” It scraped him raw to say it, but it kind of helped to acknowledge the pain. The loss. He rubbed the back of his neck.

“It was yours?” Trigg’s mouth hung open. “And she was keeping it?”

virtualventures

“Fuck, man.” He dropped his arm. “Yeah she was keeping *my* baby. Fuck you.”

“No, I meant—” Trigg held up a hand. “I’ve never seen her let anything get between her and skiing. When it comes to men, *if* she lets them near her, she’s tap and go.”

Classy.

Nate looked to the ceiling, ignoring the burn in his throat. “You sure you shouldn’t be packing?”

“Is that why she skied like shit? That’s a tough break for both of you.”

“You think? And now you know, so how about you shut up about it.” He reached up and grasped the bar.

“You two are that serious you’re making babies? Since when?”

“Christ, Trigg.” He dropped to his feet again. “Do I ask you about the women you sleep with? It was a slip-up, all right? That shit happens. Maybe take a lesson.”

Trigg scratched his beard, seemed to debate, then said, “I know it does.”

Okay, that was interesting. Nate set his hands on his hips. “Yeah? When did that happen?”

“I was seventeen.”

“Shit. That’s young. What did you do?”

“Shat myself,” Trigg stated with a snort. “Dad had just died. It was right after he bought this place, actually. Wikinger was going in the toilet because the avalanche leveled the resort. Rolf was training for Turin. I couldn’t lay it on Mom. She had enough to deal with. All I knew was that I was *not* ready to be a parent. Mandy was nineteen, wasn’t ready either. She didn’t ask me one way or the other, just told me she wasn’t going to have it. I was relieved when she said it, but soon as I hung up… I don’t know. Even now, I still think about it all the time. I’d have a twelve-year-old.”

Instead you act like one, Nate was supposed to say, but they stayed frozen in the moment, neither moving nor talking while what-ifs swirled around them like autumn leaves in a breeze.

Trigg snapped out of it first. “But I’m not asking you about *women*. I’m asking about Ilke. Her and I go back. I want to know if your intentions are honorable.”

“Really.” Like Trigg would know what that looked like. Even so, old-fashioned jealousy prickled. “How far back?”

Virtualventures

“I dunno.” Trigg made a face. “She didn’t have tits or front teeth. You do the math. Bit of an ugly duckling, if you want the truth. I was surprised she turned out that hot.” He swore as something occurred to him. “You know, I think I might have called her that for a while.”

“Ugly duckling?”

“That’s probably why she’s always shut me down.”

“It’s a wonder any woman waves you in.”

Trigg shrugged that off. “So why is she still here? You that good at oral?”

Nate wanted to knee him in the mouth—he really did—but Ilke’s future had been niggling at him since this morning, when she had mentioned how murky it was. Actually, after their kiss, he’d been wondering if there was any sense in pursuing something with her or if she’d be leaving as soon as her fortunes turned around.

He still hadn’t figured that out, but he didn’t want her barricading herself in her room, losing her will to live.

“How do sponsorship deals work?” he asked Trigg.

“Oh, yeah. She would have lost a bunch of her funding, wouldn’t she?” He rubbed his thighs. “If you’re asking me how to get money from Wikinger, I can’t help you. They give me a full ride and sponsor a crap-ton of other athletes, but there’s a whole arm’s length thing in place against my having any say, since I’m still competing. So I can’t sabotage someone who might actually have the balls to think he’s better than me. But Rolf could pull some strings, if he wanted to. If he doesn’t, let me know. I’d help her out of my own pocket.”

“Really?” Generous, but Nate instantly hated the idea of Trigg supporting her. Still: “She’s that good?”

“Hell, yeah. Glory bitches about what kind of damage *my* dick causes, but, Lucy, you got some ’splainin’ to do.”

“Too fucking soon, man.” He walked away a few paces, hands on his hips, starting to see the full scope of what the pregnancy had cost her. It humbled him to realize that she had been willing to go through with it despite that.

“My bad, dude, but, hey. Her mother has money and her stepfather—Actually, forget that.”

Virtualventures

“What?” He turned back. “I know she’s not real close to her mom.”

“Yeah, and her stepfather is a card-carrying dink.” Trigg reached to change out the handle on the cable. “Likes to coach women, likes to fuck them while he does.”

“Cheats on her mom?”

“So hard. Moved to New Zealand because no one would work with him in Europe anymore.”

“Huh.”

“Yeah. I guarantee Ilke won’t accept money from them. But tell her to talk to Rolf and get her ass back on the slopes.”

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Chapter Eleven

"I CAN'T ASK Rolf." Ilke kept her voice low as they came down the stairs into the lobby. Did he think she hadn't thought of that a million times already?

She felt self-conscious beside Nate, not so much because people might infer they were together, but because she was so aware of him. He smelled good in the freshly showered way, with a hint of men's shampoo and shaving cream fragrance still clinging to his skin. His beard was neatly trimmed and he wore a snug dark-blue shirt that molded to his shoulders and arms over black jeans that looked seldom worn, almost as if he'd made extra effort. Had he dressed up for her? Why did she find that so flattering?

Physically, she was feeling better about herself after some cardio and a bath, then clean clothes and a touch of makeup just to prove to herself she could still do it. Her emotions remained a hot mess, though. Their kiss was confusing her.

Virtualventures

Nate wasn't the type to take advantage of a woman when she was down. She knew that in her gut. He wasn't trying to grope her now or stake any claims. He wasn't trying to further things at all, which told her their kiss had just been something that had happened. It wasn't the beginning—or continuation—of anything.

Not that she wanted it to be.

Did she?

"But that's what you want to do, isn't it?" he asked. "Get back to training and…"

She glanced up and saw he was giving her one thousand percent of his attention, dark brown eyes so warm and confident, she wanted to fall into them. But she read conflict there, too. He was guarded. It wasn't an idle question. He wouldn't see a future with her if she planned to chase gold again.

Her heart bumped and skipped off its path.

They entered the dining room, punched their cards, and began serving themselves from the buffet. Tonight's fare was roasted chicken with rice and vegetables with the usual selection of salads. She'd been genuinely hungry for the first time in ages a moment ago, stomach growling at the aroma, but now she was so conflicted she barely looked at what she put on her plate.

She led Nate to the first empty table she saw and they sat down across from one another.

"Skiing is all I've *ever* wanted to do," she said, not quite apologizing for it, aware it bordered on an obsession, but pleading for understanding. "I mean, I've done other jobs, but they were always whatever I had to do to pay for what I wanted to do."

"How did you get into it? How did you get as far as you did?"

She sawed a morsel of chicken off the bone.

"I told you my mom wasn't really into mothering, right? Well, before he died, my father had started me in ski lessons. Mom realized that continuing them was a way to keep me busy and allowed her to hang around chalets. It's not a cheap sport, so she found a lot of men with deep pockets there. I just liked the speed and the challenge of it. The technique. I liked learning the right way to do it and then winning because I did everything right."

Virtualventures

"My ex thinks there's something wrong with me because I'm a perfectionist. Do *you* want to drive across a bridge that was built by someone who doesn't care if the numbers were right?"

"Right? For that alone, you're justified in divorcing her." She flicked her glance up to his expression, wondering if she had crossed a line with that one.

He was making a face that said, *Damned straight*.

She let a smile twitch across her lips as she closed her mouth over a bite.

"Is that how your mom met your stepfather? Trigg said he cheats on her."

She froze. "Why were you talking to him about them?"

"I asked him how sponsorship deals work. He said your stepfather coaches and has money, but that you probably wouldn't accept help from him because he steps out on your mother."

“He does.” She was quickly losing her appetite. “And I won’t. I quit taking anything from him when I was fifteen. That’s why I’m long in the tooth for being where I am. I’ve had to do it all on my own.”

“Isn’t there government funding or something?”

“Some. It’s usually concentrated around the games, though, which is only every four years. The rest of the time, it’s prize money and sponsorships. Plus, for a long time I wasn’t living in Sweden. And who was going to think I was disadvantaged and offer me funding when my mother is married to a man who has coached medalists?”

“She knows he cheats? Why does she stay with him?”

“She doesn’t know how to look after herself and, frankly, if she left him it would fall to me to support her. I’ve offered a couple of times to have her come live with me, when I’ve been in a position to feed us both. She could go back to Sweden, if she wanted to. But she likes her house in Queenstown with the pool and the parties. I visit a couple times a year and she’s always showing me jewelry he bought her or a new car. I guess the cheating works for her because she’s compensated? I don’t know.”

“So when you say you were on your own at fifteen…”

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“I worked as a chalet girl so I had room and board and trained around that. But you have to treat the training as a full-time job or you don’t really improve and expenses are so high, I needed to work. I was stuck in ‘almost there’ for a long time.”

“What kind of money are we talking about? Don’t you just need a pair of skis and a lift pass?”

“A few dozen pairs. Different ones for different disciplines and conditions. Lift pass*es*. Plural. Club fees. Travel.” She ticked things off on her fingers. “Trainers. Ski technicians.”

“Okay. I have to say this. You’re gorgeous. How are you having trouble finding a sponsorship deal?”

She glowed inside at the compliment, but had to shake her head at his naivety.

“It’s called sexism. How often do you see women as the face of athletic equipment? Rolf and Trigg *own* the competition, and I’m certain they could get a full ride from any of the big names in skis and boards. But almost every woman I know in any sport at my level has a day job or parents taking out mortgages to support them, at least until they have some prize

money under their belts. We're so busy trying to make ends meet, we can't build a following. We don't have a following, so the media thinks we're not interesting enough to cover. Corporations want a face with a higher profile and a sexier image, so they choose a pop star or a supermodel. Around it goes."

"And you think Rolf would dismiss you the same way? Because you're not well-known enough?"

Please don't make me say this, she thought, but looked him in the eye and said it. "I think he'll say it looks like favoritism. Especially to Glory."

Nate's face stiffened and he dropped his gaze to his plate.

They ate in silence for a few moments.

"Part of me thinks I should quit. I can't bear to start at the bottom again. I know what a climb it is and I don't know if I have that kind of time. But I've already put that many years and sweat into it. I can't stomach going out on that last race." Her eyes grew hot. "I was *nineteenth*."

Her confidence had completely failed her by then and was shakier than ever now, given that her coach had quit and her training group had moved on without her. She couldn't help thinking she was kidding herself. But if she didn't ski, what would she do? That's who she *was*.

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"Ilke!" Vivien came up behind her and set a hand on her shoulder, startling Ilke into sitting up straighter. Vivien held her evening glass of wine and a warm smile for both of them.

Ilke choked slightly, suddenly remembering what she'd seen this afternoon, when she'd gone looking for Vivien and found her necking with Marvin. She touched her throat, then sipped some water to clear it.

"Good work getting her out of her cave, Nate," Vivien said with a wink at him.

Really? Nate had been on assignment? That's why he'd come looking for her?

Whatever remained of her self-worth took another hit. She had an immediate urge to scurry back into hiding. Instead, she forced herself to say, "I can work tomorrow, if you have anything for me."

Vivien's face blanked briefly, before she found a fresh smile, this one more manners than sincerity. "We have a few new bodies starting tomorrow, but you could probably help with training. Let me talk to Marvin. See what we can find for you." Vivien patted her shoulder and moved on.

Covering the front desk had been a temporary thing, and a practical move on her part, not a career aspiration. Therefore, Ilke shouldn't feel sick that the lodge was staffing up the way they had intended.

Nevertheless, hearing they didn't really need her was one more kick in the stomach.

NATE SAW THE flash of panic in Ilke's eyes before she very quickly neutralized her expression into the aloof woman he'd thought incapable of feeling anything warm or genuine.

She set her cutlery together on her plate. "I think I'll go up."

And isolate herself again? He thought of her saying she had wanted their baby so she would have 'someone.' His heart lurched as she rose.

"Ilke."

"Thank you for today." She smiled faintly. "But Vivien worries too much. You can stand down from babysitting. I'm fine."

"I wasn't—" His phone dinged with a text that he automatically glanced to read. Trigg was asking if he wanted to take Murphy now or if Trigg should bring him by when he left at four in the morning.

Virtualventures

Nate replied that he would come now, but when he glanced up, Ilke was gone.

He scraped his plate and left his dishes on the cart, then went to Trigg's room.

"Thanks, man," Trigg said. They shook hands and Nate snapped his fingers to get the dog to leave the room with him.

Murphy was a mutt and a nut. He was friendly and energetic and came across as dumber than a sack of hammers—not unlike his owner—but he knew who had busted him out of the pound. With his tail low and tight, he cast a condemning look at Trigg, who was packing his duffel.

"Dude, I am so sorry," Trigg said to the animal. "Back in three weeks. Promise."

Nate thought Trigg should try that level of concern with a woman sometime, but kept it to himself.

Murphy knew where he was going, but Nate only threw Murphy's bed into his room before he coaxed him down the hall a couple of doors.

When he knocked, Ilke called, "Who is it?"

"Me."

A moment later, the lock turned and she started to open the door.

Predictably, Murphy invited himself in with a poke of his head and a shove of his muscled shoulders.

"What—?"

"Thought you might like some company."

The dog got himself inside, gave her one nudge with his nose, then checked out the room, tail wind-milling.

Nate stepped in and closed the door behind him. Her laptop was open on the bed where she'd likely been sitting when she got up to open the door. The rest of the room was spic and span, including all her clothes folded neatly into her suitcase.

A cold claw seemed to take hold of his heart and gave it a squeeze.

"You're leaving?"

"What?" She looked up from monitoring the dog sniffing in every corner. She followed Nate's gaze to the suitcase. "There's no dresser. He's not going to pee on anything is he?"

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"No." He hooked his thumbs in his back pockets, relaxing a hair. "Hey, listen, Vivien didn't send me this morning. She told me she was worried and I was, too."

"Why? I'm fine. Oh, don't—" She quick-stepped across to stop the dog from shoving his head in the wastebasket.

"Murphy, take a chill pill. Come here." Nate sat on the edge of the bed and snapped his fingers between his feet.

Murphy came to sit, tail thumping and tongue lolling while Nate scrubbed his ears and under his collar.

"Why do you have him?"

"Trigg's leaving. Technically Uncle Rolf is supposed to have custody, but that cramps his sex life, doesn't it?" He got under the dog's throat, starting Murphy's foot tapping. "Which makes me a kiss-up for taking him, but I don't mind. Aiden loves when I have him. It all works."

"And you don't have a sex life?" She folded her arms, looking toward the closed curtains as if it was an idle question.

He debated for a second, then figured he was here to cheer her up so he might as well go for it. “Despite a terrific start, my sex life has been a wasteland since the first of January.”

Her fingers plucked at her sleeve while she frowned a little, as if she couldn’t decide whether to believe him or what that meant.

“Sit down. I guarantee you can’t stay depressed while petting this dog.”

“I’m kind of enjoying the wallowing,” she grumbled, but perched beside him and gave the dog’s ear a stroke.

Sensing a fresh sucker, Murphy squiggled his ass over and set his chin on her thigh, eyes up in that adoring, heart-stealing way babies and animals perfected. *Love me*.

He watched her fingers appreciate the silkiness of Murphy’s ear, smoothing it very gently.

“You will get through this, you know. My life was an absolute shit-show a few years ago. Somehow, piece by piece, you figure it out.”

“When you divorced, you mean? What happened with your wife?”

“Exactly what it looks like.” He leaned his forearms on his thighs, hands linked between his knees, and watched the dog’s tail swish near his foot. “She prefers women. Didn’t mention it while we were dating and engaged, which would have been the courteous thing, in my opinion. She knew that losing my parents made me single-minded about Aiden having both of his parents in his life on a daily basis.”

Virtualventures

“Perfectionist,” she accused under her breath.

“Yeah.” He absorbed that, not having seen it that way, but, “Yeah, I guess that’s what I thought, that I’d do it ‘right.’ And I can forgive mistakes, and recover from them, but she married me and had Aiden knowing that we were going to fall apart. Then decided to—Well, I’ll be fair and say she met Frankie and fell in love, which I suppose gave her the courage to be herself, but I’m still mad she cheated. I’m angry she made a family with me under false pretenses.”

“I guess that explains why you were so angry when I said I wanted to leave the baby with you.” The way she lifted her lashes was every bit as winsome as the dog’s.

“I guess it does.”

“You really didn’t suspect she was a lesbian?”

He drew a breath, able to see his own blinders now, but that didn't make it any easier. "I probably should have. I guess I thought being a pastor's daughter made her shy about sex. I thought we were good in the sack. When we were divorcing, I asked her point-blank if I'd been deluding myself all that time. She swears she wasn't faking, but she lied about being straight so I don't know."

He watched her pet the dog, hesitated, then poured out the rest, the part that sought forgiveness, but didn't know from where or how to get it.

"I feel like I was taking advantage of her or something, when it was supposed to be, you know, lovemaking. I thought she was my best friend. That we told each other everything. She's the sweetest person. Not the type to deliberately hurt anyone, but I feel betrayed. Like she didn't love me. Not the right way when I was all-in. It's been tough to get over."

She skimmed her hand from the dog's quirking eyebrows to his collar, absorbing that, saying quietly, "That's why I don't trust anyone. Even the people who are supposed to be there for you never are."

"Like…?" He thought about her being on her own at fifteen years old. "Your mom?" he guessed.

Virtualventures

She nodded, lips sealed.

"What happened that made you leave home so young?"

She wrinkled her nose and pursed her lips, shaking her head.

The bottom of his heart tilted on its edge, sharp and unsteady. "You don't want to talk about it? Or not to me?"

"I don't talk about it with anyone."

Trigg had told him *his* darkest secret. Nate was a vault. He was offended that she didn't realize that.

"Was it—" He stopped himself. Did he want to know if it was some kind of abuse? Shit. No. He really didn't. He rubbed his face, but was compelled to stress that: "You can tell me anything, you know. I know I didn't react well when you showed up here. I should have been on board from the beginning. I know that. But I'm here now. Anything you need. Ever."

"Thanks," she chirped.

"That's not an empty offer," he insisted, turning his head to look at her. "Do you lean on *anyone*? For *anything*?"

She jerked her shoulder defensively. “It’s easier if I don’t set myself up for disappointment.” She was trying to be blasé about it, but he saw the shadows of apprehension in her eyes and the tension in her cheeks.

“That stings, you know. I’m the guy everyone feels safe confiding in.”

“Oh, and you’re ready to entrust me with your deepest inner garbage?”

“I just told you about my sex life with my lesbian ex-wife. What do you think?”

She eyed him as she considered that. “Yeah, but who would I tell? I don’t have any friends.” Nevertheless, a small smile touched her lips as if she was pleased.

“What about Vivien?” She seemed to take a personal, almost motherly interest in Ilke.

Ilke’s gaze flashed up to his, alight with excited discovery. “Okay. *Can* I trust you? Because I saw something today that I probably wasn’t supposed to.”

“What?” Was it something like what he had seen? “I won’t tell a soul. Cross my heart.” He drew on his chest, wanting to laugh at the sparkle in her eye.

Virtualventures

She leaned a little closer, making this feel as if they were cutting third period, sharing gossip under the bleachers.

“Marvin kissed Vivien.” Her chin went down, her eyebrows up. “A real kiss. Not a peck. Like, maybe he even frenched her.”

Nate slapped his hand on his knee. “I saw them the other night! What the fuck, right?”

“Do you think Glory and Rolf know?”

“Oh, I would love to lay that on Trigg. He’ll shit a brick—he really will.”

“Don’t. They’re both so nice.” She got in behind Murphy’s ear, making the dog groan. “It’s sweet.”

And he thought, *You idiot*. How had he not seen what a tender heart she had?

“Yeah, good for them.” Good for the old man who was falling for a woman who was actually going to stick around. Nate swallowed back an ache that wound up stuck like a husk in the base of his throat. “What about asking Vivien for help?”

“If she gives me a job and I can pay my own way, that’s enough of a favor. Then I’m not beholden to her. But if I asked her to help with the skiing, she would just tell Rolf to help me. She would *make* him help me. I don’t want to put him in that position and I don’t want to be indebted to him. Or something he takes on begrudgingly, because Vivien demanded it. Better to just leave it.”

Okay, that elephant had trampled across his feet twice now. He was going to have to just ask. “How serious was it between you two?”

“What? Rolf? It wasn’t.” She ironed her palms across the dog’s flat skull, but he was pushing back against the pressure, loving it. “Do you really want to know what happened? Are we really having this conversation?”

“Do I want details? No. As few as possible, but when did it happen? How long were you together?”

“An afternoon. Not even. It was years ago, right before he retired. I was starting to rise in the standings. I think he thought I was older. I said hello, reminded him I had skied with Trigg and asked him how Vivien was. Then I saw him a couple months later and he walked up to me and said, ‘You said you were the same age as Trigg.’ I said, ‘No, I didn’t,’ but he just walked away, all pissy.” She chuckled, then shrugged sheepishly.

virtualventures

“So why…? Never mind. I probably don’t want to know.”

“Why did I approach him? Why did *you* hook up with *me*? We’re all human. Sometimes the tension gets to me, especially during competition. It gets to all of us. He was convenient and I knew he wouldn’t be a pest after.”

“A pest.” Nate wondered if that’s how she saw him right now.

“I haven’t had much luck with boyfriends. My first was a skier who was super controlling, wanted to tell me how to ski and when to train and what to eat. I was sixteen and let that go on for a whole year. Then I tried dating someone outside my world and he was ultra-possessive and didn’t understand the demands. He kept telling me to quit. So I gave up on relationships. I get hit on a lot, though.”

“Really?” He managed to sound sarcastic when he was actually jealous as hell. “That’s so weird.”

“Believe me, I’d be happy with less attention.” Her frown held zero humor. Her expression stayed dour and for about five seconds, she looked like she was going to add something else, then returned her attention to the

dog, lavishing him with affection. “Anyway, it’s always been really important to me to get to the top on my own and not owe anyone anything.”

He understood needing credit for a win, but he had a feeling there was more at play here.

“That’s backfiring on me now, of course. I don’t have a network to fall back on.” She tried slapping a brave smile on it, but her lips weren’t steady.

“Ilke…” He picked up her hand and set it palm down on his knee, then covered it with his own, thick dark fingers between slender pale ones, her cool soft skin warming under his touch. “I don’t know how to say this so you believe it, but you’ve got me. Okay?”

She stared at him. As he watched, her blue eyes clouded with ever more helplessness. Her mouth quirked into a crooked line that she tried to steady by biting down on her lips.

“I want to believe you. I do. It’s just really hard. Not something I’m ready to risk.” She sniffed. “But thank you. It’s the nicest thing anyone has said in a long time. And you really were awesome at the hospital and everything. I appreciate that. For what it’s worth, you’re getting a lot more out of me than anyone else has in a long time.”

virtualventures

“Jesus, babe.” He looped his arm around her and crammed her into his side.

She was surprisingly wiry and strong under that slender back and pair of narrow shoulders. Even so, he was starting to glimpse the fragility inside this well-kept shell. He wanted to scoop her into his lap and protect her from every hurt in the world.

She leaned in to him with a shaken sigh, but when she tilted her face up, her expression was shadowed with uncertainty.

“I’m not trying to get into your pants,” he assured her, pressing a kiss to her hair. “I’m saying you do have a friend.”

“You’re friend-zoning me?” She winced, but grinned ruefully at the same time.

“Well—” He’d been half-hard this whole time, just sitting next to her. “I’ll admit to feeling differently when I think about the way we rang in the new year. Why? What do you think we are?” He subconsciously braced himself.

Her mouth started to form a cheeky reply, but as she met and held his gaze, and memories flooded through both of them, she sobered and started

to blush. The helpless, hopeless look came back into her eyes and she ducked her face into the hollow of his shoulder, throwing her arm around him and hugging tight.

“I don’t know,” she said into his shirt.

He pressed his lips to the part in her hair, horny, but feeling tender and sad at the same time. It was confusing and—

Murphy put his paw on Nate’s thigh and tried to shove his cold, wet nose into their embrace.

Ilke laughed and pulled back. “Tell me again why Rolf and Glory won’t keep him?”

“Exactly.” Nate splayed his thighs, seeking room to ease the ache behind his fly.

“You’re right about not being able to stay depressed when he’s around.” She went back to petting Murphy, but her lashes lifted and her gaze was unguarded and vulnerable. Full of longing, but still short on hope.

He was in so much damned trouble. “I should probably go. Before I try to blur the lines.”

“Can I keep him?”

Virtualventures

“Do you want to get up at three in the morning and stand outside while he pees?”

“He does that? And you still talk to Trigg?”

“He’s getting better now that he’s older, but yeah, sometimes he needs to go out in the middle of the night.”

“Okay, well, no. I don’t want to do that. Have a nice non-sleep.”

“Thanks.” He rose and so did she.

He adjusted himself because it hurt, then they stood there awkwardly. She was kind of smiling and averting her gaze, but she was close enough he could see her attention flicker to his mouth and back to his eyes, conflict and uncertainty mingling with temptation in her expression.

It was the same on his side, but he was losing the battle. He wasn’t close enough to just drop his head, which saved him. He forced himself not to step any closer, no matter how badly he wanted to.

Then she came in close, saying a light, “Thank you,” as she stepped into his space. She lifted her mouth and his head dropped without his planning to do it.

Maybe she only meant to give him a peck of gratitude, but his mouth touched hers and the taste of her slammed through him. *Damn*. He groaned and she moaned. Her arms went around his neck and she came up on tiptoes. Her breasts pressed into his chest and their tongues started tangling.

He'd been dying for this. The feel of her rang through him as profound relief. He wrapped both arms around her and stroked over her back, reacquainting, fitting her tighter and closer, jolting him with pleasure when her mound ground up against his hard cock. He slid a hand under her ass and held her there. Firm and delicious. Mind-blowing.

"Ouch!" She broke away, knee almost coming up to crash into his throbbing junk.

He swore and jerked his hips away. "What—?"

"He stood on my foot. It hurt. Sorry." She rubbed the top of one foot with her other.

"Should patent him as birth control. Where were you on New Year's Eve?" he asked the dog.

She didn't laugh, which made his heart lurch.

"I shouldn't have said that."

Virtualventures

"No, it's okay." The corners of her mouth went down. "But…I don't have any regrets, Nate. I'm sad, but I'm not sorry."

It was official. She was going to break his heart even worse than she already had.

"Me, either," he said, probably never meaning anything so sincerely in his life. He would always hurt, but he wasn't sorry. He stole one more very brief kiss, hand cupping the side of her neck. "But I probably shouldn't do this."

"Probably not."

"It feels really good, though."

"It does."

They wavered. Shared one more. Not a long one, but it was deep and sweet. The kind of kiss that soothed a hurt.

"'Kay, I'm leaving." He kissed her again. Just a little one.

She nodded. "Good night."

Last one. Almost chaste. "Night."

She followed him to the door and they kissed one final time before he forced himself out into the cold hall.

He looked at the dog and suspected that no amount of scrubbing those furry ears was going to lift this weight of might-have-been from his chest.

VIVIEN WAS ENJOYING her second evening libation by the fire in the lounge, lost in wondering how she had wound up locking lips with Marvin today, when Glory's voice cut into her recollection of it.

"What did you do to my dad today?"

Vivien sputtered and her wine nearly sloshed out of her glass. "What?"

She looked past Glory to the bar, but one of Marvin's young protégées was minding the tap while he grabbed a bite before the dining room closed.

"He's wearing a shirt that *fits*." Glory settled into the chair beside her with her own glass of wine. "His bottom half still looks like he's auditioning for clown-school, but wow. Good work. How did the rest of the fittings go?"

"Oh, um." Vivien cleared her throat. "I think we've made some excellent choices. Giovanni will be back in May for final fittings on the tuxedoes, but he's sending a couple of rush suits for your father by courier."

Virtualventures

"So you're getting him out of his pants, too? Thank you for taking him in hand. You're a goddess—you really are."

Vivien was going to blush like a virgin in a minute. She changed the subject. "Did you see Eden's designs for the cake?"

"I did and she'll hate me, but I asked if I could have the scallops from the second sketch and the flowers from the first, so she's doing another one. Do you really think it needs to be four layers? That seems ridiculous."

"She talked me down from five. And you saw the email from the dressmaker?"

"Yes, and that is turning into a bigger trip. I'm waiting to hear from my agent on when she might be available. If I'm going to New York for a fitting, I might as well kill two birds, but then Rolf said if I'm going that far, he'll go with me and we'll add a week in Germany."

"The board?"

"Yeah, they're bent out of shape about the theft."

Vivien was well acquainted with the old farts on the board. Virtually all of them had been fixtures at Wikinger since Oskar's time. They had fought him on buying this resort—and so had she, to be honest. Then the avalanche and Oskar's death had pushed Wikinger to the financial edge. Rolf had still been racing, so the acting president and his minions had done their best to keep the company afloat, but they were a conservative bunch. They had enjoyed those years of control between Oskar's death and Rolf taking his seat at the table and were very dug in and proprietary, seeing Rolf's vision and drive as impulse and risk. He'd been knocking heads with them since assuming the mantle and the conflict had grown especially bad since he had begun pouring Wikinger capital into Whiskey Jack.

"Any progress on the investigation?" Vivien asked.

Glory shook her head. "Macy and Serge have been questioned. They're both claiming they broke up because she cheated with Trigg. Dirk fired Serge, trying to make it up to Rolf, but now Rolf wants to buy a company helicopter and keep a pilot on staff so things like this won't happen again. You can imagine what the board is likely to say about *that*." She smirked into her wine.

Virtualventures

"So like his father," Vivien chuckled.

"Oh, Trigg's no better! The helicopter is his idea. He told Rolf to remind the board that he's turning thirty in a couple of months and will take his place at the table. They can let them run Whiskey Jack the way they see fit or he and Rolf will fire them and hire people who will."

"Ah, my little boy is growing up." Vivien sipped her wine.

"He'll be out of diapers before you know it," Glory agreed, then grinned. "I'm going to tell him I said that." She took a moment to text. It pinged immediately. "Ha. He says, 'Too bad you're not.' Growing up, he means." She chuckled with enjoyment.

"So when will you and Rolf be leaving?"

"Yesterday if he had his way. I've been trying to finish this draft and then my darling fiancé pointed out that if we'll be gone, we could let Devon finish the renovations in our rooms. So I have to clean up *that* mess before we leave." Glory tilted her head back against her chair. "This is going to be the craziest few months. I don't know how I'm going to get it all done."

Vivien wanted to tell her not to worry, that the wedding was under control, but she was spending an awful lot of time on lodge business. She

didn’t know how she would get everything done, either.

“Oh!” she recalled with a jolt. “Ilke is out of her room. Said she’s ready to get back to work.”

“Isn’t she going back to Sweden? To train?” Glory set her elbow on the arm of her chair and braced her chin on her fist. “I asked Rolf and he seemed to think that’s what she would do. Actually, he said, ‘Quitting now would be asinine.’”

“It would be,” Vivien agreed. “But she’s still hurting. And it’s off-season now so here is as good as anywhere to cross-train, I imagine.”

“Did you know about her and Nate?” Glory asked in a confidential tone.

“Oh, gosh, no. I had a small suspicion, but I rather hoped she was here to see me.” She’d been trying to earn Ilke’s trust for years. “I should have known better. She’s hideously independent.”

Seeing Ilke with Nate this evening was both heartening and worrisome. They made an adorable couple. Vivien wanted the best for both of them, but she knew from watching Trigg and Rolf what competing took out of a person. What it did to relationships. What was Nate going to do? Quit his job, abandon his son, and leave Rolf in the lurch? Unlikely.

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But Rolf was right. Ilke couldn’t quit at this point.

“Yeah, it makes sense now, but I thought it was weird she came here and didn’t go stay with family. Her mom is in New Zealand, isn’t she?” Glory asked.

“Yes, but that woman…” Vivien lifted her brows and let her tight mouth speak for her.

“Hmm.” Glory wrinkled her nose. “That’s too bad.”

“It is,” Vivien said crisply, still incensed when she thought about the anxious, intimidated look she’d seen on Ilke’s fourteen-year-old face when her stepfather had patted her ass like he owned it. Her mother had said something ignorant about the affection between them and Vivien had nearly lost her mind.

“I invited Ilke to come live with me, years ago. She wouldn’t, but I swore she would always have a place with me and I’d like to keep that promise. She won’t let me pay for her room for any length of time, though. I want to offer her work if she wants it.”

“Of course.”

“But with all the new hires, we have the front desk covered this week.”

“How are you making out with finding a new manager?”

“We haven’t seen a résumé worth calling in for an interview, I’m afraid. So Ilke can help with payroll later in the week. For the next few days I’d rather give the new hires the practice on the desk, though. How would you feel if I asked her to help with the wedding plans?”

“Fill your glass slippers. Anything I don’t have to do is a win. Actually…”

Rolf interrupted whatever she might have said as he appeared. He sat down across from Vivien and asked her, “How many tents are you planning to give Marvin?”

Vivien nearly spit out her wine. “Just the one,” she choked.

Now she was in danger of blushing again. Honestly.

DESPITE BEING FORCED out of bed yesterday, Ilke had trouble rising today. She didn’t want to get up, eat, or beg Vivien for a job. She didn’t want to do anything.

Virtualventures

Okay, she wanted to ski. The crack in the curtain suggested it was a blindingly sunny day out there with a crisp blue sky. A perfect day where the only sound would be the scrape of her edges across frozen snow. That sound was music. *Bliss*.

But thinking about it brought on a huge wave of guilt and anxiety. She *could* ski. That shouldn’t make her happy, considering what it had cost her.

Skiing was her therapy, though. The place where all her troubles had always disappeared. She would give anything to lose herself that way today.

Skiing had *become* her troubles, however. She could send for her skis. She could even buy some, but then what? Pay a helicopter to get her to the top of the mountain before the snow melted? Go to another resort and practice? She could go home to Sweden and let the government cover her basic needs, but she would still have to find the money for training camps and start building her standings all over again. She still needed a trainer along with technical and medical staff.

Deep down she worried it would all be for naught anyway, that she couldn’t get back to where she’d been. Maybe it hadn’t been the pregnancy

that had caused her to lose so badly. Her times had been rocky through the end of last year. Sure, she had been skiing on a wrenched knee for a few weeks there, but maybe she had peaked as an athlete and was losing her edge.

Maybe the entire world knew she was garbage. Maybe that's why no one was returning her emails.

Maybe she would lie in bed for the rest of her life.

Nate might check on her, though, the rat.

Text me when you wake up, he'd messaged her last night after leaving her with all those kisses burning on her lips.

Why? she had replied.

I want to know you're okay.

She wasn't. She was confused and sad and didn't know who she was anymore.

Until this year, she had known exactly who and what she wanted to be —the best female Alpine skier in the world. That's all she had ever wanted.

Did she want a baby, though? Children? A husband and a life baking cookies and washing socks? That had never been her aspiration, yet there was something incredibly appealing in the idea. If they were Nate's babies and cookies and socks.

Virtualventures

He hadn't wanted to marry her when she'd been pregnant with his child, though, so he wasn't going to want her now. Did she want him to want her?

God in heaven, she was turning into her mother. *She didn't need a man*.

She threw off her blankets and hit the shower to warm up, then texted Nate, '*Up*,' as she was brushing her teeth.

Thought I might come see you at lunch, but shit went sideways here.

NP, she sent back. They weren't dating. He didn't have to account for his whereabouts.

But her gloomy mood fell a few more notches into melancholy, knowing she wouldn't see him.

She dressed and went down for breakfast only to realize it was a weekday so breakfast had finished early. On the one hand, that was great. Aside from Marvin's cheerful greeting from behind the reception desk, where he stood alongside a middle-aged woman and a fresh-faced young

man, and the busboy who gave her a fatalistic shrug in the dining room, she didn't have to speak to anyone.

On the other hand, she had to make do with a blueberry yogurt and a boiled egg, which was all that was left from the buffet that was disappearing into the kitchen fast.

Even Lina had moved on from the espresso bar to other duties, leaving Ilke with the stale coffee left in the Thermos at the buffet for the tardy and desperate.

"Damn." Glory came in as Ilke was tipping the Thermos, trying to coax out the dregs. "I was hoping I hadn't missed breakfast. You want a latte or something?" She moved behind the counter.

"I'd love a bloody Mary," Ilke muttered facetiously. "But coffee will do. Thanks."

"A bloody Mary sounds fantastic. But I would only need a nap in an hour and I have so much work to get through. I'll make you one if you want, though." Glory pointed toward the lounge side of the bar.

I can have alcohol, Ilke realized with a fresh pang of despair, and shook her head. "Coffee is fine, thanks."

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Glory nodded and began to grind and set things to snapping and hissing.

Ilke salted her egg and bit into it.

"Vivien said you're ready to get back to work." Glory glanced at her for confirmation.

Ilke shrugged. "Doesn't look like I'm needed, though," she said with a glance toward the crowd at the reception desk.

"But you're planning to, like, stick around? What about getting back to training?" Glory took the time to swirl the foam into a snail shell before setting it in front of Ilke. "Or do you have to wait before you go back? For physical reasons?"

"No, I'm allowed to pretty much do whatever I want. The white circus is over though. That's the World Cup circuit." She stirred her coffee, mostly out of nerves, then was mad at herself because the snail had been so cute. "This is when I would normally organize my next season. My summer training would already be booked, but I canceled it all. I'm in this weird place where I feel like I can't make a call without having to explain why things went sideways, but what am I supposed to do? Issue a press release that I had a miscarriage?" She lifted a falsely cheerful hand, like someone

was taking attendance. “Unwed mother over here. No, no, not engaged. Barely knew him.” She made a face. “Sponsors want a more family-friendly story than sluts with unplanned pregnancies. I’m sure plenty already think it was a deliberate termination.”

“Wow. That bites.” Glory finished making her own coffee then began efficiently rinsing and wiping down the area. “Can’t you just say it was an unspecified injury?”

“They want details, to know it won’t happen again. It will become old news eventually, but I don’t have that kind of time. I could go back to Sweden, but it doesn’t change the fact I cleared my calendar. Getting everything back into place will be expensive and a matter of proving myself. Do you, um…” Ilke *hated* feeling like a supplicant “…need my room?”

“It kills me to say this, but *I don’t know*. For the sake of my forthcoming marriage, I am leaving Dad and Devon to work out which rooms get finished in what order. They might as well tell me to drive into Haven blindfolded, but the control freak has told me not to try to control everything so…”

Virtualventures

“Rolf?” Ilke smiled faintly. “He’s just trying to free you up for writing, isn’t he? It’s nice that he’s so supportive.” Ilke had a quick flash of Nate’s oath of friendship last night. She wanted so badly to believe she could rely on him, which scared the hell out of her. She knew better. What if he let her down?

“Rolf is such a giant marshmallow under that thick layer of bark, you have no idea,” Glory said, kind of dreamy and smitten. “But the truth is, it’s nice to switch gears sometimes, if I’m stuck. Which I am. So I’m as frustrated as you are that there’s nothing to do for Dad.” She stirred her own coffee. “I do have something mindless that you could help me with, though. If you want. It’s just putting labels on envelopes and stuffing them with books.”

“Yours?”

“Mom’s. Keep me company at least.” She jerked her head and led the way from the dining room.

Ilke trailed after her carrying her yogurt and coffee.

Glory paused at the reception desk where her father introduced a bright-eyed young man, Shawn, and the older woman, Yolanda. Shawn was

working on his hotel management certification. This was only a summer job for him, but he was ready, willing, and eager.

“Nice to meet you,” Glory said as they all shook hands. Then she said to her father, “If you love me, you will ask the kitchen to make us a couple of BLTs and send them up in the dumbwaiter.”

“I shouldn’t need to prove it, but I am nothing if not a loving father and an attentive host.” Marvin’s bushy brows angled in empathy at Ilke. “Good to see you up and about, Ilke. Don’t worry about things here. Vivien has us staffed right up. I won’t need to prevail on you again.”

Terrific. Now she felt like some Victorian dowager who had taken to her room in a harrowing decline. But he had promised a decent breakfast so she forced a smile and climbed the stairs behind Glory.

Glory’s room was still as big a sty as it had been the day she’d come up here to tell her about Macy and Serge, complete with the massive hole in the wall still only covered by a plastic curtain.

“So, um?”

“Yeah. Rolf and I were fighting about how this is my space for writing.” She waved to encompass the bedroom area including her desk. “He wants this to be our bedroom because it has the best view. He said I should make his old room my office, but I reminded him that I claimed this space on day one. It’s where I write best. Plus, I’m in here all day, so I should have the best view. We couldn’t agree so we stopped talking about it. *I* stopped talking, which he *hates*.” She sipped her coffee. “That was before we went to Korea. Next thing I knew he was smashing through the wall.”

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“Rolf was? Or—”

“It was him.” Glory nodded. “With a sledgehammer. He calls me the hothead, but he’s such a Neanderthal sometimes. We had a nice big fight about him scaring the shit out of me, but it got us talking again.”

Glory bit the corner of her mouth as her gaze slid toward the bed.

Not just talking, Ilke surmised, envious of them all over again. She and Nate had had passion one night, then animosity, and now she didn’t know what they had. He wanted to be her friend, which was something, she supposed, but it wasn’t what Glory and Rolf had.

She wanted what they had. Deep down, in her heart of hearts, that’s what she longed for—a man who stood behind her and seemed genuinely proud of her and loved her enough to bust through walls for her.

Did she want that more than skiing, though? Because if she wanted that from Nate, she would have to sacrifice her dream.

“Rolf made the executive decision that if this was my office, that would be our bedroom.” Glory pointed through the plastic curtain. “But he doesn’t want to give up his own room because it’s the second-best view. Yesterday, Devon told me he asked her what it would take to have a kitchenette built into the hallway, between our two rooms, so all of this could be connected in one big apartment.” She swept her arm in an ‘L.’ “She asked me exactly what kind of empire he’s building.”

Ilke moved to the window. Sharp and glistening icicles on the overhang added sparkle to a postcard vista of intense blue sky over blinding white peaks. Snow clumped the trees below and the edges of the mountains folded into one another all the way into the distance where Haven sat against a flat, white lake. It was the epitome of the pristine, Alpine wilderness that had always called to her very soul.

“It’s like a castle in the sky. If I had this, I’d claim it forever, too.” She sincerely wished she had a right to.

“Thank you. I love being right. And just between you and me, I’m thinking that room will become our lounge and this will stay our bedroom and double as my office, *if* I can get this mess cleaned up. Can I show you what needs to be done?”

virtualventures

“Of course.” Ilke turned from the window to take in the boxes and books stacked on the bed. “How did you wind up selling so many of your mom’s books?”

“I didn’t. In a shameless attempt to ride my mother’s coattails with my own book launch, I promised readers a signed copy of one of mom’s books if they pre-ordered mine.”

“How’d that work out?”

“Way too well. It’s kind of gratifying to know she’s still so beloved, but it was insane of me to make such an offer. Partly I did it because Rolf and I were fighting about this space. I knew it was silly to hang on to these boxes of signed books, letting them clutter up this room. She autographed them intending them to go to her readers. It’s time to hand them out and move on.”

“And your own book sold well?”

“Far better than I expected. I made a bestseller list.” She looked upward. “Thank you, Mommy. But now I have this enormous *task*. Which I keep telling myself is a nice problem to have.” She showed Ilke the sheets of printed address labels and the boxes of padded envelopes. “My entire advance will go to postage, but here we go. Everyone gets a pen and a notebook and…” she held up a bookmark “…this brazen attempt to entice readers to buy my next book.”

Ilke looked at the cover for *Spring Fever*, the follow-up to *Blessed Winter*. “That’s cute. What’s it about?”

“A surfer from Hawaii gets a fever while traveling in Asia. He hooks up with the woman who nurses him. She has his baby and shows up the day of his wedding to his childhood sweetheart all broke and forsaken by her family because she’s pregnant.”

“Families are the worst in romances, aren’t they? I think that’s why I relate to the heroines.”

“Yeah?” She saw questions coming into Glory’s eyes and quickly deflected.

“Are you going to do all the seasons?”

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“That’s how I pitched it. I have an idea for summer, but haven’t figured out fall yet.”

“Is that why you’re stuck? What about an older couple? Autumn years?” She handed back the bookmark and started rearranging things into a more efficient production line. “Your dad and Vivien could be your inspiration.”

“What? I don’t want to think about my dad having sex! With *Vivien*. Why would you put that in my head?”

Ilke paused, having spoken without thinking, but now she worried she had outed the couple. “They’re close in age. I guess I thought…”

“*No*. Ew. I mean, they’re entitled to—But no. I don’t see Vivien going for Dad. With those eyebrows? And he has never once shown an interest in moving on from Mom. *Ew*. I should have made the bloody Marys. I’m really in the mood to get hammered now.”

Ilke bit back a chuckle, privately enjoying the fact that Vivien and Marvin were going to shock the boots off their kids at some point. She peeled her first label and carefully centered it on an envelope. Then she threw all the bits of swag in.

“Like that?”

“Perfect.” Glory wrote a brief note on a thank you card and tucked it inside the signed book. She added it to the envelope and set the package in an empty box at her feet. “One down, three hundred and seven to go.”

“Why don’t you hire someone to help you do this?”

“I just did.” Glory saluted her with her coffee. “Welcome to Team Cormer.”

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Virtualventures

Chapter Twelve

MARVIN FELT POSITIVELY transparent. Why? It was perfectly natural for a man to get a decent haircut. The fact he'd let the barber trim his brows and get into his ears and nostrils didn't make him a fusspot. He kept telling himself he was only trying to live up to the title of proprietor, the way his daughter had urged him to.

He didn't care about appeasing Glory or playing the part for guests, however. No, he was self-aware enough to recognize his motivation was an attempt to impress a girl. He was as anxious for approval as a pimple-faced suitor before prom, unable to forget their first kiss, even though it had been days ago.

Three days when neither of them had said a word about it. Of course, he'd been gone all of yesterday, driving Rolf and Glory to catch a flight out of Billings. They were bringing home Glory's new car when they returned. Marvin had taken the opportunity to visit a big-city barber and buy some new clothes.

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Now he felt as though he was declaring his interest with this suit, pinning his heart like a boutonniere in the lapel.

He stood in his bedroom looking at the man in the mirror and didn't recognize him. Somehow, mowing his hair down to a one had revealed old shots of bronze in the otherwise silver strands. He was so thin on top as to be nearly bald, but he'd been talked into owning it. Other men did.

His belt hung at a slight angle. He still had a small paunch. He wasn't thirty. He was nearly twice that, but when he stood up straight, most of his pot disappeared.

He buttoned his jacket over it. Released it, then buttoned it again. He turned this way and that. Straightened his *double* Windsor and wished he hadn't been so cheap with his shoes. They weren't terrible, but they failed to live up to the hype of the rest of this costume.

Was he being a fool?

There was only one way to find out, but he dreaded going out there. His daughter wasn't here to make comments, but there were plenty of whippersnappers who enjoyed a bit of cheeky banter. He was always a good sport over remarks that his hair looked like Doc Brown's in *Back to the Future*, or his voice caused dogs to bark across town because it broke sometimes when he was excited. He'd been taking remarks like that on the chin through decades of teaching. He was comfortable being called a fool when he looked like one.

It would gut him to be laughed at when he wanted to be taken seriously, though. By a woman.

"Oh, my word, Marvin," Yolanda said, turning at the sound of his footsteps to regard him from the reception desk. "Are you going somewhere?"

"Just my office." He took a cowardly turn through the door rather than proceed all the way to the lobby.

Damn. Vivien was in here, sitting at his desk.

At the sight of him, she took off her glasses and let them drop onto her bosom. "Well."

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"Let's hear it." He shot his cuffs and smoothed a hand down to fiddle with the closed button on his jacket. It wasn't one of those tailored things she had insisted he agree to, but it was flashier than anything he'd been seen in since his wife's funeral. "I look like I'm auditioning for *Miami Vice*, don't I?"

"You look like a mafia don who orders hits over his orange juice and eggs." She rose, but only to perch her hip on the side of his desk. Leaning on a hand, she *posed*, like a brazen hussy, and played with the arm of her glasses, drawing his gaze to the neckline of her sweater. "Suddenly, being a moll or a madam seems like a desirable profession."

He swallowed and made a point of closing the door behind him with a firm hand. "I had the barber shave me with a straight razor."

She pretended to catch her breath at the danger of it, hand splaying over the tops of those magnificent breasts. She then beckoned him with a roll of her fingers. "Let me feel."

What are we doing, Vivien? That's what he wanted to ask, but he moved closer and closed his eyes as she took her time stroking light fingers over his smooth jaw. Tingles raced down his back.

“Like a baby’s bottom,” she murmured.

He opened his eyes and caught her hand, reading humor but also what he hoped was sincere appreciation. He shook a little on the inside, afraid he was misreading things. “About the other day…”

She dipped her chin, lashes up. “Yes?”

“If I overstepped…”

“Marvin.” She sounded the way women did when they were laughing on the inside. “I know where to put my knee if I don’t care for a man’s advances.”

He subconsciously flinched and cleared his throat.

“Was that what it was?” she asked.

“An advance? Hell if I know.” He paced away a couple of steps, still not used to feeling such short hair when he reached to push his fingers into it. “I don’t want to be—” A joke. A convenience. Put on the shelf when she lost interest. *Ignored*. “This had to happen.” He faced her again and gave his jacket a little tug.

“It did,” she agreed.

“I’m not trying to raise myself up to your standards, if that’s what it looks like.”

Virtualventures

She frowned. “What do you mean by that?”

“You find this all very provincial.” He waved at the office and window and ceiling. “This lodge in the middle of nowhere.”

“Do I?” She sat taller.

“Don’t you?”

VIVIEN PURSED HER mouth and looked down to move the mouse closer to the keyboard, wondering why she was taking offense to Marvin calling her a snob when it was absolutely true. Maybe because he saw it as a character flaw and she would rather have his good opinion.

“It’s true that this is not my ideal. I only came here to be near the boys.” She looked to the window where the snow was starting to melt during the day, but freezing up again at night. The trees were still bare and all that wilderness seemed like sheer nothingness.

“The isolation bothers me,” she admitted. “I fought hard to get out of one-horse towns. I grew up with a lot of wants and maybe I misplaced the blame for why we were broke all the time. There aren’t a lot of options in a small town, but my father was an alcoholic. I felt very alone, growing up. I coped by imagining myself moving to a city where I could live in a penthouse and buy what I wanted, when I wanted it. I can’t do that here, but I’m realizing that waiting isn’t the same as wanting.”

She glanced at him, wondering what he would think of her less than glamorous roots. She didn’t think about her childhood much. It was too far in the past and she had more current baggage to carry than that dusty old knapsack.

“My family were academics,” he said.

With that suit and haircut, he looked like East Coast Ivy League stock, the kind that used to intimidate her because they were so book-smart. She was street-smart, which had its uses. But then she had hung off of Oskar’s arm, trying to pretend she understood things like the ramifications in changes to the EU trade agreements and hated her lack of formal education.

“We never went hungry,” Marvin continued. “I always had shoes that fit, but love and affection were not considered a need. I think that’s why I didn’t notice my marriage going stale. It fit with what I’d been led to expect. Which made Kathleen’s stories of savage emotions and, frankly, *kinky* sex, that much more incomprehensible. My family didn’t understand what she was doing and neither did my colleagues at the college. *I* didn’t. We certainly weren’t living the things she was writing.”

Virtualventures

He was blushing and she wanted to hug him again, for sharing such intimate details with her.

“Do you know what kids are reading online these days?” she chided gently. “What *they* think they have to do to enjoy a rich sex life?”

“I heard it all at the college.” His groomed brows were expressive as ever. “It’s a far cry from the petting in the back seat we did, isn’t it?” he said with a bemused shake of his head.

She had gone all the way, but she’d been an insecure adolescent.

“I enjoy your company, Vivien.” He was so genuinely handsome and earnest as he looked at her, her heart pitter-patted. “I would be more than honored if you thought we could pursue a romantic relationship, but this is a complicated situation with Rolf and Glory. This lodge… I wouldn’t blame

you if it strikes you as a silly old man's dream. It is. But I can't take undue risks with it. It means a lot to me."

"Quit calling yourself 'old,'" she ordered, but with affection.

After her early years of insecurity, Oskar's take-charge, controlling personality had been enormously appealing, but Marvin's caution was endearing it its own way.

"I know this is important to you. I want to see you succeed with it. I want to *help* you succeed. More than I realized," she admitted with a breath of realization. "I've spent the last ten years thinking I was… I don't know. I thought I should be content. My husband was gone, but I had the means and the freedom to travel, which was always a goal of mine. I haven't wanted for anything. Even so, everything felt quite…pointless."

He nodded understanding.

"I wasn't aware of a need for direction in my life, but now that I have some…" She shrugged. "I know Rolf pushed me on you, but I'm stunned to discover how much I'm enjoying having a hand in pulling things together. Of course, I have the luxury of deciding how hard I work, but I *like* seeing the progress. Be honest, though. Do you find me too intrusive?"

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He started to say something, thought better of it, and closed his mouth.

Her heart fell. "You do."

"It's not that. I thought Glory would take more of an interest. Her choosing to write has been a bit of a heartbreaker for me, but I respect her need to do her own thing. I wouldn't want her to wait until she's staring down sixty like I did, before she goes after what she wants. But once I realized this lodge was solely up to me, well, I had to admit that, to some extent, she's right. I've taken on more than I can handle on my own. I need help. But letting you help is a little too easy. You're very accomplished. I feel foolish next to you. Ignorant. Giving up the reins feels like abdication."

"Please don't feel like that, Marvin. Becoming indispensable is what I *do*. Call me a secretary or a personal assistant or a mom-ager—because those boys don't appreciate it, but I wrangled their agents and managers for them for *years*, long after they were out of the house. I do it for me, to make my place where I want it to be. I take over to take root. I'm like a vine."

"Are you doing that here? Are you pushing down roots? Because I don't want you to decide you hate it here and leave after you've made me nee-d —" his voice cracked "—you."

She had to resist the urge to rub her breastbone where it felt as though it was fracturing.

"No one has needed me in years, Marvin." Were those tears coming into her eyes? Was that what that burn was? Her voice was definitely abraded down to a husk. "It would feel good, if you did."

He seemed to catch his breath, barrel chest rising beneath his razor-sharp new jacket.

"Well, that's something to think about, isn't it?"

"Yes." She blinked, looking out the window to hide that her lashes were damp. If he only knew how many men she had managed in her lifetime. She had been an ingénue, a sophisticate, a mistress, a cougar, and somehow this unassuming man disabled all her best manipulation tactics, leaving her with nothing but an unguarded heart.

NATE HAD LEARNED the hard way that it was worth the time to double-check the math on a drawing even when a professional architect or engineer had already signed off on it. It was also an exercise that often resulted in him standing back and saying, "*Or…*"

VirtualVentures

Which happened today as he suddenly wondered whether putting the helicopter pad on *top* of the ski patrol building would work. Initially, they'd thought choppers would only come in for emergencies or charter trips. They had planned to keep a space cleared behind the building for ambulances and emergency airlifts, but if Rolf got his way, they would have their own helicopter anchored in that spot, in which case, where would the emergency ambulances pull in?

The chopper would be more secure and immediately accessible up there. The gables would have to come off and the roof be reconfigured along with the engineering for the second floor, but all of that was a helluva lot cheaper and easier to do now while it was still pencil and paper.

They would have to keep the roof shoveled, likely pushing the snow off the south side, where they had intended to put the sled shed. That roof would have to be shored up and angled the other way. Some thought would also have to be given for drainage as the snow melted—

Murphy stood abruptly from his nap and shook his collar, breaking Nate's concentration. The dog padded to the door, but just as Nate started to rise and let him out, he heard footsteps on the stairs.

Rolf had left yesterday morning and Trigg wasn't due back for another week. Nate glanced at the clock, but it was only four o'clock. Too early for security to come down for the night.

Blonde hair flashed in the translucent window along with a powder-blue jacket.

His heart stood up and shook itself awake while a grin started to stretch across his face.

Ilke had snow caked around the cuffs of her jeans where they hung over sturdy, black, cross-country ski boots. Her nose and cheeks were red, her eyes sparkling.

"You steal some skis and take 'em for a joy ride?"

"Lina's." She sounded a little breathless. "Her boots are too big and I forgot how much I hate cross-country, but a lousy run on the snow is better than just about anything else, especially after thirty-five days away from it. So yes. Joy." Her smile was bigger than he'd ever seen it.

Virtualventures

Murphy was pretty happy himself, now he had a fresh pair of hands massaging his ears. His tail thumped the floor and he lifted a paw against the leg of her jeans.

Nate sat back, admiring the way she was glowing. "Why do you hate cross-country?"

"Only your toes are anchored!" She said it like it was a crime. "Your skis are supposed to feel like they're part of you. Boots so tight the Chinese foot-binders cringe."

"The wind chill didn't knock your teeth into the back of your throat?"

"That's the best part."

"Is it?" He snorted.

"But your sandwich probably froze." She dug the lump out of her pocket and set the half-sub on his desk. "You didn't come up for lunch. Thought you must be starving by now."

"Yeah, it's busy with Rolf not here." He had texted her to say he wouldn't make lunch, asking to meet for dinner instead. "I had instant noodles. I'll keep this for tomorrow, though."

He put the sandwich in the small bar fridge under the coffeemaker that Rolf had bought for exactly this purpose. It mostly held soda and condiments, but Nate threw a couple of yogurt cups and some fruit in every Monday. They were always gone by Friday, which it was today, but he was going to work a few hours tomorrow morning before getting Aiden.

“I don’t expect I’ll have time for a proper lunch until he gets back.” Work was piling up exponentially. If Nate thought too much about all he had to accomplish in the coming months, he would have an aneurysm.

“I didn’t take a proper lunch either, just grabbed a sandwich and finished Glory’s mail-out so Devon can get in there while they’re gone. I told Vivien I’d cover breaks on the desk tomorrow, then she gave me this huge list of wedding stuff to do, like figuring out gift baskets for all the rooms and getting menu cards printed. The wedding is a week-long thing. Did you know that?”

“The first two nights a bunch of us are in Vegas for the stag party, so the lodge is actually only booked out solid for the weekend, isn’t it?”

“Four nights at capacity, but eighty percent the rest of the time. And most destination weddings are at all-inclusive resorts in the tropics. The guests can scuba dive or whatever between rehearsal dinners and the ceremony. Trigg has a company setting up zip lines and they have the ATVs and hiking and sunrise yoga and kayaking on the big lake in Haven, but Vivien wants me to organize a calendar so people can book in for those things when they RSVP. Then make sure we have everything, like yoga mats and life jackets or whatever. It’s a huge job.”

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“You don’t want to do it? Or you don’t know how?”

“I can get a start on it.” She folded her arms and hunched her shoulders.

“But you don’t know how long you’ll be here,” he guessed, heart lurching.

“Yeah,” she breathed and moved to the window, folding her arms on the sill and looking up at the slope that was turning gray-blue in the fading light, as the sun tracked behind the mountain peaks.

Nate stared at her back, narrow despite the thickness of her jacket. She didn’t have one of those boisterous, outgoing personalities that some did, but her height and traffic-stopping looks gave her a larger-than-life quality. It made her seem to float somewhere above everyone else, making her

bigger in his mind. He was surprised whenever he noticed how slight she really was.

"Have you heard from someone? Are things starting to fall into place?"

"No. Just a lot of, 'I'll let you know if something comes up.'" She dropped her forehead against the glass. "Which makes me think it's stupid to turn down steady work." She sighed a cloud onto the glass, then pulled back to draw a face into it before it faded.

Such a whimsical little nut under that façade of ice cream frosting.

"It's not stupid to hope you'll get a better offer. What can I do to help?"

"You're so *nice*, Nate." She bumped her forehead lightly against the glass.

"I'm really not. Inside this head, I'm a judgmental asshole convinced I'm better than everyone around me."

She turned to scowl at him. "Including me?"

He grinned. "Nah, you've earned my respect."

She snorted. "*How*?"

"What do you mean, how? You were going to have my baby even though it sidelined your career."

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All the joy she'd come in with was gone, drained away to introspection.

He rose and went over to rub his hands up and down her arms. "I feel guilty as hell, you know. I want to ask Rolf to help you as a personal favor to *me*. I'm connected. Let me do this."

"Don't." Her brow wrinkled up. "Please don't."

He blew out a frustrated breath. "Why not?"

"Because—" She made her own noise of frustration and brushed past him to pace away, coming up in front of the poster that showed an aerial view of the resort.

He could see her fingertips digging hard into the elbows of her jacket. The quilting looked like it would pop. Her nail beds were white. It was so concerning, he lifted a hand to touch her, then instinctively thought, *Maybe not*.

Something primal in the energy around her lifted all the hairs on his body.

"Babe?" He didn't know where the endearment came from. He and Wanda used to laugh at couples who used it, but this was what it was for. Asking someone you cared about to open up the deep, dark caverns in their

soul. He didn’t know how he knew that’s where they were going, but he did.

“You know that thing I didn’t want to talk about the other night?” Her head dropped so she spoke to her boots.

“About why you left home so young?”

She nodded.

For some reason, his whole body tensed in anticipation of pain. “You want to tell me now?”

“Not really,” she said. “But—Look, it wasn’t rape or assault or anything like that. Don’t freak out.”

Too late. His inner caveman snatched up a club.

“What happened?” The metallic taste of bloodlust arrived on his tongue.

She flinched a little and said, “I don’t know. Just a lot of over-friendly touching. Talk to any woman and they’ll say they’ve experienced something like it. It was just really… It makes me really mad to think back on it, because I felt so… I don’t know. Let down. I didn’t have a sister or cousins to explain things to me. That was my mom’s job and she was just angry.”

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“About what?”

“These.” She turned and waved impatiently at her breasts. “One minute I was skinny and flat, then over a summer I grew boobs and hips. I still felt like a kid, but suddenly I was being treated like I was twenty-two. I didn’t understand any of it. Mom acted like I was supposed to be excited. Flattered. At first, she was all smiles that I got so many compliments, until she realized she wasn’t getting them anymore. If the attention had only been from boys, that would have been okay, I guess, but it was men.”

“What men?” He already knew. *Her stepfather is a card-carrying dink.* Nate’s hands made such tight fists, his bones ought to be splitting the skin over his knuckles.

“Middle-aged. *Any* age.” She sent a cautious glance toward him, dark-eyed, clearly uncertain of his reaction. Terrified she would find judgment as she searched his expression.

“Your stepfather?”

She nodded and shrugged, trying really hard to keep a stiff, unaffected look on her face, but he knew where she hid her aches in the hollows of her cheeks and the tension around her lips.

“You were thirteen? Fourteen?” It might not have been rape, but: “That’s still assault, Ilke.”

“I told my mom I wanted a different coach, but she didn’t have any money. That’s why she was dating him, so he would coach me. She was trying to get him to marry her and kept saying, ‘Do you want to ski or not?’ I did.” Her voice fractured on the last word.

The emotions coursing through him were equal parts fury and nausea. He squeezed the back of his neck, trying to get a grip on himself. Settle his hackles so he didn’t scare her with the violent rage trying to take hold in him. The pit of his gut was pure fire and his heart was pounding. He recognized all of that at a distance, while trying to keep his head on straight and navigate this minefield of bone-dissolving fury.

“He shouldn’t have touched you. Not like that. Not at all. As for your mother…”

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THAT WAS THE part that still agonized her. Ilke looked away, toward the closed door to Rolf’s office, still worried, deep down, that she must have been to blame if her own mother had thought so.

“You still speak to her?” He sounded as non-nice as he had claimed to be a few minutes ago. Tough and bitter and dangerous enough to make her shiver, even though she knew it wasn’t directed at her. “Still see her?”

“She’s my mom.” She shrugged. “I usually make sure he’s not there when I go.”

“That’s why you left home when you were fifteen?”

She nodded. “The year before, I saw Vivien at a race. She could tell something was going on and tried to ask me about it, said I could come live with her. I was really embarrassed. Mom made me feel like it was my fault and he made it seem like if he didn’t coach me, I wouldn’t make it. I was afraid to rock the boat and lose the one good thing I had. But once Vivien put the idea in my head that I could leave home, support myself, hire my own coach, I made it happen. Soon as I turned fifteen, I found a chalet job in Switzerland. I had to forge Mom’s signature, but at least I was out.”

She sent him another wary look, so worried he was going to think less of her.

“Vivien didn’t report him?”

“She did.” Her voice thinned with guilt and frustration. “First she confronted him and he said it was a physical sport and that’s why he had to grab my ass and crotch. She got him suspended from coaching for a few months and I was hauled into all these interviews that were *horrible*. I thought Mom was going to kill me, so I said what she told me to say. I just wanted it all to go away so I could ski. I know that’s awful.”

“You were a kid. Scared. It’s okay.”

“It’s not,” she said with chagrin. “But it put a scare in him, I guess. He wasn’t as bad after that and he hasn’t coached underage athletes since. I’m sure Mom holds it over him and that’s how she got him to marry her.”

“Have you ever gone to the police?”

“Where? Switzerland? Neither of us lives there anymore. And I’m not very excited by the idea of having to pay for a lawyer so my character can be called into question for not being honest about it when it happened. The best I can do is make sure it’s common knowledge that he expects female athletes to do more than ski under him. Somehow he still gets hired.”

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“Fucker,” he muttered.

She nodded. “He is. And I know I shouldn’t let him still mess with my head, but there’s this stubborn, twisted thing inside me that needs to prove to him that I *can* do it without him. That I can do it without anyone.”

“That’s why you won’t accept Trigg’s money or let me ask Rolf for a favor?”

“I don’t want to owe anyone anything, especially a man. Or give them something to hold over me.”

“I really don’t think it would be like that with either of them.”

“You might be right.” She shrugged. “But I don’t want to take the chance. Whatever I get, however far I go, it has to be something I earn on my own merit. I know that’s pigheaded, but it’s how I feel.” She let the corner of her mouth curl with fatalism.

“You scare the hell out of me, you know that? You’re so fucking determined inside that pretty, delicate-looking shell.”

“I’m not.” She hugged herself. “I’m scared and messed up and full of self-doubt. I thought you’d say I asked for it. I’ve never told anyone about

him."

"No, you did not ask for that. Your mother did the complete opposite of what a parent is supposed to do. I'm sorry that happened to you, but I'm glad you trusted me enough to tell me." He started to take her by the arms again, but hesitated, chin dipping so he could see into her eyes. "How are you feeling about being touched right now?"

She swooped into his open arms so fast, he rocked under the impact. Then he locked his arms around her, and she shuddered in a wave of relief.

He tightened his arms and pressed his mouth to her hair, inhaling deeply. His arms tightened another notch, as if he wanted to squeeze her inside his skin.

She could hardly breathe, but she didn't care. She'd never felt so safe in her life.

THEY STAYED AN hour down at the base, until the night guard showed up.

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Nate had finished up a few things and enlisted her to make up some file folders for him and start tidying the third room in the office trailer while she waited. That end of the trailer had turned into a catch-all storage for hand tools and other miscellaneous items, but the human resources manager would be needing it as an office space next week.

"Rolf has promised me a project coordinator, but I think we're going to hire an admin assistant and a bookkeeper first. I don't know where we're going to put everyone. Last year we operated out of an open-sided tent all summer, but we were mostly cleaning up the site and making plans for this year. Now it's time to staff up and man, do we need a lot of bodies."

Ilke thought it was exciting to see the new resort coming together. She stood for a long time at the poster on the wall, studying the terrain where she had skied in January, fighting an urge to ask him, "Why isn't it ready yet?" It was going to be fantastic.

Nate had his truck at the base. She offered to ski back to run the dog, but it was growing dark and the security guard said, "Can I keep him? I could use the company."

Nate shrugged. “We can give it a try. Text me if he doesn’t come back when you let him out to pee. He might head up to the lodge on his own.” Nate showed him where the dog food was kept for the times when they fed Murphy here, instead of at the lodge.

Nate loaded her borrowed skies and they drove back to the lodge, worked out in the fitness room, showered, and went to dinner. They didn’t talk about much of anything, but it was nice. Companionable.

Now, as she pushed aside her empty plate, she knew she wasn’t ready to say good night. It wasn’t like her to want to be with anyone, let alone a specific someone, for such an extended period of time, but that was exactly what she wanted—to be with him.

“I’m going to watch mindless sitcoms on my laptop. Want to join me?”

“I have to review some bids and read a technical manual. Also send an email to Rolf about the location of the helicopter pad. Need to do some math first so I know I’m not blowing smoke.”

“Fun.”

“I actually enjoy it.” He didn’t look too embarassed by his kink.

He must have seen how crestfallen she was at his rebuff, though. He gave the back of her hand a little stroke with his fingertips.

VirtualAdventures

“If you listen on earbuds, you’re welcome to hang out in my room.”

“I won’t distract you?”

He gave her a half-lidded look. “Always. But I’ll manage.”

That had her beaming on the inside, holding it to a smug little grin on the outside.

She changed into leggings and a baggy sweatshirt and collected her laptop. When she got to his room, he was on a face call with his son, but he let her in.

“It’s Miss Ilke. See? Do you mind?” He glanced at her as he moved to stand beside her so they were both in the frame.

“Hi, Aiden.” She smiled.

Aiden was in his Spider-Man pajamas, sitting on his bed. Ilke had the impression this call was a nightly ritual since there didn’t seem to be another adult in sight and the kid was pretty steady with the camera.

“Hi, Miss Ilke. Are you having a sleepover?”

“What? No!” She probably reacted with such panic from a guilty conscience, since it was in the back of her mind that it might turn into one,

but now she was blushing to the bottoms of her feet. “No, I’m just going to watch a movie with your dad.”

“What kind of movie?” That was a woman’s voice. She plopped down so hard behind her son, the screen joggled. “Hi.” Her round face held a big, cheeky grin as she squeezed her image into the screen beside Aiden’s innocent expression. “I’m Wanda. You must be Ilke.”

“Take it down a notch, would you?” Nate said with a pained frown. “Not that kind of movie.”

“What kind?” Aiden asked. “Cartoon?”

“Grown up,” Nate said, voice flat.

“And no dog. Hmm.” Wanda kept that mirthful grin on her face. “Convenient.”

“Would you—” Nate’s voice was edged in frustration. His hard stare at Wanda was visible in their postage-stamp-sized corner image.

Ilke stepped out of it.

“Can we go to the otter movie, Daddy? Please?”

“I have to see if it’s still playing, buddy. If there’s a matinee on Sunday, we can probably do that.”

Virtualventures

“Then you can come for dinner,” Wanda said brightly. “Both of you.”

“Take it down two notches,” Nate advised.

“Come on, Nate.” The way Wanda said his name was rich with familiarity and persuasion. History. It made Ilke’s heart hurt in inexplicable ways. She wondered if coming here had been a mistake. He had said his marriage was a lot to get over and maybe he wasn’t over it.

“We’ll talk about it and I’ll get back to you,” he said, looking Ilke’s way.

Ilke shrugged, silently letting him know she didn’t want to intrude. She wished she knew him well enough to read whether Wanda’s suggestion annoyed him or what. Did he want her to meet his ex-wife? That seemed like a reasonable thing for Wanda to expect if she and Nate were serious, but they weren’t.

Were they?

She was still feeling shaky on the inside after revealing her ugly little secret earlier. She kept everything to herself as a rule, but Nate already knew her deepest pain. He shared it. Somehow that had allowed her to spill out the one that used to be her worst agony.

He'd stood there and taken it in, then held her. Healed her.

She didn't know what that meant. They had kissed a few days ago, had been sharing meals and workouts and idle conversation, but the more time she spent with him, the more she wanted. She was becoming greedy, losing her edge where maintaining boundaries was concerned.

Nate was saying good night. "I love you, Son. Have a good sleep."

"I love you, too. Good night, Daddy. Good night, Miss Ilke."

"Good night," she called, voice holding the stretch this situation pulled on her heartstrings.

Nate signed off and moved to set his phone on the night table. He slid his fingertips into his back pockets.

"You don't have to come. Most animated movies are okay, but the audience participation can get on your nerves. We have to go into Kalispell, which means it's pretty much a whole-day shot. I limit the junk food, but he invariably snaps about six miles from home anyway."

"You chose project management over sales when you can pitch that hard?"

His mouth quirked. "I'm just saying, I'll owe you a proper dinner and movie if you risk this one. Or we could do that another time anyway." His brow lifted in self-deprecation over how smoothly he maneuvered her into a date one way or another.

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That should have made her smile, but her mouth felt all wobbly. Things were happening to her that she had never felt or even really understood could happen. Thrums of nervous excitement that he wanted to be with her. Yearning for closeness of every kind, but her future wouldn't have room for him.

"What are we doing, Nate? Because I don't know if I'll be here or…"

"I know." He came over to pry loose the hands she had clamped around her elbows. He brought them together in the middle of his chest. His big palms warmed her through, all the way up her arms and into her back and down to the pit of her belly. Lower. Into her thighs until her toes curled in delight at the warm swirls he sent through her, just with that light, cherishing hold on her twitching fingers.

She thought she could feel the thump of his heart against her wrist bone. She was quite certain she was falling into his eyes and would never come out, they were so dark and fathomless.

“I’m barely here myself. I’m a workaholic with a kid. The last thing I need is another failed relationship, but look at me.” He dropped his gaze to her hands in his. “When you’re not in front of me, I want to know where you are. When you are here, I want to touch you.”

“I like it when you touch me. When you’re not doing it, I wish you would.”

“Yeah?” His mouth quirked in tender amusement and he drew one of her hands up to his lips and left a damp kiss on her knuckle. “I can arrange that.”

How did such an innocuous touch feel so monumentally intimate? Maybe because she had never been one to enjoy affection, barely putting up with the air-kiss greetings some people demanded. Even massages irritated more than relaxed her, but Nate’s hands were different. When he rubbed his thumbs on the backs of her hands, she felt it rejuvenate something in her. Like she was rehydrating or filling her lungs with clean, cool air. It was like something necessary for her to thrive.

He brought her other hand up and rubbed his lips against the backs of her fingers. “We should probably talk about—”

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“I have an IUD.” She saw the flicker of surprise in his gaze and shrugged self-consciously. “I got it when I went for my follow-up. I used to like the patch because I could control when I got my period, but I wanted something more permanent and failsafe since…”

“Right. But I was asking about the movie—I’m kidding!” He laughed and grabbed her close before she had fully recoiled in appalled mortification.

“You’re evil.” She pinched his side and he caught her hand, arm staying hard around her.

“I’m a little bit evil, but things are so fucking heavy between us sometimes.”

“*You’re* heavy,” she retorted, using the hand that wasn’t in his to try pinching his back, only getting pullover between her finger and thumb because he had such taut skin over solid muscle.

He scooped her legs from under her, startling her into going stiff in his arms. “You’re not,” he said, and plopped her on the bed just as quickly as he’d picked her up. He dropped down beside her, then held himself on an elbow, gaze solemn, body warm and strong against hers. Pleasing.

“I wish this could be light and easy,” he said. “I wish we could mess around and just enjoy it. But I don’t want to get hurt and I sure as hell don’t want to hurt you.”

She traced the line where his cheek met his beard. His skin was ultra-soft in that one spot where he had freshly cleaned up the edges before dinner. She let her touch trail to pet his short beard, smoothing a couple of tiny hairs that were sticking the wrong way.

“That’s what New Year’s was supposed to be. Painless.”

“Yeah.”

She folded her arm beneath the side of her head, snuggling a little closer, fingertips still smoothing his beard, tracing his lips. She watched his Adam’s apple as he swallowed.

“Would you rather read your technical manual and I’ll go back to my room?”

“That would probably be the wise thing for both of us.”

He was right. She had never been particularly scared of falling or physical injury when she skied, but she was heart-stoppingly aware that opening herself to this man opened her up for pain she hadn’t known existed.

Virtualventures

She was also astonished by how much touching him, being with him, had already given her the same feelings of peace and excitement she got from skiing, but tenfold. Higher soaring joy, deeper visceral wonder, and more intense satisfaction.

It was a long way to fall, but oh, the view from the top as she wavered. How could she not throw herself into it?

She touched the back of his head.

He lowered his mouth onto hers, dragging her close at the same time. Their legs tangled and they both sighed as their bodies sealed chest to loins to thighs, like they were magnetized. The tension shifted from pull to something balanced and centered and secure. Unbreakable.

Their mouths did the same, slanting to fit so they were locked in a place of pure sensation. He was big and heavy even without pressing all his weight onto her. He intimidated, or should have, with those shoulders. His kiss was deeply possessive, tongue thrusting boldly into her mouth like he had every right.

She loved it. All of it. Everything he did. Her arm behind his neck pulled him in as she twisted, urging him onto her further, wanting him to press her flat into the mattress while he made love to her mouth with his own.

He complied with a growl, only half on her, but stretching out straight and hard, letting her feel more of his weight before he crooked one leg between hers, shifting her legs apart. He settled his fly against the tops of her thighs, so she felt the thick, hard shape of him pressing where her mound was an aching throb.

Her sweat shirt rode up and his fingertips brushed her skin, came back and burrowed without hesitation into the warmth. When he found her braless, he cupped the swell of her naked breast in a hot palm. His thumb grazed her nipple, causing her to shiver with delight as her nipple prickled and stood under his flickering touch. He groaned into her mouth.

This was how it had been the other time. Fast and physical, so intense and exciting she had to stay in the moment or risk her very life. She was greedy for his skin and her lips needed his and: “Why aren’t you inside me already?”

Virtualventures

“I’m trying not to come in my jeans,” he lifted to say, then dragged his mouth down to her neck. His thumb kept circling her nipple, but slow and deliberate while he scraped his teeth against her nape. “Slow down.”

“But I’m so ready. I am,” she insisted, pushing his hand into her leggings.

He swore as his touch met damp curls and moved easily in the valley between her slippery folds. He didn’t linger, only bit out a hard curse and sat up. He dragged her pants off as he went, without fanfare, expression fierce and hard as he gazed on her trembling thighs and pale blonde bush.

“The way you make me feel. It’s not civilized.” He used two fingers to part and explore, teasing her clit by stroking on either side of it, not over it.

She whimpered and squirmed, trying to guide his touch with one hand, plucking at the tail of his shirt with the other. “Take off your clothes.”

“Not yet.” He moved to drag her shirt up and off, though. Then he loomed over her on his elbows, his clothed body over her naked one, nose to nose as he looked into her eyes.

“I know you want to control this. Can you trust me to do it my way?”

Her heart lurched. She did like to control sex. Make it fast so she wasn't vulnerable too long. Hit as many gates as she could in as short a time as possible. There was something in the power of pushing a man past his breaking point, while she stayed in her zone—that appealed to her, too.

"I'll make you feel really good," he promised. He flicked the tip of his tongue against her upper lip so erotically, she clenched with her inner muscles, aching and restless.

She writhed, aroused and defenseless, very aware of her nudity under his fully clothed weight. She was reacting to his lightest touch in a way that felt like a huge disadvantage.

"I want to make you come this time, when I go down." He rubbed his lips against her jaw, kissed the tip of her nose, her chin.

An automatic protest rose in her throat. She hardly ever let a man go down and always ended it before she lost herself. Nate had aroused her briefly in January, but it always felt too *much.* Letting herself go like that was too intimate.

"You don't want that?" She saw the shadows behind his eyes. Old ghosts?

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"I don't know what I want," she confessed. *To feel safe*. Which she did with him, mostly. She couldn't believe the parts of her she had already let him see. This wasn't any different. Being unguarded was deeply unsettling, but she could trust him—she knew that in her heart.

It still felt like an act of blind faith to say, "Okay. If you want to."

He smiled, slow and hot with anticipation, body rocking so his thighs were between hers.

"Spread your legs. Spread 'em wide so I know you want me there."

"Can't I just say it?" she protested helplessly, chest tight.

"Show me." He slid down a little, still balanced on his elbows while his wide hands took each of her breasts, squeezing gently, just enough to make her nipples stand up high on the plump flesh like cherries on a sundae. He licked and swirled and teased, making her hips shift under the weight of him.

Part of her instinctively wanted to press her thighs closed, to ease the yearning ache between, but somehow they fell open. Giving him lots of space.

He sucked in a breath through his teeth. “Wider—Yeah. Like that.” He made a noise that was ancient and avid as he got his shoulders between her thighs and splayed her flesh again with his finger and thumb.

When his mouth came down, the sensation was so sharp she jolted. His touch on her firmed, pinning her thighs open while he laved at her clit with his tongue. As she grew hotter and wetter, two thick fingers invaded. She clenched herself on them, neck arched as she moaned. It was so good, acutely good. She started to think she couldn’t bear it and tried to catch his hair in her fist but it was too short.

He lifted his mouth, but she felt his breath on her pulsing flesh as he spoke. “I’ll stop if you want me to. Always.” She’d never heard that deep a rasp in his voice, though, like he was drugged or something. It nearly pulled her over the edge. “But I can feel how tight your pussy is gripping my fingers. You’re so close you’re going to snap. Let me give you this.”

She sobbed and opened her hand on the back of his head, urging him back to her needy, molten center—

He rocked his fingers inside her and sucked on her clit and gave her such a shattering orgasm her whole body twisted and she nearly screamed. He held her down and kept the contractions going as he fucked her with his fingers and made love to her with his mouth. Thrilling her. Pleasuring her. In control of her, but giving her all she needed in that moment.

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When the storm began to abate and she was limp muscles and panting breaths, he rose to tear off his shirt, then settled beside her, gaze hot and pleased, smug maybe. There was something tender there, too, beneath the scorching heat.

“Thank you.” The backs of his fingers smoothed the outside of her breast. “I needed to know I could give you that.”

Baggage from his own past? She didn’t let it intrude too much, just traced the pattern of hair on his chest, finding his dark nipples needle sharp. “Does that mean I can be in charge now?”

“Oh, fuck, no. I’m just getting started.” He took her hands and stretched her out beneath him, this time letting her feel all of him. His gaze stayed locked on hers, checking in, making sure she was with him.

When she pulled at her wrists, it was a test of his grip, not resistance to it. She didn’t know why she found his hold exciting. Probably because she could see from his smile that he was playing. Teasing. He was strong

enough to restrain her, if he wanted to, but all she had to say was, “No,” and he would let her go.

He wasn’t pushing her to accept him. He was teaching her she could trust him when he was in control. She was pushing *herself* to trust beyond what was comfortable for her. She wouldn’t have done it with anyone else, only him. It was exhilarating to feel so sure of him, to be able to let go of misgivings and simply enjoy. *Feel*.

“Fuck me,” she said, more to see if she could disarm him.

His hold on her wrists tightened and his pupils exploded so his eyes were pure liquid black. “I will,” he promised in a voice that was leather and velvet and danger and promise. “But you know I’m big. I don’t want to hurt you.”

“I can take you,” she reminded him.

His nostrils twitched. “When you’re hot and wet enough, yeah.” He rolled away and stood, took a condom from the nightstand.

“You don’t have to—”

“Just to be sure. And I gotta slow myself down, babe.” His smirk was self-deprecating as he stripped his jeans and shorts.

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He *was* big. His cock was thick and long, jutting out dark and hard from a black nest, fluid sitting on the tip. He rubbed it into his skin, then gave his cock a few lazy strokes, eyes on her, before he began rolling on the condom.

She cupped herself, exploring her own wetness and how sensitized her flesh was after the abrasion of his beard. When he only stood over her and watched, she crooked her knee open. “I’m ready.”

“Roll over. On your knees.”

“I can take you,” she insisted.

He only shoved a hand under her hip and flipped her. She started to come up on her elbows and he was already kneeling behind her, hot shaft nestled in the crack of her butt while his muscled thighs got between hers and his knees shoved hers apart.

“Bossy,” she accused.

“Trying to be a gentleman and take it easy on you.”

That made her laugh, but then he shifted and the wide dome of his head was at her entrance, pressing inexorably. Oh, he was so hard. She held very still, liking the stretch, but a little intimidated. She had forgotten that they’d

worked up to her taking all of him and there was good reason. He only gave her the tip and a couple of inches and she was shivering with reaction. Full and excited, but nervous.

“Come here. I want to hold you.” He drew her up off her hands, one arm across her chest, the other hand open on her abdomen, then skimming down to her mound.

Her knees were splayed open over his, stretching the muscles down the insides of her thighs. As her weight came up, his cock shoved into her a little more, making her react with a squeeze of her thighs against his bent legs. He was strong and immovable. His tense belly was a wall against her ass, his arms straining to hold her up in front of him as they stood on their knees on the bed.

“That’s all for now,” he soothed, nibbling at her nape in a way that had her shivering and clenching on him. He held her pinned in front of him with one iron-hard arm across her front. He fondled each of her breasts in turn with his free hand.

She moaned and twined her arms around his neck, straining to twist and kiss him. The position was athletically challenging, which excited her all the more.

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At the same time, the way her front was unprotected left her helpless against the onslaught of his touch. “Your tits look fantastic. You feel so fucking good, all tight around me like that. Feel.”

He guided her hand down to where her taut flesh clung around the intrusion of his thick shaft. She measured what he wasn’t giving her, the base of his hot cock and his tight, heavy balls. He groaned as she explored and caressed.

“I should have done this in front of the mirror. You’re so wet.” He scraped his teeth on her nape and sawed his fingertip against her clit. “Show me how you like it.”

She covered his hand and played his touch over the bundle of nerves, body pinned to his so she could hardly breathe, only squirm in delight as her arousal grew to a fever pitch.

His thick cock was a hard pressure that accentuated the sensations. She could only rock in abbreviated pulses of her hips, but even that was becoming too good. She was going to tip over the edge and wanted to savor this. She stopped touching herself, trying to fight back the crisis, but he

continued stroking her, forcing her higher. She was in a vise of pleasure, grinding with need against his lap, wanting more of him, more, *more*—

She bucked as an orgasm took her again, wracking her with shudders of ecstasy.

He kept stroking her, waiting until the pulses began to abate before he bent her forward again, one hand on the mattress, the other arm still supporting her. She dropped her hands to hold herself up and arched her back, pushing her ass into him so every last inch of him was inside her while she continued shivering with ecstasy.

Finally, he began to pump himself into her. Thrusting with subdued power, skin damp enough to cause hot friction against hers. “Tell me if that’s too much.”

She groaned in luxury, hands fisting in the blankets, barely able to speak but letting her body do the talking as she met each of his heavy thrusts with a shove of her body into his.

“Don’t stop,” she gasped.

He didn’t. Not even when she was tense and keening and thought she couldn’t handle the concentration of pleasure. By then he was slapping his hips into her ass, big hands holding her steady for his meaningful thrusts. She flung her hair back from her face, wild, never wanting this to end. Glorying in this primordial act.

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“Come,” he commanded, shifting only a tiny bit to tilt her hips and open her legs a little more, so the sensations were a fraction more intense, the ultimate pleasure impossible to avoid.

She buried her scream into the tangled blanket beneath her while he drove himself deep and held there, entire body shuddering with the force of his climax while her own turned her inside out and left her completely, undeniably, *his*.

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Chapter Thirteen

NATE'S PHONE ALARM went off at six, same as every morning. Today, however, another body shifted on the mattress. The scent of sex wafted from the covers as he moved to silence the depth-sounder ping that was his alarm tone.

When he turned back, Ilke was facing him, covers pulled up under her chin, blonde lashes blinking over sleepy blue eyes.

"I *have* to go to work. I didn't get my reading done last night." He had no regrets, but screwing each other's brains out hadn't changed the fact they occupied two very different, very busy worlds.

"You're the first man I've ever slept with."

"Yeah?" He probably shouldn't have thought that strange since he'd only made a habit of sleeping with one other person himself, but still. It was kind of sweet.

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"I didn't think I'd like it. I like my space."

"And?"

"It's nice." Her foot slid across to rest on his, toes curling in a little caress near his ankle.

She had given herself to him without reserve last night, blowing his mind even more than the first time. Yet somehow that little bit of footsie and her pleasure in waking to find him beside her was so impactful, his throat locked up.

He set his hand on the side of her neck where he could feel the throb of her pulse against the heel of his palm. He wanted to make love to her again. That's pretty much all he wanted to do, ever, since words didn't seem enough for the emotions she provoked in him. He didn't know how to make the rest of their lives work, but here, between the sheets, this was utter perfection.

"Go back to sleep if you want. I have to shower." If he couldn't stay here with her, it would be nice to at least know she was still in his bed.

“I thought you showered last night?” She tried for innocence, but he saw the slyness digging in at the corners of her smile.

“Dog’s gonna hump my leg if I go down to breakfast smelling like this much sex.”

She laughed and slid close, snuggling her naked softness into his growing wood. “I could shower with you.”

“Probably defeats the purpose, but sure. Let’s see what we can figure out.”

THEY HAD AGREED that things weren’t light and easy, but spent the week pretending that’s exactly how things were. They had glorious amounts of sex and slept spooned, waking naked and having sex again without asking what it meant. They met for workouts and dinners, never talking about anything heavy or worrisome.

Ilke’s holding pattern was beginning to make her stir crazy, though. She was determined to be ready for pre-season, even if she didn’t know what that would look like, and bought a used pair of cross-country skis in town. She worked on getting her legs back by going out every day for a couple of hours with Lina or anyone else she could find since Nate had warned her against skiing alone. The bears would be waking soon and the wolves and cats were shy, but they left tracks.

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As long as she put in a few hours with Vivien or the lodge, her room and meals were covered. Her budget for camps and coaching and technicians was pretty tight, though, at least until she got back on the circuit and *hopefully* started winning, so she kept running different budgets. Lots of low-end training? Or pay for a week of premium coaching at a top-shelf resort that had just opened up? That meant a flight to Sweden, accommodation…

Argh. She wished Nate was here to talk it over with her.

He had Aiden tonight, though. She was spending the day with them tomorrow, but they had agreed it would be better for Aiden if he had his dad to himself tonight.

Actually, Ilke had suggested it and Nate had very promptly agreed.

Very promptly.

Which meant that instead of looking up flight costs, she was sitting here full of heartache because *Nate had agreed*.

What sort of role did she want in Nate's life that she was disappointed in the one she had? She had no right to complain. They were friends-with-benefits. He was like no one else in her life, listening to her frustrations and sharing his own. Or not. They talked or they didn't and it was always comfortable. He made her laugh with his dry asides, and the sex! New Year's Eve had not been an anomaly of hormones. They were made for each other.

Which made her hesitate to dip into her savings to book a flight. There was also a strength and conditioning trainer in Austria who might consider taking her on. He was very well-known and reputable, which was why his schedule had been booked out a year ago. So far, he had only agreed to meet with her as a courtesy. To offer some tips. Showing up would go a long way to proving to him how serious she was, making it more likely he would take her on as a client. She *was* serious. She needed this.

But Europe was a long way away and she couldn't afford the time or the cost to chase the wrong horse.

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Ask Rolf, Nate had said again the other night. *At least for advice. That's free, right?*

She was growing tempted. Desperate, even, but Rolf was still in Germany. Trigg was supposed to be on his way back here, but she had no intention of taking any funding he might offer. *Earning* a sponsorship from Wikinger was one thing. Of course, if she *really wanted to ski*, she wouldn't have reservations in how she made it happen.

Well, if she really wanted it, she would already be back in Sweden, working out at a local gym if nothing else.

She *did* really want it. She also wanted to be here. With Nate.

Oh, no. She buried her face in her hands. She was doing it. Letting a man pull her off course.

As if on cue, someone knocked on her exterior door with a muffled thump, as if he wore gloves. "It's me," Nate said.

She scrambled off the bed and opened up. Murphy immediately tried to come in.

She shoved her thigh into the crack to stop him while Nate said, “We’re taking a sled down to the base. Rolf needs me to get some info off a couple of the drawings from the original resort and send it to him. Wanna come?”

“In the *dark*,” a little voice said. Aiden turned from peering through the rails. He was in his snowsuit, boots and mittens on, and held ski goggles against his face that were far too big for him. The better to protect his big, brown eyes, she supposed.

It was a clear sky with a fat moon. The world was a landscape of slate blue, still and cold enough her nose was already tingling, sniffing that dry, frosted air.

“Will there be room for me? Where does Murphy sit?”

Aiden giggled. “He runs beside.”

“Oh. All right. I’ll meet you downstairs as soon as I put warmer pants on.”

Nate and Aiden were sitting on the running snowmobile when she got down to the parking lot. The headlights were on, Aiden perched in front of Nate. Nate was tightening the goggles over the boy’s hood.

“Thank you,” she said as she snuggled in behind him.

Virual Ventures

“It’s a trick,” he said. “I’ll be a few minutes and he’s already asking about building a snowman.”

“Joke’s on you. I love building snowmen.”

Nate kept his speed down, but it didn’t take long to get there. The security guard came outside as soon as he heard the sled coming. Nate went inside with him while she rolled snowballs with Aiden. The snow was too dry to stick properly, though. They amused themselves by throwing loose clumps in the air and watching Murphy jump to try to catch them in his teeth.

It made them both laugh and she didn’t know what made her happier—the kid, the dog, the snow sparking in the moonlight, or all of it put together.

What if this was her life? Playing with Nate’s child? Children? Not that he’d suggested he wanted such a thing. But what if he did? Was she prepared to give up her dream?

The air she drew into her lungs with the next breath was so cold it made her ache like her whole body was an ice cream headache.

She had never had anything beyond skiing, so it hadn't been hard to stay motivated and focused. This break from the grind was easy to get used to. It was *easy*. If she truly wanted an Olympic medal, however, she had to work for it. Put aside *everything*. Physical comfort, friendships, a silly night of throwing snowballs for a dog while a little boy cheered. Winning was *hard*.

But the fire for it still burned inside her. *Want*. A voice in her head warned her she didn't have time to waffle and waste. She would see results if she put the work in. Hurry, hurry.

Maybe.

She had never doubted her ability. From the time she began skiing, she'd been told she was a natural. When the heat was on, she performed at her best. When competitors rose in the ranks alongside her, she measured herself against them and found ways to be better.

When she had walked out of her mother's house, she had had faith in herself. It had driven her to keep at it despite all the hurdles she had faced.

Standing at the bottom of Whiskey Jack's ungroomed *piste* in the dark, dog and child frolicking at her feet, she wanted her confidence back. She wanted to know who she was and where she belonged.

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Fear of going through all of that time and effort and grit for nothing was what really held her back from putting up the money and taking another chance at chasing gold. It had nothing to do with Nate or unanswered emails or a desire to play rather than work.

What if she simply wasn't good enough?

Nate came outside. "Snowman's union on strike?"

"For better conditions. This snow's like baby powder." She clapped it between her hands and the ice crystals poofed into a cloud, like fairy dust.

He nodded approval at her pun, then whistled for Murphy who was wandering into the shadows near the trees. "We gotta go, Son. It's nearly bedtime."

"Look at the stars," Aiden said.

Ilke tilted her head back. Even with the light over the porch of the trailer, the sky was a dazzling array of twinkles.

"That's a lotta wishes," Aiden said.

Ilke chuckled, then nodded, chest tight. She had only ever had one wish and look how it had turned out. What did that say about the odds for the

new ones beginning to sparkle inside her? They were even more light-years away, same as the first.

Weren't they?

She trailed behind Nate and Aiden and settled in behind Nate's strong back. She wrapped her arms around Nate's waist while he got Aiden's mask into place again, settling her cheek between his shoulder blades, needing the contact right now.

Before he started the sled, he picked up her hand and set a small kiss in the bit of inner wrist exposed between her sleeve and glove, as if he sensed her struggle and wanted to console her.

His tender gesture made her torment that much worse.

AIDEN HAD BEEN too young to sit through movies when Nate and Wanda had still been married. It was something Nate usually did alone with him, unless they were visiting family in Sacramento—then it was a swarm.

When it came to dating, Nate had never introduced a romantic interest to Aiden. The females Aiden saw in his father's life were exactly like the males—co-workers at the lodge, like Glory and Devon. They didn't go places with him and his son.

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Ilke understood and respected his desire to protect Aiden, which Nate appreciated.

Nevertheless, as he'd been walking by her door last night, his fist had reached to knock all by itself while the words, "Let's see if Ilke wants to come," had slipped from his lips.

It was the damnedest thing, but he wanted to share his son with her. He was so friggin' proud of his kid. He would do anything to protect him, but he wanted her to see what a great person he was. How much potential he had. How he was funny and inquisitive and opinionated.

He wanted his son to know Ilke and like her and feel as good around her as Nate did.

As if she was sticking around and they had some kind of future.

Highly unlikely, if Aiden kept kicking her seat.

The day had gone well with lunch and a bit of shopping before the movie. The cartoon itself was par for the course, the atmosphere as chaotic as any theater full of young families. At least he'd been able to set his arm along the back of Aiden's seat and tuck his hand against Ilke's warm neck. She had smiled at him while sharing her popcorn with Aiden, taking in stride their disappearance mid-movie, when Nate took Aiden to the bathroom.

"Son," Nate warned.

"So-reee," Aiden said in a sing-song.

Nate had already explained to Ilke that Aiden didn't realize he was growing. He had already told the boy to drop his boots and telling the kid to sit still was a losing battle. He didn't know what else to do.

"Can I stay with you tonight?" Aiden asked.

Here it comes. Nate wasn't the fun parent on purpose, but his agreement with Wanda was one night a week and just about any stretch of days he was able to book off, which was invariably the holidays. That wouldn't work in a few years, when Aiden was in school and couldn't fly to Sacramento at the drop of a hat, but for now it gave Nate the flexibility he needed.

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The flip side was, he liked to maximize the time he did have with his son. Sometimes they got a hotel room so they could play at the aquatic center or go to the indoor jungle gym or play mini-golf. Even when they hung around the lodge, Nate kept him busy. They fished, went out on the ATVs in the summer, the sleds in the winter. They tobogganed and, soon as he got a lift installed, they would start snowboarding together.

Hell, if it was up to him, he'd have his kid full-time, but such was life. "I have work and you have school tomorrow, Son."

"I don't wanna go to school." His voice veered a few notches toward a whine.

"Right on time," Nate said, pointing out the sign that proclaimed, *Haven, six miles*.

"Really?" Ilke asked.

"Every time. What's wrong with school, Son? You get to play with your friends. That's fun, right? How's Zuzu? What about Ryker and Will? You like to play with them, don't you?"

"Will is a bugger."

Ilke choked and shot a wide-eyed look at Nate.

“Where did you hear that word? You can’t call people that, Aiden.”

“Why? He *bugs* me.”

Ilke cupped her hand over her mouth, snorting behind it.

“Okay, but don’t call him that. It’s not a nice word.”

“How come?”

“It’s just not—Would you stop?” He prodded Ilke, who was making noises in her throat like a wounded animal. His own voice was strained.

“Will always says I have to sit by him in circle time, but I like to sit by Zuzu. Pleeeeze can I stay with you tonight?”

How kids found that exact pitch, like nails on a chalkboard, Nate would never fully understand, but Aiden was a master at it. It drained all the humor out of him.

“Son—”

“What’s circle time?” Ilke asked.

Aiden explained about attendance and looking at the calendar and noting the weather.

Ilke had a bunch more questions about what he did at school. She told him some things about growing up in Sweden and somehow they made it the rest of the drive without the usual escalation.

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“Thanks,” Nate said when he pulled into Wanda’s driveway.

“For what?” Ilke asked, genuinely not aware of the distraction she had provided.

Her conversation with Aiden had been exactly that. They’d been learning about each other and Nate was soft as three-ply bathroom tissue because he found that insanely sweet.

Aiden remembered that they were coming in. Rather than kick up about not going to the lodge, he was excited for some promised Lego building with Daddy.

Nate went around and helped Aiden back into his boots, then set him on his feet to scramble around the truck and in through the gate.

“Were you thanking me for this? Coming to dinner?” Ilke asked in an undertone, glancing at the windows overlooking the drive. “I don’t mind.” Her expression was wary, though.

She had every right to be. This was really fucking weird.

Small effing town, though, because Ilke had said she liked Frankie and wouldn’t mind seeing her again.

Wanda was urging Aiden up the stairs when they got to the back door. “Tell Frankie our guests are here.” Wanda held the door wide for them to enter, then offered a hand to Ilke. “It’s nice to meet you in person.”

“Thank you for inviting me.”

“Of course. And please let me tell you how sorry I am about your loss. Frankie wouldn’t normally share anything about a patient, but—”

Nate could see Ilke retreating fast into her blonde bomb-shelter.

“Appreciated,” Nate said, taking Ilke’s coat and inserting himself between the two women long enough to give Ilke a chance for a bracing breath. He sent a light hand down her back as soon as he had one free.

You’re not alone here.

Frankie came downstairs with Aiden. She greeted Ilke warmly and poured drinks. Nate stuck with a coffee since he was driving and had to finish some work later. Ilke had a glass of wine with the women, even though she was mostly abstaining now she was getting serious about her workouts. He was really going to owe her for this.

They all moved into the living room where Nate stretched out on the floor with Aiden and the tub of building bricks. Frankie and Wanda sat side-by-side on the sofa. Ilke perched in the armchair, expression cautious as Wanda set in with her interrogation.

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She started out with innocuous questions, asking about Sweden. Aiden chimed in, repeating what Ilke had told him in the truck.

“Babies nap outside. Even in winter.”

Wanda then had questions about their preschool curriculum and childcare fees. Frankie wanted to know about the healthcare system and how that was funded. Soon the inquisition turned to government funding for sport and how Ilke had ended up skiing professionally.

“I was scouted at a race by Trigg’s coach, actually. That was before Trigg switched to boarding. Coach Wurgler persuaded my mother to take me to Germany for a season so I could train with him there. That lasted three years, until my mother began dating the man who became my stepfather. We moved to Switzerland and he was my coach for a few years, then I got a job, moved out, changed things up, eventually started winning again. I lived in northern Italy for a few seasons and moved back to Sweden when I made the national team.”

“Your mother is still in Sweden?”

“She moved to New Zealand a few years ago.”

“Oh. That’s a lot of places to live. Where do you consider home?”

“Wherever my skis are,” Ilke said wryly, glancing at Nate before looking to the hands she had stacked in her lap. “Stockholm, at the moment.”

“Is this your off-season? When do you start training again?”

And there it was.

“Wanda,” Nate said.

Frankie gave him a look for his tone, but screw it. He and Wanda had enough history, he could tell her when to rein it in.

“I’m curious about how the training schedule works,” Wanda said. “I’m not prying about plans.”

They were one and the same in this instance, but Aiden asked him to help him find a piece. Nate glanced up at Ilke to make sure she wasn’t searching for the door, then started combing through the bin for an angled nib.

“Things went sideways this year, obviously. But I usually mix things up in summer with other sports like cycling or wind-surfing. Something that’s different enough to be a fun break, but keeps me conditioned. I’ve been cross-country skiing, but once the snow melts, I’ll maybe try kayaking and swimming. I typically spend a few weeks skiing in New Zealand, testing equipment, working on technique.”

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“You take your skis there?”

“I keep a few pairs at my mother’s, and ship the rest, yes. I travel with a few dozen. I also need a technician to take feedback and make repairs, wax and sharpen edges, and a trainer of course.”

“That must get expensive,” Frankie murmured.

“I guess that’s why athletes need sponsors,” Wanda said. “Who—”

“Wanda,” Nate cut in. “Is there anything I can do to help with dinner?”

Her shoulders fell. “I’m just curious. Am I making you uncomfortable, Ilke?”

“They’re questions I’ve been asked before,” Ilke said with an unruffled smile, but he saw the tension around her eyes. Heard the strain in her answers.

“I’ll dress the salad,” Frankie said, touching Wanda’s arm. “Why don’t you come check the lasagna?”

They sat down a few minutes later to garlic bread, Caesar salad, and a lasagna recipe that was a nostalgia trigger for him.

“I forgot how good your lasagna is, Wanda. Thank you,” he said sincerely.

“I’ll give Ilke my recipe.”

A beat of silence, then Ilke said, “And I will give it to the chef at the lodge, because neither of us has a kitchen.”

“Oh, right.” Wanda laughed. “What do you think of Nate’s project?”

“He knows what I think,” she said with the sassy look he was growing to need like air. “He should work faster.”

“Get shoveling so I can see where I’m working.”

She grinned. “It’s going to be amazing. Truly, I am in awe and cannot wait.”

She said it more to him than the women. She held his gaze with a look that swelled his heart in his chest. In the back of his brain, the usual pressures played. *If* the money kept coming. *If* he stayed on time and budget. But he was proud of what he was doing. To have her feel as excited for what he was building as he was made the whole project that much sweeter.

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“Will you stay here, then? I mean, the resort is supposed to open this coming winter, isn’t it?” That was Frankie chiming in, glancing at Nate for confirmation on the deadline. She sounded friendly and curious.

Wanda doubled-down with interest, holding her cutlery suspended as she waited for Ilke’s answer.

Nate had known this was a fishing expedition, but now he was genuinely pissed off. He had said, *No*.

“It will be some time before the sport school and athletes’ facility is staffed and running,” Ilke said, but carefully because her future was such a sensitive topic. “I can’t imagine it will be ready on opening day. Programs like that take time to develop.” She glanced at Nate.

“My job is to get the buildings in place and the lifts moving, preferably not the other way around. How Rolf runs things after that is his business.” Literally. But it wasn’t Nate’s experience that Rolf dragged his feet on anything.

“What about your job?” Frankie asked with a frown, glancing at Wanda with yet another check-in. Those two were definitely still conspiring. “I

thought you were here for a few years at least," she said to Nate.

"There's a five-year plan for expansion. As long as I keep doing my job right, I have one."

"But if Ilke has to train… Where do you think you'll go, Ilke?" Frankie asked her point-blank.

"You know what?" Nate said, voice tight. "We need to steer this conversation in another direction."

"Nate," Wanda said in a plea that urged, *Don't be mad*.

Way too late for that. He eyed how much food was left on Ilke's plate and glanced at the clock.

"It's a work night for me. I hope you won't find it rude if we eat and run." He shot a flat look at his ex-wife.

"We're just curious," she said under her breath, sounding hurt. She reached to wipe the corner of Aiden's mouth with a napkin.

"*Fuck*," Nate said when they were pulling out of Wanda and Frankie's driveway.

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"It wasn't that bad," Ilke said, folding the recipe Wanda had written out for her. She would give it to the chef, but she would also keep a copy for herself—not that she knew when or where she would make it. "She wants to know what kind of person is hanging around her son's father. I wish my own mother had shown that much concern."

"That's not what that was." Nate rolled through a stop sign onto the highway. Nothing was coming, but the way he picked up speed suggested he had just robbed a bank and wanted a clean getaway.

"What, then?"

He didn't answer, seeming to prefer to fume.

She sighed, trying not to think about her inability to provide solid answers to the women's questions.

"Wanda wants another baby. They do. Frankie wants to get pregnant."

Ilke turned her head. "You don't approve?"

"Here's the thing." She barely saw the cut of his hand through the glimmer from the dash lights. "I didn't have my parents. I love my

grandparents and I am incredibly grateful for the life they gave me, but you don't aim for that. That's a contingency plan for when life hits you in the face. The way Wanda and I are working things out, this was never the goal. Not my goal, anyway. It's a fallback position."

"Okay. But I don't understand how Frankie getting pregnant would affect you. They would be a two-parent family. Are you, like, against two women—"

"*No*." He drew a breath as though gathering tested patience.

"Because it means some other man comes into the mix? Couldn't she go to a bank or something?"

"Sure, but we already have this functioning co-parent relationship and wouldn't it be nice if Aiden had a sibling?" His tone was so scathing and bitter, it took Ilke a moment to fully appreciate what he was saying.

"Wait." He couldn't be serious. "Are you saying they want you to—" The absurdity struck her right in the funny bone. She clapped a hand over her mouth, quite certain he was too angry to see the humor, but it was sputtering from between her clamped lips.

"It's not fucking funny, Ilke."

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She couldn't hold it in and dropped her hand to release a gale of laughter. "It really is."

"It's so fucking not." His fury made it extra funny.

"Think about it." She strained to talk around the bubbles of hilarity that kept rising from the middle of her chest into her throat and coming out as peals of laughter. "If I had had your baby and Frankie had your baby…" Her eyes were watering. "Wanda already had—"

"Cut it out." Oh, he was mad.

She worked at stifling herself, wiping under her eyes and drawing even breaths, but it took solid effort.

"I'm sorry," she said, sniffing. "You're right. If I have any say in the matter, you are definitely not fucking Frankie." But for some reason, just saying that made her break down again.

"I thought *I* might have some say in the matter," he informed her coldly, which only kept her going.

"Stop it. I'm so fucking…" He made a noise of subdued rage. "Wanda knew how much it meant to me to have a family where both parents come home every night to our kids. She *lied* when we got married, and had our

son knowing what my expectations for our future were. Now we're *this*, and she wants to make it even more of a Jackson Pollock painting?"

The pain beneath his anger allowed her to finally get hold of herself.

"I didn't mean to laugh." She reached a contrite hand to his. "It caught me off guard."

"Tell me about it." He turned his hand to hold hers, giving her a little squeeze of reprimand, then kept her in his warm grip.

"But you can't be *too* angry. I can see why they asked." She had to hang on to his hand as he tried to pull away. "You're a wonderful father, Nate. That's why *I* wanted your baby. I can't blame them for seeing the same thing."

"Yeah, well, I'm not a fucking stud service." He let her keep hold of his hand, though.

She sighed, turning her face forward into the dark beyond the headlights. "They were trying to figure out if you and I are planning to try again to have our own."

"Yeah." The way his voice sounded so graveled abraded inside her own chest. "Which wouldn't have any bearing on whether I'd make a kid with Frankie. I *won't*."

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She didn't say anything, only sat there wishing she could have a do-over on having his baby. At the same time, however…

"I need to make some hard decisions, Nate."

His thumb stroked the back of her hand. He sighed. "I know."

"Care to weigh in?"

"I don't think that would be fair."

He was right. He could offer a future that she might take with both hands only to feel held back and cheated. This was something she had to decide on her own.

They were quiet the rest of the trip, just holding hands.

He had left Murphy with Lina because they were planning to be out all day. He took her in his arms the minute they were in his room.

She felt as urgent for closeness as he seemed to be. Not because they'd had to skip a night while Aiden was here. It was the outside pressures, the things demanding a shift that neither of them wanted to make because *this*. Why should they ever have to think about anything beyond how perfectly

their mouths fit, how good his palm felt rubbing her breast, how the flex of his shoulder muscles under her hands somehow weakened her knees?

His skin against her own was better than cashmere. The scent in his neck made her drunk. When she tasted his salty flavor, taking as much of him in her mouth as she could, she wanted to suck him dry.

“Not tonight, babe,” he growled, fist in her hair gentle but inexorable. “I gotta be inside you.”

Then he made sure she was ready for him, tonguing her until she was nearly wild before sliding deep, filling her so completely she shook. A few testing pumps and she was locking her knees against his rib cage, hands clawing at his back while an orgasm twisted through her.

“Feeling you come is almost better than doing it myself, you know that?” He cupped a tender hand against her cheek and kissed her, moving in lazy thrusts.

She stroked his hair and beard, yearning for things she couldn’t have. “If I could give you what you want, I would.” She meant the idealized family he craved.

Solemn now, he said, “I wish I could give you what you want, too.”

They had this, though. It was almost enough.

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Chapter Fourteen

"Good morning, Nate."

The male voice had Ilke lifting her gaze from her breakfast to find a blond, blue-eyed hunk had stopped at their table. He looked vaguely familiar.

"Hey, Quinn. You get in last night?" Nate rose to shake the man's hand.

"Yeah. Crew's sleeping in, but I was hoping to catch you before you head down to the base. Warn you we'll be crawling around."

Right, Ilke recalled. He was a producer of extreme sports documentaries. She had occasionally seen him from a distance or in his own work. He was as fearless as any of the athletes he filmed, often posting GoPro footage of leaps from cliffs or photos of stitched injuries sustained while working.

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"Have you two met? Ilke Lundquist. Quinn Baxter," Nate provided.

"I know you by reputation," she said, smiling and rising for a quick handshake. "I'm always impressed by what you do."

"Back at you," he said with smooth flattery.

She automatically dismissed it. Men said things.

Then he added, "I was hoping to schedule some time with you today."

"Me?" He was looking right at her, so she resisted the urge to look behind her. "You know I ski Alpine, not freestyle?" Even at that, he usually showcased the really daring sports like cliff diving and parkour ten stories off the city sidewalk.

"Quinn is gathering footage here for a How They're Made documentary," Nate said.

"To show the resort coming online? That's a great idea."

"This trip is more about setting up time-lapse cameras for the melt and construction of all the buildings." Quinn pushed his hands into his pockets. "But Rolf told me you were here. Suggested I get your impressions of the terrain, the snow. From an athlete's perspective."

“Um, sure.” Rolf and Trigg couldn’t exactly talk up their own project, could they? But what about her own credibility? On the one hand, a cameo in the sort of films that Quinn Baxter made was fantastic exposure that could only help her in terms of sponsorships, but what if her return to skiing was short-lived and a disaster?

She agreed, not really feeling she had a choice, and figured there was a good chance he wouldn’t use her interview anyway.

She sat down with him a few hours later. By then she was wearing makeup and a black turtleneck. He took her onto the patio where she stood against the rail. It was the third week of April. The pond was still frozen, but the trees had dropped their loads of snow to show dark green boughs. It smelled damp and pine-fresh out here.

Quinn already had lighting umbrellas and bulbs ensuring she wasn’t backlit by the bright scenery. His camera was on a tripod and he stood next to it making final adjustments.

Ilke had done the odd on-camera interview before, mostly for local networks in Sweden. She had been tutored on how to stand still and straight, smile, speak a little slower than normal, since nerves got the better of some people.

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“Say something,” he said, fiddling with something she presumed was sound levels.

“When do you expect this movie to come out?”

“We’ll be in post-production this time next year, hoping for wide release as the second season opens. Provided the first one opens successfully and we get some good edits of these hills being shredded. Ready?”

“One thing, off the record,” she hurried to say, holding up a staying hand. “I, um, had a miscarriage recently. I’d rather not discuss it on camera. If you were going to ask me what happened in Korea, that’s what happened.”

“I was.” He picked up the notepad he had left on a nearby stool and drew a line across a few things, then made a few fresh notes. “Okay. Take your time and answer as fully as you need to. There’s no rush. Ready?”

She took a breath, tried to smile without looking stiff, then nodded.

He started with some background questions. She repeated a lot of what she had told Wanda and Frankie. Then he asked about the terrain here.

“Very challenging in some places, in the best ways. There are no groomed slopes yet, but I saw the potential when I skied the powder in January.”

“I was up there end of January,” he said. “It’s something else, isn’t it?”

“They told me ten miles. That’s sixteen kilometers?”

“Two-thousand-meter drop in elevation.”

“We took two hours coming down. We stopped a few times for avalanche control. I was exhausted, but went up again that afternoon.” She laughed at herself. “No spa built yet, either. I was sore the next day, but I couldn’t get enough. No regrets.”

“Is that what draws an athlete to make a particular resort their training facility? You’ve moved around a few times. What will this mountain offer the professional that others don’t?”

“The Johanssons,” she said dryly. “They’re bringing a unique perspective to the development. Recreational skiers will love it here, but as an athlete, you’re looking beyond good conditions, wanting a good club. I foresee both when this resort opens.”

“When you say ‘a good club,’ do you mean a good community among fellow athletes? Do you look to them for support? Or are they the competition?”

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“We all want to win. You can’t win without competitors or you’re just having a nice day of skiing.”

He nodded amused acknowledgment.

“Of course, I study my fellow athletes to see what they’re doing. If I see something that might give them an edge, I’ll try it. Maybe that athlete has a protein shake before practice. I’ll see if that improves my own performance. There’s no magic bullet, though. Well, I guess there is one for protein shakes—”

She was going off the rails, but he only grinned and rolled his wrist, indicating she should keep talking. She tried to focus on answering the question intelligently.

“I don’t begrudge my competitors when they win. They worked just as hard as I did for their chance.”

She had been trying to internalize that truth since her loss in Korea. The winners had won because they had been prepared to win, same as her.

When she moved out of the way, it became their day. It shouldn't feel like a robbery.

"Your real competitor is the mountain. The conditions of the day," she said, knowing as she spoke that wasn't the whole truth. Somehow this had become a bit of a confessional. Her smile faded as she grew even more reflective.

"Actually, your hardest competitor is yourself. Body and soul, head and heart. It all has to want the win. And even when you do everything right, you can still lose." Her body had let her down: first in Korea, then with the baby. She still hadn't forgiven it.

"Which is really disappointing." Her voice broke as emotion overcame her. "Can we—?" She waved at the lens with one hand, appalled with herself. "I'm sorry."

"Of course." Quinn touched the camera and pulled a packet of tissues from his pocket.

"You're prepared," she said, sniffing as she plucked one out.

"You have no idea how many times I've started to film someone only to realize they have snot running down their lip."

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That made her laugh and shove the tissue against her nostrils.

"You're fine," he assured her. "Doing really well."

"The lack of sexist questions makes it easy," she joked.

"I was just getting to those."

She laughed and used a fresh tissue to ensure her mascara wasn't running.

"I'd like to finish up with a couple of softball questions. If you don't mind."

She agreed and went back into position.

He restarted the recording and asked, "Are you a natural blonde?"

He was joking, but she still gave him a disgusted look. "Are *you*?"

"Nice." He nodded approval, then rapid-fired a few quick questions like, "Best race? Worst injury?" And finished up with, "What do you wear under your racing suit?"

It was a silly question that sports athletes were asked as often as Scotsmen about their kilts. She gave him the pat and predictable answer.

"Skin to win."

“Naturally,” he commented, pressing a button and nodding. “Thanks. That was great.”

She tucked her hand behind her neck, still feeling self-conscious about her small breakdown.

Trigg came out from the lounge at that point, though—Murphy on his heels, tail wagging. The men did the shake and half-embrace greeting.

When Trigg transferred his attention to her, she wasn’t ready for awkward questions, so she quickly asked, “What do you wear under your snow pants when you compete?”

“Skin to win, man,” he said promptly.

“That’s what I said.”

“Yeah, but I shave it down to the wood. Like a swimmer.”

God in heaven. Ilke made her escape.

“THE WORLD DOESN’T match the way I was raised,” Marvin said, topping up her wine.

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Vivien put down her pen and followed the direction of his gaze. The lounge was full of young folk, virtually all of them on their phones. Some leaned close to look at their neighbor’s screen, but only a few were having actual conversations.

“All those push-up bras and liquid eyeliner, going to waste,” Vivien agreed with dismay.

Quinn’s crew was mostly male with one woman who looked boyish and her girlfriend who wore a dress. The first woman had her ear in one half of a pair of headphones.

Glory was leaning to listen in the other. Wedding music was being auditioned.

Rolf was on Glory’s other side, equally red-eyed from jet lag. He slouched tiredly, but was giving Quinn his attention. Trigg was on the other side of Quinn, but turned away from the table so he could look at something the girls from housekeeping were showing him on their phones. Those girls were wearing short skirts, lipstick, and ought to sign a waiver before letting Trigg so much as glance their way.

Nate was on Trigg's far side, Ilke beside him. She was on her phone; he was listening to Quinn. One of Quinn's boys had sat down next to Ilke a few minutes ago, expression not unlike Murphy's when he smelled bacon. That's when Ilke had reached for her phone and Nate had reached for her hand.

Those two were so adorably connected these days. It was lovely to see.

Quinn's boy gave up and looked at his own phone, not giving any notice to the chambermaids or the weekend desk clerk, Shana, who was sending smoldering looks his way.

"But every generation thinks the next one is disrespectful, ignorant, and doomed," Vivien said.

"They are ignorant and doomed. When I was their age, I had a newborn. Twenty years went by like that." Marvin snapped his fingers. "They ought to pull their heads out of their devices and pay attention."

She knew the feeling, but lately felt less resentful of her age. She'd been angry through the menopause transition. The boys had grasped their own lives with both hands. Her husband was gone. The men courting her were more interested in a nurse or a purse than her feminine charms and then, even those had begun letting her down.

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"Do you think Rolf and Glory will have kids?" Marvin folded his arms on the bar to lean close, lowering his voice conspiratorially. He was looking rather dapper, having shaved before dinner and wearing a suit vest with a subtle stripe in it over his white shirt and tie. He had rolled up his sleeves and she noticed the hairs on his arms were white. She had an urge to pet them.

"I'm dying to ask her," Marvin continued, looking toward his daughter. "But I'm afraid she'll pick up on how badly I want to be a grandfather and refuse out of spite."

"Maybe let her get the wedding over with first," Vivien said dryly, not so comfortable with her age that she was ready to be called Grandmamma, even by her stepson's children. "But I expect Rolf is eager to raise the next gold medalist. Man knows how to get things done, too. Serves him right if his child turns out to prefer folk dancing or computer programming."

Marvin chuckled and straightened to polish glasses. "Or write love stories, like Glory. What about Nate and Ilke? What's happening there, do you know?" He glanced their direction.

“You old gossip,” she chided.

“My primary source of entertainment while I was teaching. That’s a sad fact, but there was no shortage of drama between young folk on a college campus. I worry about Ilke. Has she heard from her mother at all?”

Vivien shook her head. “I’d be dead shocked if she told her anything about it.”

“Hmmph. Well, Trigg’s always coming and going. I would have thought she would be back to training by now. Or is she staying to be with Nate?”

She and Nate had their heads together, cooing like lovebirds.

“I’ve tried talking to her a few times, offered her money if she needs it. I’m sure that’s an issue, but she’s always been extremely independent, determined to do things herself.” Vivien was heartened to see her in what looked like a healthy relationship with a terrific young man, but Ilke had always been wary of being in debt to anyone.

“Needs a sponsor, you mean? What about Rolf?”

“I asked him before they went away. He said if she wants him to sponsor her, she’ll ask.” Vivien didn’t think it would kill him to offer, but it wasn’t her place. She had done her part by making it known to him she wanted it to happen. More than once, actually.

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When she looked back at Marvin, he was watching her, an expression on his face that was so tender, her heart did a little skip in her chest.

“What?” She touched her hair.

He blushed. “You’re very tenderhearted, Vivien. You’re so smart and beautiful, it catches me off guard when you’re sweet and kind as well.” He slowed in his polishing and set aside the glass with care. Cleared his throat.

They sat like this most nights, talking about work or guests or the wedding. He made her laugh. He was smart and delightfully open-minded where she’d often been surrounded by men who thought women should be seen and not heard. She knew how to hold her own, but it was work to stay on her toes all the time. Marvin wasn’t work. He was comfortable, but not in an old-shoe way. He allowed her to be calm and let down her guard. He was a warm blanket, a cozy fire, a beautiful song, and a perfect glass of wine.

He was a friend. One whom she sometimes kissed.

One she cherished enough she was hesitating to turn him into a lover in case things went awry.

And it only occurred to her now that he was waiting for her to make that decision, not trying to make it for her as the men in her younger years had.

"Marvin, do you think we should…" she drummed her nails on the bar "…take this to the next level?"

"Take wha—Oh." He blushed. "I've thought about that quite a bit, actually. Definitely wanted to wait until the boys were back so I could ask permission to date you."

She burst out laughing, then cut herself off as she realized, "Oh, you're serious. Hell, no, you won't."

"Hear me out," Marvin said, flicking his glance to the group across the room as he set down his towel. "I gave Rolf a hard time for taking up with Glory. He would have every right to expect me to at least talk to him, especially as it concerns business arrangements between Whiskey Jack and Blue Spruce Lodge."

"Marvin. Darling," she said as gently and firmly as she could. "I am an adult woman with all my faculties. I will fuck whom I please and inform my children of that event if and when it suits me."

"You—You just said that to disconcert me." He picked up his towel and shook the bunched terry at her. "You let me know where and when, then," he said in sharp challenge. "Because I've been to my doctor and got my blood pressure medication sorted. I'm not thirty, you know. If that's the direction we're going, we ought to damned well get there before we're too old to make it work."

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He threw down his towel and turned the satin back of his vest on her, starting to restock the beer fridge, but she could see the bright red in his profile.

Vivien bit back a laugh, thinking, *Fair point*.

Rising, she went over to the main table. "I'm going to turn in. Glory, shall I ask your father to pour another round and let you take care of anything after that?"

"Sure, Vivien. Thanks. Good night."

She went back to the bar and relayed the message, then said, "And why don't you bring your nightcap to my room?"

Marvin stood very straight, staring at her. "Are you saying…?" His jaw worked, but no more words came out.

“I’m telling you where and when, Marvin. Let’s get there before we’re dead.”

LOOK WHO TALKED a big game and got himself into trouble.

Marvin smoothed his eyebrows with one finger as he brushed his teeth with the other hand. Then he ran a damp facecloth around his junk, looked at the shower, looked at the clock, and finally looked at the drink he’d poured himself, but was afraid to knock back in case it affected his performance.

What performance? He knew plain vanilla and not much else. His porn had been the old magazines with the articles. He’d never been comfortable jacking in front of a computer. Too nineteen eighty-four. What if he accidentally had the camera on?

Did he need a condom? That would be terrific, having to go back to the lounge and ask one of those young men—Trigg, perhaps—if he had a spare sheath so he could get busy with his mother.

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Why hadn’t he bought one in Haven the last time he was at the drugstore, after his doctor’s appointment? Because he’d been embarrassed, that’s why.

Maybe he was a tiny bit relieved he didn’t have one. They could put this off so he could ruminate a little longer and harder.

Screw it. He grabbed his whiskey and went up the back stairs, like a football captain sneaking into the head cheerleader’s bedroom. He knocked on Vivien’s door, fully prepared for disappointment.

She opened the door wearing a negligee, all silky and rosy pink. Her hair was combed out, her makeup still on, but her jewelry off.

An hour later, weak and naked alongside him, she spoke between pants as their hearts slowed. “Have your business chat with Rolf. I’m not giving that up.”

NATE TRIED NOT to play the denial game, especially since he hadn't seen the demise of his marriage coming. He tried to be conscious of life-altering things like his grandparents getting on in years. He knew he had to make time for them while they were here, not take for granted that there would be other opportunities. He was hoping to get them here for a visit sooner than later, actually—once the weather was decent, but before the wedding. The lodge was fully booked after that and so was he.

His own time was already tight. The days were warming and the phone didn't stop ringing. Plus, they had three new bodies in the office, which annoyed him just a little.

The new staff were all nice enough and even brought a bit of color to this landscape of otherwise predominantly white. Kimi, the new bookkeeper, was Blackfoot, married to a welder the resort would keep busy for the next few years. They had two school-aged kids and were buying a place in Haven.

They'd been one of the first hires by Orin, the new HR manager. He was a middle-aged, heavy-set, red-bearded pirate of a man who was openly gay. "If you have something to say about that, let's get it over with," had been his opener when he met Nate. He had twice drunk the last of the coffee and forgot to turn off the pot, but it was his first week and everyone was still getting organized.

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Chivonne was trying to help with that. Nate didn't know what her heritage was with that long, loose, gold-tipped Afro-like hair, lightly tanned skin, big green eyes, and pointed nose over a wide, but thin-lipped mouth. She wasn't even a certified PA or project coordinator. She had worked in the office of her father's construction business in Minneapolis "from the time I could alphabetize and file." Her father sold the business to fund his retirement, gave her a chunk of cash, and told her to buy a house or go to school. She was twenty-two and intended to buy something in Haven if this job worked out. Devon had recommended her and she was already proving her tiny-ass weight in gold.

"You should buy that old bunny bus they're selling in town," Chivonne said on day three, as she hung her coat. "Be a nice job perk if I didn't have to drive all the way out here, then wait for a lift from the lodge. I could work while I ride."

Nate and Rolf had looked at each other, both remembering how efficient things had been this time last year, when the only way into the lodge had been the snowcat. Workers had shown up on time to catch it and got to work right away on arrival, having finished their social hour on the way in.

"You talked about setting up a shuttle service once the hill is operational," Nate reminded Rolf. "We're always sending someone into town to pick up parcels. This way our own driver can put parts on the bus and save us a trip."

"We could schedule two runs a day and bring in sandwiches to sell out the back. Then we won't lose people who run to the lodge for lunch and take forever to come back." Rolf turned his attention to Chivonne. "Make it happen. Buy the bus, figure out the pick-up location, talk to Orin about hiring a driver—"

"I have ears," Orin called from his office, adding in a grumble, "No fucking time, but sure. I'll get right on that."

"Talk to Marvin. Make sure it's going to work for the lodge schedule," Rolf added.

The dining room at the lodge was going to take a hit on their lunch rush, since the snow conditions were deteriorating and the cross-country reservations were drying up.

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Vivien was already stressing about 'workers traipsing through the lobby in their greasy clothes and muddy boots' anyway. She had asked Devon's opinion on whether a pick-up window could be cut out of the wall inside the bar and the patio extended to serve people who lined up outside.

Devon had provided her stock answer. "I can do anything, if you want to throw enough money at it."

A pick-up window was actually a great idea. Nate expected to see a hole smashed into the siding the minute the melt started in earnest.

There was no constant but change. He knew that and thus tried to make a point of savoring this particular Saturday morning. There might not be another like it, one where he walked downstairs with Ilke's fingers woven through his, body rested from sleeping in, bones loose from morning lovemaking and skin tingling from their shower.

This week had passed in a blur of him playing catch-up with Rolf, now back from Germany. Nate hadn't had much time to spend with Ilke. She was putting in a couple of hours of conditioning on top of the workout they

usually did together, fitting things in around whatever Vivien threw at her, so she was keeping busy.

He had asked her briefly last night if she had any news on the training front. She had said she had hard decisions to make and there were no right answers. A few people were answering her emails, but he could tell by her face she wasn't impressed by her options.

"My stepfather heard I'm looking for a new coach," she said in a tone of disgust. "Mom emailed me, wants me to hire him."

"Are you kidding me? *No*."

"That's what I said." She didn't elaborate, not seeming to want to talk about it and, truth was, neither did he.

Once she found a trainer, she would leave. That meant the end of *this* and he wasn't ready.

At least today felt like old times. Quinn's crew was gone, Trigg had hit the road, taking Murphy with him, and the dining room was mostly empty with only a handful of guests lingering over their coffee. Aiden had a birthday party this afternoon so Nate was working a full day before running out to fetch him. He expected Rolf would join him at the base and it would be the way it had been all last year: quiet and productive.

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As he and Ilke crossed the lobby, however, squinting at the sunlight streaming in the windows from the dining room, Ilke made a noise and pulled her phone from the back pocket of her jeans.

"My mother." She made a face. "I should probably get it, in case it's important."

That's it, he thought, knowing in his gut this was the turning point on losing what they had. His hand reflexively tightened on hers.

She looked at him with surprise and he tried to be a man about it. He didn't *know* this was bad. There was no way she would hire her stepfather, but his senses told him this was the end. He had to swallow a lump in his throat.

"I need to—"

"Yeah." The word scraped his windpipe. "I'll meet you in there." He made himself release her.

He tried to talk himself out of this sense of doom as he went to the buffet.

Rolf and Glory were already here, sitting down with full plates. Glory smiled and said good morning. Rolf asked him about a modification one of the suppliers wanted to make.

“I meant to forward the full email. I don’t disagree, but we should talk about it.” Nate pulled out his phone and scrolled to send it.

His mind was on Ilke, though. She was growing anxious to put things in place. He was a tiny bit terrified she would buckle to whatever pressure her mother exerted.

“Fuck, that’s expensive,” Rolf muttered. “No.”

“Keep reading,” Nate said, sitting down across from Rolf with his filled plate. “We maybe don’t go with his solution, but some of the points he brings up need discussion.”

Rolf scrolled as he ate and Glory asked Nate about Aiden.

He told her about the birthday party while Ilke came in and got herself a fruit cup and yogurt.

“What are your plans today?” Glory asked Ilke as she joined them. “Because I’m running in to see Eden and—Are you okay?”

“Fine,” Ilke said, slapping her phone face down beside her coffee. Her eyes were bright, her color high.

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“Your mom okay?” Nate asked her.

“Totally fine. Outstanding,” she added acerbically. “Wants me to come see her.”

“*No*,” Nate said.

“That’s what I said.” She stabbed a chunk of melon with her fork and looked past Glory’s shoulder to the buffet, chin set. She was trying to hide it, but there was something persecuted in her profile. She was losing hope.

“For fuck’s sake,” Nate said under his breath, reaching his limit. “Glory. Would it bother you if Wikinger sponsored Ilke?”

She frowned in confusion. “That has nothing to do with me. Why would it bother me?”

“I don’t know, but Ilke refuses to ask Rolf if he’ll ask them to sponsor her because she thinks it might annoy you.”

Glory looked from Ilke to Rolf, who was still reading his phone, then back to Ilke. “Fill your ski boots,” she said.

“Rolf?” Nate prompted.

“If that’s something Ilke wants, she’ll ask me,” he said with disinterest, keeping his gaze on his phone, thumb sweeping, while he absently chased eggs with his fork.

Nate looked to Ilke. Her fingers were white where she gripped her dish of fruit. She sent him a baleful glare for interfering, since Glory hadn’t been her only hurdle, but she transferred her stare to Rolf, maybe waiting for him to look at her.

He didn’t.

For long seconds, there was only the sound of utensils on plates at other tables. Low conversations between other diners.

Ilke swallowed. Her expression was stiff with defensiveness. “Rolf, would you be willing to talk to marketing at Wikinger and ask them to consider me?”

“No,” Rolf stated, flat and unequivocal, still looking at his phone.

What a fucking dick. Nate had seen this side of Rolf in action before, but had never felt the kickback so personally.

“Why?” he demanded in a hard enough tone Rolf lifted his gaze to meet the death stare Nate was giving him.

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Ilke’s hand settled on his wrist. “It’s their choice, Nate. They have reasons. Branding, budget… It’s fine.”

“*Do* you have a reason?” he asked, holding his boss’s stare. “Because I’d love to hear it.”

“Nate.” Her hand squeezed.

“I have two,” Rolf said without flinching. “Ilke knows the main one.”

Nate turned his head. She was staring at Rolf, kind of pale.

“If it’s because you two—” Glory started to say.

Rolf gave her a flat look. “No.” He went back to his phone.

“Quit being so fucking mysterious,” Nate said.

“It’s because I’m not good enough,” Ilke said, eyes closed, voice thin as a dried-up onion skin.

Nate looked from her white lips to Glory’s shocked frown to Rolf’s lack of reaction as he continued reading his phone.

“Are you fucking kidding me?” Nate tried to keep his voice low, but he was so furious his gut was cramping. “You *know* what happened. You know why she tanked in Korea.”

“Rolf,” Glory admonished. “You don’t really believe that. Do you?”

“It doesn’t matter what I believe. Why would any company sponsor an athlete who is convinced she can’t win?” He was still acting like he was barely part of this conversation.

Nate wanted to take him by the throat, but at the same time, the table seemed to tilt, sending loaded emotions from one side to the other. *Was* that what Ilke thought?

She was staring a hole through Rolf’s head. “Do *you* think I’m good enough to win?”

Finally, he set aside his phone and gave her one hundred percent of his attention. “You know what it takes to win, Ilke. *Everything*. But you couldn’t even work up the courage to ask me to arrange your sponsorship. That tells me you are not all in.”

She bit her lip. Her chin crinkled and her brow flexed in anguish. Then she sat up, chin coming up with defiance as she stared right back at him, clearly agonized.

“I’m scared,” she admitted with a slow, pained nod. “Not of skiing, but of putting myself through all of that again and finding out I’m actually not good enough and that’s why I failed, not because of the baby.”

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Nate put his hand on her thigh. She covered it with a cold, clammy palm, fingernails digging into the top of his hand, almost like she was holding him off while holding on.

“You had a bad fall,” Rolf delivered without inflection, but it wasn’t unkind. “Doubt happens to all of us after that. Fucks with our mental game. You know how to get past it, though. If you had torn your knee or broken your ribs, what would you do once you were healed?”

“Snap on my skis and get back out there.” She sounded admonished, like a little girl, mouth not quite steady. “I need someone to tell me I’ll get there, though. I know it’s weak, that I should be able to believe in myself, but I need someone to tell me it’s worth the sacrifice.” She closed her grip over Nate’s fingers, crushing them.

Words crowded Nate’s throat. *Don’t.*

“I can’t tell you what’s worth sacrificing. That’s something each athlete decides for themselves,” Rolf said. “But you have to do a lot of it. No one hands you a win. You fight back everything that prevents it. That’s the only way.”

She nodded. “I know.”

He set his arm on the table, leaning in. “But if you want my opinion, athlete to athlete, you had every right to be on that podium. You have the talent and could stage a hell of a comeback if you wanted to dig deep, conquer that self-doubt, and make it happen. Do you?”

“Yes.” No hesitation. Her grip on Nate’s hand was likely to leave a bruise, but her voice held so much conviction, it raised the hairs on the back of his neck. “I do. I really do.” She flashed a look at Nate. “I have to.” No apology and he didn’t expect one.

“I know.” He wasn’t nearly as calm as he managed to sound.

She looked back at Rolf.

“Okay, then,” Rolf said.

Nate felt the shock that went through her in the flex of her hand on his. “You’ll ask Wikinger to sponsor me?”

“No.”

“Rolf!” Glory cried and looked like she wanted to kill him. Nate sure as hell did.

He flashed them a look of irritation. “Am I the only one at this table aware of what I’m building? If the board wants to draw a line between Wikinger and Whiskey Jack, and pretend this facility is my pet project and not something that will benefit them, they can get in line and beg for the privilege of sponsoring the team I build here. The team I *mentor*, so my athletes don’t get screwed over by lousy agents and sponsors who fail to stick when shit happens. You—” he pointed at Ilke “—had better be up for this because you just became our poster girl. You’re setting the bar at a level that tells the rest of the world I’m not fucking around. Whiskey Jack is where *champions* are made.”

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The whole room had quieted as he spoke.

“You sneaky S.O.B. How long have you been planning this?” Glory turned in her seat to face Rolf. “My ovaries just went off like Roman candles.”

He lifted an irritated brow. “I thought I was pretty clear on what I intended to do here.” He picked up his phone, cutting a glance at Ilke. “Get a new phone. I’m going to send an email and yours is going to explode. Don’t answer anything for a few days. And make a doctor’s appointment. I want a note telling me how hard you can work. Then pack to travel. You’re going to assemble and test drive your support team.”

Her face fell in shock. “Are you serious?”

“I’m always serious. Go. You’ve wasted enough time.” He jerked his head, then said to Nate, “We have to get down to the base. Your ovaries will have to wait, *schatzi*.” He cupped the side of Glory’s head and kissed her crown as he rose.

Glory was beaming, looking up at him like he’d just rescued her babies from a burning building.

While Nate’s barely acknowledged dreams were going up in smoke.

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Chapter Fifteen

NATE DIDN'T SAY anything on the way to the base. Rolf spoke in German on the phone all the way, mentioning Ilke's name twice. Nate was still reeling from what this meant for him and her.

The security guard was outside when they arrived, waiting for them. He was training in avalanche control and preparing to telemark up with one of the contract technicians. Rolf stayed outside to talk with them while Nate stomped his feet on the grate and went inside.

The heat and lights were on, but the coffeepot was empty. He started a fresh one and was hanging his jacket when Rolf came in.

"You going to be grease or friction?" Rolf asked, point-blank.

Nate didn't play dumb. He was zombie-like, kind of holding off thinking about it because he already knew there was no workable solution. If there was, he would have found it.

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He flicked his desktop computer on. "I'll get out of her way. I'd be a dick if I didn't, wouldn't I?"

Instead of nodding and going into his office, Rolf folded his arms and stood there staring at him.

Nate stayed on his feet, crossed his own arms and stared him down. "We playing poker here, man? What other cards you keeping against your chest?"

Rolf snorted and leaned against the end of the desk Trigg used, ankles crossed.

"Vivien put the bug in my ear last year, when she told me Wikinger should sponsor her. Ilke had just signed a silver sponsorship for some kind of yogurt and didn't need Wikinger's money. Even so, I knew she could have done better. Her agent should have done better, if she even has one. We weren't anywhere near ready here, so I let it go. Things were complicated with Glory anyway. It was for the best." He ran his tongue over his teeth.

Nate was really fucking happy for him that things were so golden with Glory now, he was willing and able to ruin Nate's love life.

"Then Vivien invited her here over the new year." Rolf chinned toward the top of the mountain. "I watched her ski and I was pissed right off, wishing I'd said something last summer because I could see I was too late. I figured she would sweep the games and write her own ticket. Instead, she fell apart. I was standing there with Trigg, watching her Super G. We just looked at each other afterward, trying to figure out how that car accident had unfolded. It didn't make sense."

Nate looked away, still not clear if he was supposed to feel guilty or what.

"I watched her the rest of the games and she was leaking confidence like oil. I came back here thinking about how to get her here without it being a topic of a bigger conversation with my future wife. Then Ilke showed up, told me she was pregnant. That was that, right? She couldn't ski."

Nate sent a brooding look toward the floor.

"And then, what? I was supposed to tell her the day she miscarried that I want her to become my personal project and make *my* baby look good?"

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"So you've been wanting this since last year."

"Yes. And it's been hard, waiting until she was ready."

What a guy, biting his tongue all this time.

Rolf wasn't moved by Nate's scowl of disgust. "You're the one who pressed the button today," he pointed out.

Nate swore, shook his head. "I thought she might buckle to her stepfather. You know he's a douche, right?"

"Probably an even bigger one than I can confirm. I've used my influence as much as I can to limit the damage he does to our sport, but I can't save the world. That's not even on my top ten list of things I want to do. I want to train athletes. Influence the next generation in *my* world."

Nate's gaze snagged on the poster showing the resort phases, thought of Ilke's excitement for it. What an epic joke that he was building the thing that would take her away from him.

"What exactly are you offering her?"

"Anything she needs. I'm paving her way to the podium." He skimmed his hand through the air. "Buying myself a ringer to put Whiskey Jack on

the map."

Nate choked at Rolf's shameless motive.

"So it's not about her." Good to know.

"Of course, it is. The whole point in sponsoring an athlete is to commodify their reputation into selling whatever you're selling. Her sponsors scattered because they thought she'd lost her edge, that she couldn't sell skis anymore, or a wholesome image for bulk buckets of yogurt. Whiskey Jack is selling champions and that's what she is. Top-tier trainers and techs will want to work with her because she'll make them look good. She's that ready to win. I bring her on board and I can easily seed my training facility with the best—start up here, not down there." He drew levels in the air with his hands.

And all Nate had to do was step out of the way. He smoothed his hand down his beard. "Four-year commitment at least, right? Get her to the next games?"

"That's what I'm going to ask from her, yes."

This conversation was like taking a pummeling in the boxer's ring. He was managing to stay on his feet, but his face felt split and swollen. His ears were ringing. His guts hurt like hell.

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"Thanks for making all her dreams come true in a way I couldn't, by the way. You're a real guy." By 'guy,' he meant 'asshole.'

"You're making my dreams come true. I'm paying it forward."

Nate chuckled dryly. *Such* an asshole.

"I don't know what to say to this, Rolf. You tell me. Is there going to be room in her life for anything but skiing? What happens when I want to watch her race? You giving me the day off? Hell, I know what working away does to a relationship and she'll be gone for half the year."

"Afraid you'll start fucking Orin? I'd be scared, too. Look." He straightened off the desk and plucked a pen out of the cup on the corner of the desk, clicked it and threw it down. "I'm a self-centered prick. That's a proven fact. I get what I want however I have to. I want Ilke to win. I'm gambling Whiskey Jack on her making a comeback that gives me an edge right out of the gate."

"And however bad you want her to win, she wants it ten times more. I get it. No room for me." He wanted to throat-punch him, just to release some of this pent-up anger-pain.

“But here’s the thing. Last year, when Glory left and went back to Seattle…” Rolf picked up the pen again and held it upside down, click-clicking it against the calendar that served as a desk blotter, clearly uncomfortable.

Nate was standing here trying to be okay with his boss pulling the pin on his relationship with a woman who’d been Rolf’s one-off lover. It was awkward as hell without Rolf starting to act like it was feelings time in share circle.

“Glory told me she wanted to write books and asked me what I would do, if the phone rang and the voice on the other end told me to come back and race. She said that’s what writing is to her. Her books are her gold medals. I had to respect that and I stepped out of the way.”

Nate’s throat started to close. He nodded, feeling the walls caving in around him.

“But she came back and we make it work and sometimes it sucks balls. She gets snappy if things aren’t working and she’s had a couple of reviews that…” He made a slow fist and looked like he wanted to use it. “Fucking trolls. Nothing I can do about it, except stand over her shoulder and tell her that shit doesn’t matter. And when people I already pay well bust open a container and fucking *steal* from me, Glory’s right there, putting up with my shitty mood.”

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“What are you saying? That I should keep seeing Ilke?” The darkness around him peeled back a layer.

“I’m saying, think long and hard about which way you’ll jump. It *will* suck and if your level of commitment isn’t there, it’s going to hurt *my* athlete. I’ll protect her however I have to.”

“Fuck that noise, Rolf. She’s mine.” He went there, yes he did. All the way into the primordial muck in the center of his soul, where bloodlust was candy and the alpha male only got to call himself that because Nate hadn’t ripped his throat out yet.

Rolf didn’t move except to lift one brow. His mouth twitched. “Maybe you don’t have to think about it.”

He really didn’t. Which took him aback. Nate ran a hand over his hair, trying to pull himself back into a shell of civility.

“I don’t know what you expect of me, though. Be her fucking cheerleader?”

“Yes.” Rolf pushed his hands into his pockets and rocked on his heels. “She’s going to have to unload on someone about what a demanding dickhead I am. Who’s that going to be? Glory? Vivien? Who else does she have? You know her mother wasn’t there when she was losing, right?”

Nate already knew what a pathetic excuse her mother was, but: “She was at the *Olympics*.”

“Yeah. Vivien makes me crazy, but she never missed a race unless she needed emergency gallbladder surgery. I watch all of Trigg’s competitions even if it’s a shitty stream on my laptop. But there was Ilke, trying not to cry in front of the cameras. Vivien left to go find her.”

Nate remembered seeing Ilke all tight-faced after a disappointing finish. He’d hurt for her. Now he knew her that much better and her pain was that much harder to bear. He swore and looked at the poster again.

“You want me to build this fucking thing *and* make sure your star athlete keeps her chin up so you’ll look good.”

“You got something better to do with the next four years of your life?”

There was no guarantee Ilke *wanted* him in her life. Had Rolf thought of that?

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“I’m going back to the lodge,” Nate said, clicking off his desktop and reaching for his jacket.

“Take your time. I’m gonna text Glory. Ask her to bring me lunch.”

ILKE LAY ON her bed dry-eyed, hugging a pillow. A steady drip was drumming outside her window as icicles melted in the spring sunshine, competing with the muted phone vibrating on her nightstand. Her phone was blowing up exactly as Rolf had warned her it would. She ignored it.

Be happy, she told herself. This was what she wanted and needed. It was everything. A lottery win. An open road of golden bricks all the way to the castle at the end of the rainbow.

Yet she was hollow inside.

Footsteps sounded on the balcony and a knuckle rapped on her window.

She rolled over to see Nate standing outside.

She rolled back and pulled the pillow over her head, not ready to do this.

“Babe, come on.”

Men calling women ‘baby’ was dumb. She had always thought it suggested the woman had father issues, but when Nate called her ‘babe,’ she loved it. She was really starting to fear—

She threw the pillow away, afraid she wouldn’t be able to get through this if she admitted to herself where her feelings were going.

She let him in with a gust of wet, spring-scented air.

He let his shoulders fall back on the door as it closed and he folded his arms. He glanced around the disarray of clothes she had started to fold, then threw in a bunch on the floor.

“How’s the packing going?”

She choked and waved an arm through the air. “I don’t know what I want! Do I go after the dream that has kept me sane my entire life and finally get there this time? At the cost of a relationship that—” It took a lot of courage and she wasn’t sure she wanted the answer, but she made herself ask, “Do you even want a relationship with me?”

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He grew so serious, she held her breath. He swallowed and his voice rasped.

“I do.”

Everything inside her went still, absorbing his steady voice and his steady look like it was the first rays of sun coming over a peak, warming her skin. So bright on her eyes it hurt to look, but her spirit went up, up, up with the promise of a beautiful day.

Then she began to tremble. Because she couldn’t have both. The pull in each direction was so strong it was going to rip her in half. Her throat started to hurt, all the way from behind her breastbone, radiating an ache across her collarbone into her shoulders. She tried to swallow and couldn’t. She sank onto the bed, bony elbows on her thighs, cold fingers laced together and pressed to her lips.

“What about you?” His tone was so careful and measured, scaring her because he was so strong and capable. He was bracing for rejection, but he could withstand it, whereas she had been lying here waiting for her last meal and a lethal injection.

“I don’t know how to be in a relationship, Nate. What if I turn down Rolf’s offer and you and I crash and burn in a few weeks because I’m not what you wanted after all? Skiing is all I ever had. If choosing you costs me that, and it turns out we can’t make it work—”

“You can have both, Ilke.”

“No, I can’t.” She dismissed that on a dry laugh, not even daring to entertain the idea.

“Why not?” He pushed off the door.

“Because that’s not how my life works. I never get what I want. Not without tearing my fingernails out scratching for it.”

“You’ve got me.” His palms turned up. “Your manicure is still intact, isn’t it?”

“But, I *don’t*. You can’t say that. We’re not—” She didn’t know what they were. That was the problem. “You didn’t want me when I was pregnant with your baby.” She had to bite her lips, they began to tremble so hard. “This…” She glanced at the pillows. “I don’t even know what this is. Grief therapy?”

He dragged in a breath and unzipped his jacket, hung it on the hook on the back of the door, then bent to unlace his boots. He left them on the boot mat, then straightened and pushed his fists into the front pockets of his jeans.

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“That’s fair,” he said. “I don’t know what we’ve been doing either, except trying to heal. But Rolf just dragged my ass down to the base to ask me if I was in or out. Seems he has a vested interest in protecting the mental health of his athletes. When he made it an ultimatum, I knew I was in. No contest.”

She shook her head.

“No, listen.” He grabbed the chair he’d brought to her room when they’d started sleeping together, so he’d have a place to hang his vest. He swung it to face where she sat on the bed and lowered into it, forearms on his thighs, hands taking hold of hers.

“This is what I know: I want this for you.” He squeezed her hands as if he was impressing the words into her nervous system. Into her bloodstream. “Whether you and I are a thing or not, I want to see you win. I believe you can. If you need me to get out of the way, so you can do that, I will. But I don’t want to. I want to be with you every step of the way.”

Her heart lurched. “Like, come to Europe with me? Because that’s where most of the races are.”

“Yeah, that’s the catch.”

“See?” She tried to pull her hands free, but he hung on to them.

“I didn’t say it would be perfect. Which isn’t easy for me to accept. You know what I’m like. We’re not always going to be together when we want to be. I have a job and a kid. It’s going to be hard on Aiden, and I don’t like that, either. But what are we going to do? Throw away something with this much potential because it’s not easy?”

She let her hands rest in his, looked at the strong fingers that held her narrow ones with such an easy, gentle yet implacable strength.

“What…” She bit her lip, then screwed up her courage. “What kind of potential do you see in us? Like…marriage?”

“Does that scare you?”

“It does.” Her thumbs started working across the spot where his fate and life lines came together in the heels of his palms. “I’m kind of half in love with you.” She refused to look up as she made that confession. “Which is why I’m terrified to let this go on. It’ll only be worse if we have to end it later. For me, anyway. It would destroy me if I started to think we had a future and we didn’t.”

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“Then we won’t end it.”

“I don’t have your confidence, Nate. I’m sorry, but I don’t.” She did look at him then, to let him read how scared she was. How she yearned to believe in him and them, but she had had to stop believing in nonsense to survive. Hell, she expected Rolf to come through the door and yank the rug on her sponsorship any second—that’s how little faith she had in her ability to get what her heart desired.

He lifted one hand to cup her cheek. “I know trust is hard for you. I won’t pretend it doesn’t sting that you need time to see how solid I am. How good we can be. But you have to give me a chance to prove it, Ilke.”

“Why? I mean…” She searched his dark eyes. They were tender and steady and… She refused to guess what those glints and lights were. “What about your feelings? Are you…”

“I’m probably a little further in love than you are,” he said wryly.

She pulled away from the hand on her cheek and narrowed her eyes.

He chuckled. “Oh, did that rile the competitor in you? I can work with that. Let’s see which one of us is ready for marriage first. Hmm?”

She wished she could laugh at that, wished she could bask in those words about him being in love with her, but her heart was fishtailing inside her chest.

“I might never be. Do you realize that? And you would never aim for a half-assed relationship. I know you wouldn’t. When it comes to more kids, one miscarriage doesn’t mean I can’t have babies, but it’s a long way off before I try again. I can’t ask you to put your own life on hold for me. That kind of sacrifice is too much pressure.”

He sobered. “This is a compromise, not a sacrifice.” His voice went desert dry. “And if having another baby was a priority for me, I could jack into a cup and hand it to my ex-wife.”

“God in heaven,” she muttered, dropping her forehead into her palm. “I’ll be away a lot, you know. Jacking is very much in your future.”

“Sex with you is worth waiting for,” he drawled.

She lifted her head. “It’s pretty good,” she agreed. “I feel like I score more wins than you do, but…” It was a dumb joke. She was getting back at him for the love competition remark, but it worked.

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He said, “Yeah? That what you think?” and caught his hands behind her knees as he came off the chair. He dropped her neatly onto her back as he loomed over her and settled between her legs. “Let’s test that.”

“I keep a close eye on the scoreboard. Trust me. I know what I’m talking about.”

“And see, getting a goal and a cheer out of you makes me feel like *I’m* winning.”

She chuckled and cupped her hands over his beard, thinking she was probably a little more than just *falling* in love with him. She was pouncing out of the starting gate like a cheetah, picking up speed at an accelerated pace, *throwing* herself into love. If she caught an edge it would leave her in a thousand jagged pieces.

But as his lips settled on hers and his eyes stayed open, his gaze endlessly hot and tender, she was willing to risk it. He promised the ride of her life.

MARVIN WAITED UNTIL Trigg returned, then he asked Vivien to host a family dinner in her suite. She already had a small bistro table in here, where she ate her breakfast most mornings. He knew that because he'd begun joining her after waking in her bed.

He was getting a helluva lot of good sleep these days, but after a week of it, they'd had enough of sneaking around like adulterers. He had a table brought up from the dining room along with three more chairs. She set it. He fetched the appetizer trays from the dumbwaiter and opened the wine.

They looked at each other a dozen times. What were the kids going to say?

Trigg arrived first, knocking and coming through the door they'd left propped open.

"No dog," he assured Vivien, waving at the empty space behind him. "Nate has him. Needs something to cuddle since Rolf sent his Swedish massage to pick up her skis." Trigg smiled with relief as Marvin poured him a beer. "Thought I would be the first to arrive. Thanks."

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Marvin sent a circumspect look at Vivien. She rolled her eyes behind her son's back.

"I think it's lovely that they're coming out of their tailspin so well," she said as Trigg turned to face her. "Nate and Ilke both deserve love. Everyone does." Vivien touched the back of her neck, under her upswept hair, sliding Marvin a look. *Flirt*.

"Mom." Trigg moved to the window and took a slug of beer. "If you start in on a lecture about sowing wild oats, I'm going downstairs for a burger."

Rolf and Glory came in as he said that.

"*You're* wild oats," Glory said, then clapped a hand over her mouth. "I'm so sorry, Vivien. That was rude. I meant—"

Trigg turned, quite happy to see Glory stammering. "Can I get you a shovel? Would you like to dig yourself in further?"

It was the silliest thing, but Marvin grew misty at the way those two batted good-natured, sibling-like insults at each other. It made him see his

budding relationship with Vivien as more than a stab at romance by a pair of old fools. They were making a family here.

There wasn't much room in the small lounge. Five bodies pretty much filled it up. Glory sat on the arm of the chair that Rolf took like a king settling into his throne. Trigg stayed on his feet by the window. Marvin sat on the love seat next to his lover.

Vivien glanced at him.

He nodded. "There are some things we wanted to discuss," he began.

"The catering, I know. Eden was away. They all went to Florida and hit the amusement parks for a week. But her chef friend confirmed and sent a couple of sample menus. Eden said she would come out next week and finalize it. She and her sister will help in the kitchen that week, too. Also," she said to Rolf, "I was to tell you that Kurt got an email from a colleague while he was on vacation. It was about something somewhere that I can't remember. Kurt said it might be a lead and he will call you as soon as he gets hold of the guy and has something specific to tell you."

"Very helpful, thanks," Rolf said dryly.

"I did a final fitting on the way back from Germany and my dress is in Dad's room so Rolf won't see it. Vows are drafted, tuxedos get a second fitting in a week, right?" Glory was counting off on her fingers. "The music is organized, the swag bags and baskets for the rooms are coming together. Ilke got a huge start on that before Rolf hijacked her for *his* little project." She elbowed him.

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He forestalled her jab with his cupped hand, not even jostling the beer he was bringing up to his mouth with his other.

"I think everything's under control. But it's super nice of you to have a private dinner for us, Vivien. We never get to sit as a family, do we? There's always staff around, interrupting."

"About that," Marvin said, now his daughter had run out of steam.

"Vivien already told me." Glory held up her hand. "I know, and I'm sorry. You're not allowed to get mad at me, either," she told Rolf. "The phone was ringing off the hook and I was right there. I didn't know you were trying to wrap up the manager interviews by Tuesday. I'm sorry I said that woman could come Thursday, but she sounded really nice. You—" She pointed at Trigg. "Keep it in your pants this time."

"Says the woman who left her mitten under my brother's desk."

“Trigg,” Vivien scolded him with a pained look.

“I was wondering where it went.” Glory slid a look at Rolf.

“You keep a dog under your desk,” Rolf pointed out to Trigg.

“Rolf,” Vivien muttered.

“We’re thinking of making a change,” Marvin said firmly, trying to pull things back on track before they devolved into utter nonsense. His voice might have cracked a tiny bit.

Vivien started to pat his knee, but chickened out.

The children—and they were clearly all puerile adolescents—finally shut their mouths and gave him their attention.

“If you tell me you don’t want to run a lodge after all,” Glory began in a tone of dire warning.

Rolf nudged her thigh.

She leaned her arm along his chair back, skimming a hand over his hair and touching her mouth to his hairline. “You’re right,” she murmured. “Best thing that ever happened to me.”

His brow quirked in a way that said he damned well knew he was.

“We’re finding our remote location is prohibitive when it comes to hiring a manager,” Marvin said, which was true, but he was also pleased to come into this announcement from a side door. “I’d like to be able to sweeten the deal by offering my suite.”

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“You can give them any room, Dad. And we’ll have the staff quarters by September,” Glory reminded him.

“Mine has a kitchenette, which I never use, and quite frankly, I’d prefer a little more distance and privacy from the front hall. I’d rather be up here. The view is better.”

“You won’t mind the stairs?”

“Vivien doesn’t find them a problem, do you?”

“It’s just enough to work my hip without tiring it.” She smiled blithely.

His cheeks started to heat and he gave her a second look so she would know he knew what she was doing, the vixen.

“So, you’d take the corner one on the other end? When? That’s going to screw up all the room bookings for the wedding. Vivien has been working on that for weeks.”

“I need something stronger if this is going to be wedding talk all night.” Trigg glanced at Rolf on the way to the selection of bottles on Vivien’s

liquor cabinet.

Rolf gave a hell-yes nod and drained his beer.

“We don’t need an extra room,” Marvin said, heart beginning to pound. “I’ll be in this one.”

“Where are you going?” Rolf scowled at Vivien. “Berlin?”

“Goodness, no. I’ll be here.” She showed not a single flutter of nerves. Her smile was amiable and calm.

“In this room? But—?” Glory frowned, confused. Then her eyes began to widen until they were more white than blue-green. “Are you saying…?”

Rolf swore and closed his eyes.

A dull thud hit the carpet. They all looked over to see Trigg scrambling to right the bottle of schnapps before the clear liquid leaked all over the carpet.

“I think we have their attention, Marvin.” *Now* Vivien put her hand on his knee. “Yes. We will share this suite. And the bed, if that is your next question.”

Silence.

Marvin knew he was bright as a pocket of coals in a weenie-roasting fire. He picked up Vivien’s hand and found a light sweat in her palm. So she *was* nervous. He wouldn’t know it to look at her. She sat there cool as a cucumber as she met three pairs of unblinking stares.

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Rolf moved first, holding out his beer stein. Trigg came over and glugged an unhealthy portion of alcohol into it before taking a hit straight from the bottle. Rolf tipped his own back and didn’t stop ’til he’d drained it.

“I need some of that, too,” Glory said, holding out her wineglass.

Trigg poured a couple of ounces on top of the burgundy.

“Since when?” Trigg asked. “You know, I’d be thrilled for you, Marvin, sowing some oats of your own, if it wasn’t with my *mom*.”

“So, you’re going to live together?” Glory asked. “Or—?”

“We’ll see how we get on,” Marvin said. So far, it was swimmingly. “Let’s get through the wedding we already have on the books before we worry about any others.”

“It’s still a big step,” Glory said. “What does it mean for the lodge?” She glanced at Rolf.

“Rolf and I will need to have some discussions,” Marvin allowed.

“Oh, sure. He gets to have ‘the talk’ that’s easy,” Trigg muttered.

Glory clasped her hands in mock excitement and leaned toward Trigg. “Maybe they’ll give us a little brother or sister!”

Rolf sighed and tipped his head back to give her a look that begged for deliverance.

Vivien squeezed Marvin’s hand. “I told you not to worry.”

He kissed her. Just a little one, but right there in front of their kids.

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Chapter Sixteen

SPRING MELT WAS in full swing with only a few patches of dirty snow in the corners of the lot and a steady soundtrack of trickling water. The graveled lane between the lodge and the base was nothing but potholes. Nate watched Trigg weaving the ute back and forth around the handful of young men shoveling and raking gravel. Murphy zigzagged behind to smell at bushes and tufts of grass.

Nate turned his face up to the warmth of early May sunshine, squinting at the brightness and breathing the pine-scented air, feeling pretty damned good in the moment.

"Thought your Swedish was back," Trigg said as he drew to a stop at the bottom of the stairs.

"She's sleeping off the jet lag."

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"Is *that* what she's sleeping off?"

"Lunch?" Nate tried.

"Just say 'sex,' man. We all do it. No reason to be coy."

"Yeah, I heard *everyone* is doing it."

Trigg gave him a half-lidded stare. "Was that a 'your mama' joke?"

"It's okay if you're feeling confused about getting a new dad. That's normal."

"I love how everyone thinks you're the nice guy around here when you're actually the biggest asshole of all of us."

"You're the one who turns it into a competition."

"You're on fire today, aren't you? Is this what sex does for you? 'Cause you never used to be this quick."

They heard the sound of an approaching engine at the same time and looked, but it was only a little hatchback, not the rented minivan Nate was expecting.

"So where are they? Or did you text me to get my ass up here 'cause you were feeling lonely?"

“Wanda texted that they left an hour ago.”

A brunette got out of the hatchback, hair in a ponytail with wispy bangs framing her face. She shouldered a heavy purse while giving the façade of the lodge a curious gaze, then brought her attention down to them. She might have jolted a tiny bit when she looked at them, but with the distance, Nate couldn’t be sure.

Trigg was busy trying to recover lost points anyway. “So, your grandparents had lunch with your gay ex-wife and her girlfriend? How did that go?”

“Grammy and Wanda were always very fond of each other. I’m sure they enjoyed catching up.”

“Who wouldn’t?” Trigg drawled, but sounding distracted now. The brunette had snagged his attention. He was making no effort to hide his interest as she approached and walked past the nose of the ute.

“Good afternoon,” she said, but sounded more guarded than interested. She wore a long blue skirt that kicked as she walked and she turned her head to stare down Trigg, barely glancing at Nate.

Trigg let a crooked grin spread across his face as she turned her attention forward at the last second. He made sure to lean back in the seat of the ute so he could see past Nate and watch her disappear into the lodge.

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“Dude,” Nate snorted. “That’s probably your mother’s last interview for lodge manager.” Vivien had mentioned it when Nate dropped by the office ten minutes ago to tell her his grandparents would be here soon.

“You’re just jealous you couldn’t clock that. I wouldn’t tattle. You could have taken a peek.”

“You *would* tattle. In a heartbeat.”

“Yeah, I might do it anyway, just for shits and giggles. She was really cute, don’t you think?”

“I have no opinion and if you say I did, I will rat you out to Glory so fast, you’ll be watching her feed your nuts to your dog before you know they’re gone.”

“They made up their mind on Tuesday. This is just a courtesy because Glory screwed up and said this one could still interview. She’s not going to get the job and will probably need consoling.” He looked toward the doors. “How long am I going to be playing chauffeur?”

“I just need the wheels, man. Feel free to go offer a cuddle and a boot knock. See how that goes.” Because Nate didn’t think that look she’d given Trigg had been the invitation Trigg thought it was.

Trigg was giving him a pained, “Dude, they come to me. That’s rule one,” when Vivien came out.

She wore designer jeans over boots with a low heel and a quilted-silk jacket. She was pulling on a leather glove, but paused and removed it.

“It’s quite pleasant out here, isn’t it?”

Trigg sent a speculative look past Nate, as though waiting for the brunette to follow. “Thought you had an interview?”

“Marvin is handling it. I wanted to say hello to Nate’s grandparents. Do you mind?” she asked Nate.

“Not at all. Grammy is looking forward to meeting you.”

The minivan arrived. He waved and pointed at a spot across the parking lot, then went across to greet them.

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MARVIN WAS FEELING sheepish as he showed Wren Snow into his office. The girl had walked into Vivien pretty much telling him to get rid of her as quickly as possible. They had been standing outside the door of his suite, easily seen and heard from the front desk when the dining room was quiet, which it was.

The lodge had been built before wheelchair accessibility had been law. Marvin had already asked Devon to draw up a proposal for an elevator at least to the first floor, but with Nate’s grandparents in town, and Marvin moved into Vivien’s suite, they had decided to put the older couple in there for the night. The retrofit on the door had only taken a day. He and Vivien were doing a final check of the room when Wren entered the foyer.

Marvin had been saying he felt sorry for the girl, driving all the way from Utah, but Vivien didn’t think they needed to hear her out.

“She gave us the wrong contact details. It’s her own fault she came all this way for nothing.”

That’s when they heard a small cough. Marvin was certain she had overheard them, but she was looking around, not letting on.

“I should see if Nate’s family has arrived,” Vivien had said, having the grace to look embarrassed. She snagged her coat off the wall behind the desk with barely a nod toward the girl.

Wren watched Vivien go with such a lingering gaze, Marvin had the impression she recognized her.

It added to his own curiosity about the girl. Vivien had a point. They’d made their decision, but his insatiable interest in human behavior had him wondering why this young woman had been ‘planning to be in the area,’ when she had talked Glory into booking her an interview.

At the same time, he was learning that he didn’t always have time for chit-chat. Indeed, where he often saw himself as letting someone down easy, they occasionally misinterpreted it as a different signal. They were taken aback by his bad news if they’d had a lengthy, warm-hearted conversation leading up to it.

Managing was an art form. He needed exactly the right person to make this place work as well as it could. So, in agreement with Vivien over the experienced young man they had both favored, Marvin sat down and said what he had to.

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“I’m afraid we’ve made our decision. I did try to cancel the appointment, but I wasn’t able to reach you.”

“I was traveling.” Wren said it so quickly, he suspected she had rehearsed the excuse. “But, do you mind if I ask… This place is being renovated by the, um, Johansson brothers. Is that right? The snowboarders?”

“Rolf skis. Trigg boards. But yes, they’re both gold medalists. Rolf retired a few years ago. Trigg is still competing.”

“Are they, um, *here*?” She pointed at the floor. “I mean, did I see *Trigg* Johansson on my way in?” She pronounced his name with an odd amount of care and waited with seeming bated breath for his reply.

From the first time Marvin had met Trigg, he’d noted the young man garnered a *lot* of female attention. Glory had begun drafting an employee manual and it contained a fraternization guideline she referred to as the ‘Don’t Frigg Trigg Rule.’

Marvin smiled in preparation for letting down this girl, who it seemed may have driven all this way for a glimpse of a crush.

“It’s very likely you saw him, but he’s only here part-time. As I say, he still competes which means he travels more than he stays put. If you thought that by working here, you would see him every day, that’s not likely.”

She stared at him, gray eyes blinking under the fringe of her dark hair, expression waifish and looking as out of her depth as a small-town freshman in her first week at college. Her paperwork said she was twenty-five, but she wore minimal makeup and looked about fourteen.

“Well, that’s embarrassing.” She brushed her dark brown hair across her forehead, sitting very straight. “I’m not—” She shook off the suggestion of interest in Trigg with a flushed, flustered kind of shudder. In fact, he thought he also read the same anxiety in her blush that young virgins at college wore, when they realized how experienced everyone was and were both uncomfortable and a teensy bit envious.

When in doubt, *smile*. Marvin did, as he tried to get back to the business at hand. “I see that your certificate is in medical and dental administration.”

“Yes, but I put myself through college working as a night manager at a motel.”

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A tiny, twelve-room operation that catered to travelers needing a bed and little else, he had already noted.

“I still help them with their taxes,” she added.

Her smile was very engaging. In fact, there was something about her pointed chin and wholesome prettiness that was very reassuring and welcoming. Her voice held a soothing warmth and even though she seemed nervous, she was projecting control of her emotions, if not the circumstances around her.

It was the temperament they sought for this position, which made it that much harder for him to say, “I presume you were hoping to make a change, but—”

“Yes,” she said firmly. “Things have to change. Yes.” Her mouth tightened with resolve. “*Yes*.”

He faltered, then smiled again. Apologetically.

“But we need someone with more experience and training. Unless there’s something you haven’t indicated in your résumé, we would only have positions in housekeeping or the dining room to offer you.”

“I could do that,” she stated promptly. Then her brows tugged in. “Although, what does that pay?”

Not nearly as much as the manager position. He told her the wage. “Plus tips. And we’re building a staff house, but it’s bunk-rooms with a common kitchen.”

“Oh.” Her gaze dropped to the hands she stacked in her lap, one folded over the other. She stayed very still, head down.

Praying?

“Although…” He brightened as he realized he could offer her a consolation prize. “I would encourage you to check with the Human Resources manager at the resort. Orin. He’s in the middle of a hiring push for when the resort opens mid-November. I could call him right now, ask him if he has time to speak with you.”

Even if he did, he would likely offer a similar minimum-wage position selling lift tickets or renting skis. The kids working those jobs wouldn’t even have accommodation here at the resort. Not this year. They would bus in from Haven every day.

“I’m sorry you came all this way,” Marvin said, trying to wrap up.

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“I did. I came all this way and should have…” She sighed and looked toward the door, expression full of conflict.

Marvin had seen this, too. *I’m in the wrong class. I thought it would be different. My parents expect…*

“I wish I could be more helpful,” he tried, rising.

“You can,” she said. She was crushing one hand with the other now, knuckles white. “Would you answer a couple of questions for me. Please?”

“About the job?” He sank back into his chair.

“About the Johanssons. How well do you know them? For instance, the woman I saw when I came in. You were speaking to her about me. Is she Vivien Johansson? Trigg’s mother?” She bit her lip.

“She is. Why?” He saw her gaze follow the perplexed shift of his brows, the way thousands of eyes before her had done.

But she wasn’t too distracted by it. She quirked her own inquisitively.

“You’re not—You aren’t Trigg’s father are you? Online it says his father passed away.”

“Years ago, yes. Vivien and I are, well, we live together.” It was true, but it still made him warm with a slight blush to say it. “Trigg’s older

brother, Rolf, is marrying my daughter, Glory."

"So you're *very* close with the family." She blinked at him, absorbing that.

"I like to think so, yes. Why?"

"Because—" She searched his expression, but hers was impossible to read. "I need help." She frowned at her hands. "It's not easy for me to say that. I've managed this far and quite well, all things considered. I'm not here for a handout. Let me be clear about that." Her head came up, expression earnest. "That's why I put in for the manager job. I expect to continue supporting the both of us. This isn't about money. I would stay in the job I have, but she's *so* unhappy. Acting out. And she keeps asking about him. I don't know what she expects to come of it, but I had to see what our options are. I have to do something or *she* will."

"Who?"

"My niece. Trigg's daughter."

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"SINCE WHEN ARE you going to New Zealand?"

The edge on Nate's voice scraped over Ilke hard enough to make her both jerk with surprise and shrink a little. Guilt? She wouldn't go if she had a choice!

She bit back a sigh, not wanting to do this even though she had known it was coming from the moment she had mentioned it over dinner with his grandparents.

It had been such a nice dinner, too. She'd been horribly nervous, but the tiny woman Nate called Grammy had hugged her and said she was sorry about the baby and Ilke had nearly cried because she knew Grammy meant it.

Nate's sister had his sense of humor and his grandfather was as inquisitive and analytical as Nate, asking technical questions about racing and wanting a lesson on the point system used to establish international rankings. She had been explaining how she was assembling her team and that she wanted to meet with a technician in New Zealand when Nate had

sent her a hard look that she had ignored because she hadn't wanted to have this conversation in front of his family.

She barely wanted to think about it, frankly, but they were in her room now. His sister was in Nate's room, spending some one-on-one time with her nephew since her own kids had stayed in Sacramento with her ex. Nate's grandparents had turned in for the night and she and Nate were going to hash this out, she supposed.

"The technician I met in Sweden was a sexist jerk." She didn't stop sorting her laundry, pulling the dirty stuff out of the suitcase and leaving the clean stuff on the bed. She had taken a mostly empty suitcase to Sweden and cleaned out her locker at the club.

"Each time I said, 'This doesn't feel right,' he said it would be fine once I was skiing. All the resorts were closed for the season. I couldn't see if he was right, but I thought, *If I have to go anywhere with this guy, ever, I'll kill us both*. So I told Rolf, no."

Aside from that idiot, the trip had been fine. The handful of people she had run into had seen the press release. It hadn't mentioned her miscarriage, only quoted Rolf as having 'every confidence' in her, but gossip had made the rounds. She got a few sideways looks. Mostly people had only asked her about Whiskey Jack, though, which she was more than happy to talk up.

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"Since I had to go to Sweden to ship my skis, I met with that guy, but there's a man in New Zealand who was our first choice. I've met him before and I like him. He was away sailing when I called him. Now he's starting his season, but he's willing to consider a change and move here this fall if he and I are a good fit. At least I can ski and see how we work together. I want to get a few things from my mother's house, too. I have to go."

"So you're planning to see her. What about him?" Her stepfather, he meant.

She lowered the insulated shirt that was technically clean, but smelled like her locker. She threw it in the dirty pile. "I've walked that minefield before. It's not a big deal."

"It's a huge fucking deal. You're not doing it. Not alone. *No*."

"Nate. This is what we're up against. I have to do what I have to do. You're not always going to like it."

"This is different and you know it. When are you going?"

"Next week."

His shoulders went back and he stood taller. “I’m just hearing this now?”

“I wasn’t hiding it from you! We have busy schedules. You were trying to get on top of your workload so you could have time with your family. If this technician doesn’t work out, I will probably go to Canada. This is what my summer will be, traveling between training, pulling my team together. I’m sorry to say this, but it’s not your call whether I go to New Zealand. All the decisions I make for my career have to be mine.”

The blistering look on his face made her heart sink. She thought, *This is it. So soon.* Hairline fractures began spreading across her heart. Why had she let herself begin to think this relationship could weather what others hadn’t?

“You’re not going alone. I’m going to talk to Rolf.” He walked out.

VIVIEN STARED AT the man whose clothes were alongside hers in the closet, his toothbrush beside hers in the cup. They were a couple and, she had believed, were on the same page in most areas of their lives. But, suddenly, she saw the side of him that made Glory tear her hair out.

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“Why on *earth* did you offer her the job? We agreed she wasn’t qualified.”

“Vivien, I want you to sit down.”

“For heaven’s sake, Marvin. I’m annoyed, not hysterical. Please tell me you got her correct number this time because you have to call her back and rescind the offer. We hired that nice young man with the management degree and experience in five-star service. He’s ready to start next week. We can’t wait another month for this girl to arrive, then not know what she’s doing when she gets here.”

It was still two months before the wedding, but there was still so much to be done.

Marvin brought her glass of wine across with his own and nodded at the love seat. “Please.”

“I’m not—Why are you being so difficult?” Vivien plopped her butt on the cushion with a beleaguered sigh, telegraphing that she was highly

resistant to whatever silly reasoning he might have.

Marvin took it as well as he did when Glory behaved the same way. He stiffened and his expression fell into neutral lines, hiding his hurt.

Some of her anger began to deflate. She didn't mean to be dismissive, but this was so exasperating.

"She needs the income of the manager position." He lowered into the chair and set his wine on the coffee table, then angled to face her. "*And* the suite. She's raising her niece."

"Oh, Marvin." That big heart of his was a lovely quality, but it was entirely too soft to be a boss. "It's one thing to have Aiden here once a week on Nate's day off, but we can't have a child running around here full-time. This isn't one of those sitcoms off the family channel. You have to take seriously the image we're trying to project."

"This isn't about the lodge's branding. This *is* about family." He looked so grave, her heart stopped.

"Have you been to the doctor or something?" She reached a cold hand to his, not ready to face losing him when they were so new.

"No, no," he dismissed. "I'm fine. But did you know," he began in a very carefully measured tone, warm hand clasping hers, "that Trigg has a child?"

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Vivien heard the words and thought distantly that she shouldn't be surprised, but she dismissed it just as quickly. He was mistaken. That couldn't be.

Somehow, her wine was wetting her lips and she felt the cool liquid slide down her throat, but then she choked on it, which caused her to jostle so hard, her Chardonnay sloshed onto her knuckle.

"Is that—" She took another big gulp of wine. "Did that young woman say that today? That she has Trigg's baby?" It had been in her mind for years that accusations like this could be made. She should have been more prepared for it, but she really wasn't.

"Her name is Wren. And, what she actually said was that her sister, Mandy, had his baby. The girl is named Skylar. She's twelve."

"*Twelve*." She shrieked it, startling even herself as she recoiled in shock. "That's not even possible," she managed in a tone that was lower in volume if still full of hysterical disbelief. "He would have been—"

“Seventeen. They met in Utah. She told him she would get an abortion, but their father found out and didn’t allow it. He wanted Mandy to give up the baby for adoption, but she kept it, then died in a car accident a few years later. Wren has her now.”

Vivien blinked. It didn’t make any sense. She didn’t always agree with how Trigg lived his life, but he never hid what he did from her. How could she not know he had got a woman pregnant *twelve years ago*?

“I don’t believe it.” It was a statement of fact. She absolutely did not believe that this woman had come here with this story, and that Marvin had been suckered into believing it. “She applied for the manager job! What was she going to do? Start working here without even telling us who she was?”

“I think that was partly an excuse to get in the door and see what kind of people we are. She seems quite protective. Hasn’t told Skylar anything about Trigg, not even his name. She wanted to wait until she knew what kind of reception the girl would get from him. She’s willing to arrange a DNA test. She has her sister’s diary, too.”

“That’s probably as made up as the rest of this. She’s after the Johansson fortune, Marvin.”

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“No, she wanted the job so she could continue to support the two of them. That’s why I believe her, Vivien. She’s been on her own with Skylar for five years. She’s always known Trigg is Skylar’s father, but kept it to herself and would continue to do so if Skylar wasn’t pressuring her to find him. It sounds like she’s becoming a handful, starting to run with a rough crowd. Wren hopes this answers some questions and settles her down. She showed me some photos. It was like looking into your eyes.”

Oh, dear God. “I’m a grandmother?” *No*.

His mouth pursed. “I’m envious as hell.”

“Don’t make jokes, Marvin.” She finished her wine, hand shaking. Tears were coming into her eyes. “Are you certain?”

“Well, I imagine a DNA test is the right thing to do, but I believe *she* is certain. If this is Trigg’s daughter, we have to welcome her, don’t you think? Do everything we can to foster a relationship between them? I didn’t know what else to say except that of course I would give her the job if this turns out to be true.”

“I have to talk to Trigg.”

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Chapter Seventeen

NATE CHECKED THE lobby then called Rolf on his way back up the stairs. “Can I come up?”

“Sure.”

When Nate got to the top floor, he found the old doors to Glory and Rolf’s rooms had been closed in along with the window at the end of the hall. Rolf opened the door on the room next to Glory’s and let him into what was now a lounge with a small dining area. One set of double doors opened into what was still the bedroom, another let onto the wraparound balcony.

Glory was at her desk in the corner of the bedroom, under the gable. She pulled out an earbud at the sound of voices and twisted around to say, “What? Oh. Hi, Nate.” She smiled in greeting.

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“Nice,” Nate said with an admiring nod at the renovation.

“Yeah, we’re getting a kitchen, too.” She thumbed to the old door into her room. Nate presumed it went through the roughed-in space in the hall to Rolf’s old room. “I don’t mean to be rude, but I’m on a roll.” She waved at her laptop.

“It’s business. Carry on.”

She plugged back in and Rolf moved to close the doors between the rooms. “What’s up?”

“I’m going to Queenstown with Ilke.”

“We have four teams of contractors on site. I can’t spare you.”

“Aware. But I won’t take chances she’ll run into her stepfather. Not alone. And don’t say her mother will be there.” Nate folded his arms. “I wouldn’t interfere if it was anywhere else, but this is a deal-breaker.”

Rolf didn’t flinch or even react much at all. Only stood there measuring how serious Nate was, eye to eye, man to man. Nate silently conveyed he was dead fucking serious.

“Trigg’s due to head to Chile that week. Maybe he could go with her.”

“Not good enough.” To get his point across, Nate hit below the belt. “Would you send Glory anywhere near that guy?”

“Fuck,” Rolf muttered, turning away, hands hooked on his hips. He made a sucking noise through his teeth. “I knew we’d run into conflicts. Hoped we’d at least have the resort running before we did.”

“Look, Chivonne is pretty capable. I’m actually really impressed by her. If we could get her some help, get the PA we’ve been talking about, that would ease a lot of pressure. How long is Ilke supposed to be gone?”

“If you’re going? Five days, max. Two of those travel.” Rolf rubbed his beard. “Damn it, I wanted her doing time trials down there, getting her confidence back. But fuck it. I’ll tell Trigg to put off Chile until after she’s back. Then he can take her with him, get her started there.”

The pressure suffocating Nate eased. He nodded and left.

VIVIEN WAS SHAKING even harder by the time she reached Trigg’s door. She was a little out of breath, having stormed down the hall faster than she’d moved in years. And if that little shit wasn’t here, she would knock on the door of every single woman in this place.

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He opened to her imperative knock. He was in his workout clothes and was tying up his hair. “I’m heading to the gym. What’s up?”

She shoved past him and hit the edge of the door hard enough to pull it loose from his grip to slam it.

“Damn, Mom. Was it my turn to take out the garbage? I guess I’m grounded from the skate park now.” He folded his arms, and gave her the look his father used to wear, when he thought she was overreacting. It was so patronizing and annoying, she wanted to spank him.

“Tell me about Mandy.”

Behind his closed lips, his tongue touched the front of his teeth. Then he blinked and his expression went neutral. He sat on the bed to put on his shoes.

“Barry Manilow, if I recall correctly.”

“Do *not* get cute with me right now.”

She knew her son well. He was trying to act bored and unaffected, but he knotted his shoes hard, like they were the only thing grounding him to reality.

"Nate mention her?"

"What does Nate know about it?" Her voice arrived at shrill.

He stalled, frowned at her, then finished tying his shoes. "Who then?"

"The young woman who came by today. Wren Snow. She's Mandy's sister."

He stilled with recognition.

"Ah. Bells are ringing, are they?"

"What do you want to know? I was at the board camp in Utah. We hooked up and she called a few weeks later, told me she was getting an abortion." He rubbed his thighs. "Frankly, I didn't think you needed to hear that. Not then and probably not now. Why the fuck did her sister think you did?"

"Because their father doesn't believe in the right to choose."

He frowned, then, as comprehension dawned, his color drained away. "She *had* it?"

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"You have a daughter, Trigg. *Skylar*."

His pupils shrank to needle points in perfect circles of blue surrounded by a sea of white. His lips barely moved. "Are you fucking serious right now?"

"How many more are out there? *That* is what *I* want to know."

"I thought there was zero." He dropped his face into his hands.

"She said she was willing to do a DNA test. That's probably a good idea."

"We were virgins, Mom. But sure, fine. Okay." He rubbed his face and rose. "Then what? A settlement or something? How much does she want?"

It struck her that he was talking about Mandy. She had the sense to push her anger to the backburner while she delivered the next bit of news in a more compassionate tone. "Mandy died some years ago. When the girl was two."

That information seemed to splash across Trigg like acid. He flinched and turned away. "'Kay. The sister needs money, then?"

"Your *daughter* wants a relationship, Trigg."

"With *me*?"

“Yes. Marvin wants to offer Wren the position as lodge manager, if Skylar is actually your daughter. Wren wants to move here so Skylar can get to know you.”

Trigg pivoted back to face her. “Are. You. Serious?”

“Marvin has her contact details. You should arrange for the test as soon as possible. I’ll leave it to you to explain things to your brother.”

“Thanks,” he barked.

She went back to her room, still shaking, never so happy to see Marvin as she was when he welcomed her with open arms.

ILKE TOLD HERSELF she was being overly emotional because she was still jet-lagged, but when Nate came back and said Rolf had agreed he could go to New Zealand with her, she almost cried.

“Babe?” He took her by the arms and dipped his chin, looking concerned. “You’re shaking.”

She was embarrassed that she was reacting like this, but she couldn’t help it.

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“I’ve always just faced it and dealt with it. I block myself off and get through it. Tell myself it doesn’t matter.” She wiped under her eyes. “I was so envious of you tonight, when I saw you with your family. You don’t hold back. You can just be you and relax. No one is scared or pretending everything is fine over a layer of tension. You’re not watching the clock or counting the days for it to be over. It was so nice.” She was full-on leaking tears now and sniffling as she wiped her wrist across her cheek. “That’s how I feel with you, too. Relaxed. I’m really happy you’re coming with me. I’m glad I have you in my life. It means so much, Nate. You have no idea.”

He pulled her close. “I thought you were mad that I was acting like a possessive boyfriend.”

Boyfriend? “You’re so much more than that.” She squeezed him tight, keeping her head buried in his shoulder and her mouth muffled against his shirt as she leapt off a cliff. “You’re the man I love. And I’m so scared, but so happy.”

His breath caught and his arms tightened. She thought she felt his heart slam harder beneath her cheek. He pressed his mouth to her hair as he said in a choked voice, “Me, too. I love you so much.”

She tilted up her face, needing to see it was true. Looking into his eyes was scary, causing the bottom to drop out of her stomach. His gaze delved into hers, deep into the pockets and dark corners of her soul. He saw everything, leaving her naked and without a single defense against him.

But the heat and tenderness that she saw in his eyes made her heart swell in her chest. The corner of his mouth kicked up and she knew it was okay that she couldn’t hide anything from him. The tears that were burning behind her eyes were happy ones.

The first touch of his mouth against her lips filled her up, made the burn in her eyes sharpen and sting, but in a good way.

She slid her arms around his neck and they deepened the kiss. Started tugging at clothes, needing to be completely naked, no barriers between them.

Her luggage was still on the bed and he gave it a shove as he flattened her naked body beneath his own. She opened her legs, sliding her thighs up to his hips, inviting him to press into her, but he said, “I have to slow down.”

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“It’s okay. I want you inside me. I want…” She guided him and she was so slick and ready, he slid deep, all the way, easy and smooth and thick and tight. Filling her up so she gave a shaken sigh of relief.

He cupped her head and looked into her eyes again. “You know it’s not just this, right? This is better than perfect.” He rocked his hips a little, settling even deeper inside her. “But I love *you*.”

Why? That’s what she wanted to ask, never having believed in soul mates until this second, but he seemed her perfect match in every way. She closed her eyes, trying not to want too much.

“Sometimes I worry we’re too good to be true,” she whispered.

“Open your eyes.”

She did.

“I’m right here. You’re awake. This is real.” He kissed her and moved slow and deliberate.

They both sighed and she started to let her eyes drift closed, wanting to savor the feel of him. All the points of contact where skin brushed skin and

muscle flexed and hair abraded. The sensation of his shape gliding smoothly, so satisfying, yet teasingly inciting at the same time.

"Keep looking at me," he murmured, kissing her softly. "I like seeing that dreamy look in your eyes. Knowing I put it there."

They *were* dreams, the kind she barely allowed herself to entertain, but she let him see all of them. Let him see her desire to believe in him, to be deserving of his love. Let him see her longing for a shared future, endless and solid and bright.

It was intensely intimate, making fresh tears of vulnerability dampen her lashes, but it was so beautiful at the same time. She had never felt so cherished, so connected to anyone in her life. So willing to open herself this way and so rewarded for it.

Neither looked away as they climbed the peak together, every increment taken in tandem until the universe was before them and the breath rushed out of her and he clenched his teeth right before they plummeted effortlessly into the abyss.

Then, and only then, when his back was shuddering and his muscles flexing and her own body writhed in agonized ecstasy, did she close her eyes.

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As a million stars danced across the backs of her eyelids, she began to believe that maybe this time, her wishes upon them would actually come true.

FIVE DAYS LATER, the day they were supposed to fly out, Nate was under the open-sided tent at the base, finishing up his morning tailgait meeting with all the contractors, waiting for Trigg.

The fucker had disappeared the morning after Nate had backed Rolf into agreeing to let him go to New Zealand. When Nate had asked Rolf where Trigg had gone, Rolf had given him a curt, "Exactly what I want to know."

It wasn't Chile because he took Murphy. Vivien and Marvin were both playing dumb, sharing side-eyed looks, which seemed to aggravate Rolf all the more.

The only reason Rolf was sparing Nate was because he expected Trigg to be here. After texting him several times, Trigg finally replied that yes, he would be back before Nate went to New Zealand.

They were leaving in a couple of hours for the airport, so where the hell was he?

Nate was handing out forms as the meeting broke up when Murphy trotted up, tongue hanging out the side of his mouth.

Lifting his head, Nate let out his breath. Finally.

Trigg wasn't moving with any degree of urgency, though, ambling toward the tent. He pushed his hands in his pockets and chucked his chin rather than offer a handshake.

"You all right?" Nate asked him, calling back one of the dispersing contractors and holding out a sheet of paper. "Kimi needs you to fill that out and get it back to her." He turned back to Trigg's lack of response. "Where'd you go? I was getting worried. I haven't been on vacation with a woman since my honeymoon. I can't miss this, man."

"Had to see a man about a horse," Trigg said, not looking or sounding like his usual carefree self, especially when Nate had left it wide open for remarks about honeymoons down under.

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"Seriously, are you okay?" Nate asked.

"Fine. How're things here?"

"Pretty much under control. Ilke's having a last-minute strategy session with Rolf." He thumbed toward the trailer. "Then she's heading to the lodge to pack. We're leaving in an hour. You and I have lots to cover."

"I need to ask you something," Trigg said, talking over him and clearly not interested in anything Nate had just said.

Nate picked up the gravity in Trigg's tone. "About?" he asked with a frown.

Trigg glanced around, ensuring they were alone. When his gaze came back to Nate's, his expression was defensive, yet hard.

"When you found out Ilke was pregnant, what did you do?"

Nate let his weight fall back on his heels, surprised they were going there. "What do you mean?"

"I mean, how did you process that information? It was probably different because you were already a father, but it still must have been a shock."

“It was.” Nate blinked at him, starting to comprehend what Trigg was getting at. “I thought you were in this situation once before.”

“Yeah,” Trigg said forcefully. “Still there, apparently.”

For a second there was just the distant sound of machinery and the dog’s collar as he scratched with his hind leg.

“Are you saying…”

Trigg was nodding, but it was the only part of him that moved. His shoulders were made of granite, his feet rooted hard into the ground.

“I went to give a sample for a paternity test. Pretty sure I have a daughter. She’s *twelve*,” he pronounced quietly, but very clearly.

“Shit, man,” Nate breathed. His heart took a little stumble toward envy. “I know you’re in shock, but I gotta say it.” He held out his hand. “Congratulations.”

Trigg ignored his hand. “Yeah, I don’t feel like that’s what’s in order here. What the fuck do I do? Apparently, she wants to get to know me. That cute girl from last week? She’s her aunt. Marvin *hired* her. They’re coming here to *live*.”

“Holy shit,” Nate said in an astonished chuckle, which only made Trigg scowl harder.

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“Not funny, man.”

Before he could figure out a more appropriate response, Rolf’s voice cracked like a gunshot from inside the office trailer.

“Fuck!”

ILKE WAS WORKING through some details with Rolf when Chivonne called through his open door. “That’s the police station in Haven. You want that, right?”

“I do,” he said, holding up a finger to indicate Ilke should stay right there. He didn’t bother closing his door. Rolf’s face grew darker and darker until he said a barely contained, “Thank you.” He stood and slammed down the receiver, shouting a huge, “Fuck!” that froze the entire trailer in a moment of shocked silence.

Ilke pressed herself into her chair while footsteps ran up the stairs and the door in the main area slammed open.

“What?” Nate said, rushing in to look at her.

Her superhero of a man had come to rescue her, apparently, but even though she wasn’t in danger, she imagined her eyes were planetary. She shrugged to indicate she didn’t know what had set him off and looked to Rolf’s still fuming expression.

“That was Kurt.” Rolf nodded at the phone. “He finally got hold of his colleagues in Tahoe about a bust there a couple weeks ago. Ring of black market ski sales. Serge was arrested. Serge claims *Basco* is the one who told him the container of skis was here.”

“So *you’re* our leak,” Trigg said, folding his arms. “Since you told all the investors we had a shipment coming and would trick them out if they showed up for our pitch.”

Rolf flicked his gaze to Trigg. “Yeah. And Serge says Basco *told* him to steal them. Paid him to.”

A chorus of, “*Why*?” followed.

“Unclear. Kurt is calling him in for questioning, but needs more than Serge’s say-so before he can charge him with anything. That could be weeks away, but that fucker is not setting foot on my site in the meantime.”

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“Basco?” Nate said. “You’re firing him?”

“Affirmative. Tell everyone with his logo on their shirt or invoice that work stops now. If anyone wants to come back as an independent contractor, you’ll be happy to interview them. Then get started finding a construction company that doesn’t fucking sabotage my project to take it over.”

Ilke’s ears rang.

“But what about…?” she started to say. She was watching Nate’s expression grow from flabbergasted to furious.

“We have to open this season,” Rolf told her flatly. “You want that as much as the rest of us.” He leaned his knuckles on the top of his desk. “I’ll ask Vivien if she can go to Queenstown with you.”

Don’t cry. *Do not cry*. It’s silly. It’s nothing.

“Rebook it,” Nate said, looking between her and Rolf.

“Your job is to get this place built and running,” she said. “Mine is to staff up the training facility and represent.” She rose, but she felt cold all

over. “It’s fine.”

It wasn’t fine. Not because she couldn’t go alone. She had done it before and could do it again. It was that she had let herself believe she wouldn’t have to. She had let herself start to believe she could rely on Nate. This wasn’t his fault. She knew that. But the disappointment was so profound, she could hardly bear it.

“Ilke.” Nate tried to catch her arm as she went through the door.

“I need to pack and get to the airport.” She brushed him off and hurried out of the trailer.

“Ilke!” He came out behind her, feet stomping heavily down the stairs as he caught up to her and stopped her.

“You have to…do things,” she said, throwing her arm out to indicate the activity across the site.

“Let’s talk this out first. We can rebook your trip in a week. Figure something out.”

“I don’t want to put this off, Nate.” She rubbed the spot between her brows where tension was starting to gather. “This is what it takes to win. You stay the course no matter the bumps. But…” Why had she let herself believe in him? *Why*? “But it’s probably best if we don’t do *this*.”

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“Do what? Don’t say us,” he said through gritted teeth, even as she waved between them. “No,” he stated. “What do you want me to do? Quit?”

“No!” she cried. “I want you to build this hill. Rolf is right, you need to make it happen—otherwise I have nothing.” Literally nothing because skiing was all she had ever been able to count on and even that was teetering on the edge again.

Why had she let herself believe? *Why*? Her heart was being cracked in two. Split by a cold, steel wedge.

“Look. This isn’t about me having to go alone,” she managed, hands shaking as she tried to keep herself from falling apart. “I braced myself for going alone and I can do it. You’re the one who insisted on coming.” Her lungs felt as though they were filled with acid, the pain so intense her eyes watered and her voice rasped. “But I wish you hadn’t, because then I started to count on you. I can’t lift my expectations only to have them dashed. I can’t let myself believe in something, in someone, and have that fall apart. I should have kept my expectations low. Instead, I started to believe I had you. But I can’t need you like that. Do you understand? Because then, when

you’re not there, the disappointment will be an obstacle I can’t get over or around. Not more than once or twice. So just…let me go alone.”

NATE WATCHED HER walk away, stunned, throat aching with words she wouldn’t believe until he could prove to her that he was as solid as hammered iron.

She wasn’t saying she didn’t need him, though. She needed him too much and he would be damned to hell before he would disappoint her. He loved her far too much for that.

He swung back into the trailer and pushed through the now closed door to Rolf’s office.

“Busy,” Rolf barked as Nate barreled in, but he ignored that and snapped the door closed behind him.

In the minutes he’d been gone, something had shifted between the brothers. They were staring at each other like a pair of timber wolves in a standoff. Maybe Trigg had told Rolf about his daughter, maybe not. Nate didn’t give a flying fuck what their latest pissing contest was about.

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“You asked me what you should do,” he said to Trigg. “You should man the fuck up and start looking after things around here.”

Trigg rocked back on his heels. “Is that right?”

“You wanted this place. You started it. And by the way, how many fucking medals do you need? Because I’m not going to stick around making this place come alive for you, while you can hang a few more around your neck, and she faces her worst nightmare alone, trying to get what you already have. Hang up the skates, man. Be where you need to be. Because I am not losing the woman I love because *you* told a guy you had a shipment of skis.” He swung that at Rolf.

Rolf lifted his brows.

“And *you* told a woman when to steal them,” he said to Trigg. “You two made a deal with a guy I’ve met twice. And I thought he was a prick, by the way. So fuck that. I’m going to New Zealand so she can say goodbye to her mother and never see the bitch again. It’d be nice if I have a job when I get back. If I don’t, I’ll send for my shit.”

He slammed out.

Three pairs of wide-eyed stares pulled him up for half a second. He realized exactly how badly he had lost his cool, but fuck it. He jumped in his company truck and drove it to the lodge, intending to take it the airport, because, *Fuck it*. He knew where his priorities lay.

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Chapter Eighteen

NATE STORMED INTO Ilke's room before she'd had time to decide whether she was crying or packing or going upstairs to ask Glory for her car.

Strangely, his appearance didn't surprise her. He was a stubborn bastard when he wanted to be and he was wearing the hard mask of a conqueror, eyes narrow, cheeks tense, jaw clenched beneath the black layer of his beard.

Why did he have to make this so *hard*?

She searched for the will to expel him from her life and this time to mean it, when he said, "I'm going with you."

Definitely making this next to impossible. Where was she supposed to find the strength to fight him?

"Nate, you can't. Rolf needs you."

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"*You* need me. You said so. Here I am." He shed his work vest and threw it over the back of the chair.

Her heart rose up to beat in her throat. She shook her head. It was never that easy. Not for her.

"How? Please don't say you quit your job."

"Threatened to. We'll see if they accept it," he allowed with a careless half-shrug that made her stomach drop into her shoes.

"No!" She covered her eyes. "Why would you *do* that?"

"There are other projects and other managers. The hill will get built. You'll still have a place to train. I'll find something else. He's not going to pull your sponsorship in retaliation, if that's what you're worried about."

"That wasn't what I was thinking, but now I am! What about Aiden? This job is for him, too."

"I'll figure it out. But Rolf isn't going to fire me. Or let you go."

"You don't *know* that."

Nate looked at her as if he couldn't fathom how her brain worked.

“Ilke, you *have* to start recognizing your value. I know what *I’m* worth.” He tapped his chest. “I know what I’m saying when I walk in there and tell them that if it’s between you and my job, then the answer is you. *Rolf* understands it’s not a bluff. And he knows exactly what he stands to lose if I walk out. Now you do the math. You know what I get paid. You know how hard I work. You know how much I love this job and that it’s important to me to work near my son. What does that mean *you’re* worth, then, if I’m putting all of that on the line for *you*?”

“Don’t,” she whispered, starting to tremble. “It’s too much.” It wasn’t just a gesture. It was a pledge of fealty. “You said we would make compromises, not sacrifices.”

“This isn’t either one of those things. You *matter* to me. I’m not trying to prove something or win something. I have your back because *I love you*.”

“But if you’re willing to do all that,” she said through lips that wouldn’t stay steady. “Then I should be willing to do it, too, right? Quit skiing—”

“*No*. For God’s sake, Ilke. If I get hit by a bus, then, yes. Skip a race and come to the hospital. But I love you *because* you’re going after your dream. That’s one of the qualities that makes you special and attractive to me. You’re funny, you’re smart, you’re driven. I’m nuts about everything you are and I don’t throw my love around at just anyone. Open your eyes and realize that.”

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He didn’t. And she would never, ever understand why he thought she was worthy of taking up space in his heart, but she couldn’t overlook what he was saying and doing. What he was demonstrating in a way she *had* to believe.

As she stood there, trying to take it in, the walls she had hastily tried to rebuild were falling apart. She thought it ought to hurt more, but she was so damned grateful to see him coming through them.

“You undo me every single time. I don’t know how to handle this much love. It’s—” Giant. Like she was swallowed by a whale. “This is why I wanted your baby,” she acknowledged in a jagged voice. “I knew you were this man. Good. Strong. Loving. I knew that I wanted to share something with you. I just didn’t know how.”

“Now you do.” He cupped her face in big, warm hands. “We’re going to share our whole lives with each other.” He smoothed his thumbs across her cheekbones.

“Sometimes I wonder, what if I didn’t get pregnant? What would I be if I didn’t know you like this? As part of my soul?”

He didn’t laugh at her flowery words and call her romantic or sentimental. He looked very solemn and said, “Somehow we would have found each other. Because we belong together.”

She let herself believe that, too, and it wasn’t hard at all.

“I’m sorry I panicked. I won’t do it again,” she vowed.

“Good, because I think I only get one ultimatum a year with this job.”

He kissed her and she tasted his love. His confidence in her. He lifted her up, off her feet, but emotionally, too. He filled her with aspiration and a hunger to prove him right. To make him proud. He filled her with belief. In herself. In *them*.

His phone buzzed.

He stilled mid-kiss, mouth on hers, then gently set her on her feet.

“Trigg,” he said, reading the text aloud. “‘I’m retiring. Hurry back.’”

“He’s retiring?” Ilke asked with shock. “From *snowboarding*?”

“Yeah.” He looked thoughtful until his phone pinged again. “‘Eat well down under,’” he read with a wince. “Such a classy guy.”

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She rolled her eyes. “Let’s pack and get out of here before something else happens.”

THEY MIGHT NOT have been on their honeymoon, but it sure as hell felt like one to Nate. It was their last morning in Queenstown and his snow goddess was gripping the headboard above his shoulders while he slouched on the pillows beneath her. Her pale breasts were bobbing close enough he caught her nipple and sucked, which stilled her and allowed him to gather his fraying control.

When he released her, she sighed and swallowed him in the heat of her body, so hot it was like an ice burn, then she smoothly took up the rhythm again, lifting her hips until she was almost releasing the swollen tip of his cock.

His fingers tensed in the arch in her lower back. He was shaking, fighting hard against the explosion that was right there, making him want to

close his eyes and surrender, but he also wanted to keep watching her. She was so beautiful, sinking down, then lifting again, riding him into insanity.

The way she was wallowing in their lovemaking, taking her time, glowing with perspiration, but flushed with joy, was something he wanted to hang on to for the rest of his life. Would. One way or another, however he had to.

But like this trip, their lovemaking couldn't last forever. He felt the first quivers of climax ripple around him and his own avalanche of sensation threatened to tumble through him. Her mouth opened in a silent scream and he groaned, fighting not to let go. She was exquisite, holding him in the grip of almost-there ecstasy for a long few seconds before the release came upon them, almost in slow motion before it arrived in hard, throbbing pulses, finishing in a hot, overwhelming rush.

A spell. One that transformed and renewed. Left him wasted and weak, but so deeply happy.

As she shakily settled over him, they began to breathe again, hearts hammering against each other, skin adhered by perspiration.

All he could think was that he never wanted to move, never wanted this moment to end.

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Because he knew what was coming.

Cradling her limp weight on him, still joined, he sank a little lower in the bed and stroked her hair, trying to believe that nothing could ruin this. After a long string of flights, they had spent a half-day getting their bearings and trying to cope with the time change.

Yesterday, she had worked with Nikau, a young man with Maori tattoos on his face and a lilt in his voice.

Nate had strapped on a snowboard and screwed around on the slopes, trying to teach himself to stop with more grace than a face-plant.

In the middle of that, a streak of orange had zipped past him, then cut across in front of him so fast, he didn't realize it was Ilke until he passed her where she stopped on his other side, facing uphill. As soon as he passed her, she whipped across the slope behind him and coasted alongside him again, laughing because she was literally skiing circles around him.

He had managed to slow himself down to a wobble and stay on the board while calling her a show-off, then he asked how things had gone with Nikau.

Glowing with excitement, she had said, “I called Rolf, told him I want him.”

“How are things going at home?”

“They want your ass back there.”

“So no extension.”

“I didn’t even ask.” She seemed to float effortlessly across the snow with barely a scrape of skis or a nudge of pole. It was all done with a shift of her weight and she was right in front of him, lifting her face for a kiss before floating away again.

They had spent the rest of the day on the slopes, playing like kids. If he hadn’t already been in love with her, he would have fallen for her then. She was a sight to behold. Like a part of the mountain come to life. An ice sprite.

It was a perfect day that ended with a nice dinner at the hotel, a soak in the two-person jet tub, and some energetic lovemaking that put them into a hard sleep.

She had instigated this morning’s session and he had been more than happy to let her take her fill. She was introspective now, though, worrying him.

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“Okay?”

“Mmm-hmm.”

They packed in silence and she drove to her mother’s, since she knew where she was going and was comfortable with driving on the left.

Ilke had called a week ago to ensure her stepfather wouldn’t be here, but Nate still prickled with tension as they went through the garden gate. She knocked on the back door, then called out.

Nate wasn’t all that interested in meeting her mother, based on her reputation, and she underwhelmed even his lowest expectations. She said hello, then showed off a new necklace, talked up her husband like he was a philanthropist, mentioned that he had bought them tickets to some concert or other, and wanted to pour cocktails even though it was only ten in the morning.

Ilke dug her skis out of a room off the heated garage. Nate loaded them into the rental while she went back into the house. She came out with a box of trophies and what looked like one of Glory’s mom’s romance novels.

“You really can’t stay?” her mother asked. “When will you be back?”

Nate was holding the car door for her, conscious of the fact Ilke hadn't hugged her mother when they greeted each other or looked like she intended to hug her goodbye.

"I won't be back, Mom. I live in Montana now." She looked at him and he read what she was thinking. *That's home now. You are*.

"We'll come see you there," her mother said.

"Check with Vivien," Nate said in one of the few sentences he aimed directly at her. "She'll let you know if there are any rooms available." There wouldn't be. Not if he had anything to do with it.

They went to the airport, checked Ilke's skis and the rest of their luggage, then stood in line for security with their carry-on bags. She was still awfully quiet.

"Homesick?" he asked, tugging her close.

"I am," she admitted, leaning in to him. "Thank you for coming. That was harder than I expected. I feel bad. Like I should love her, but I only feel sorry for her. She's the only family I have."

"That's not true." He tucked his chin to look down at her. "I'm your family now."

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She smiled up at him. "I was thinking you're my knight in shining armor, but yeah, you're like that, too."

"I'm not *like* family. Babe—" He had sworn he wouldn't rush this. At the very least, he ought to have found a better setting than the mouse-maze of an airport security line. "I want you to *be* my family. My wife. Will you marry me?"

"Nate." She drew back a little further, arms still around him, and looked genuinely astonished. But even as her eyes teared up, her smile spread wide and full of joy. His insides started to expand with a laugh he couldn't contain.

"You really want to marry me?"

"How can you be surprised? Of course, I do. I love you."

"I love you, too. But…I don't know what to say. I made myself stop believing in the fairy-tale ending."

"You say, 'yes.' 'Cause it's not an ending. It's the beginning."

She laughed and said, "Yes. I would love to marry you!" She threw her arms around his neck and the people who overheard them began to applaud.

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Epilogue

March, the following year

If there had been a better way for Ilke to come back from last year, Nate didn't know what it could have been. She had started the season in peak health, winning her first race out of the gate, and racking up the points with a string of top-three finishes through the season. Each time her rank slipped to third, she became more resolved, dug deeper, worked harder, and skied faster.

It wasn't easy. He wished he saw her more, but he was also in awe of her guts and stamina. And he was so fucking proud of her, he didn't have words. He'd been grinning like a fool since they had landed in Sweden for the World Cup finals. He wanted to point out to everyone that that was *his* wife wearing the red bib—the one that designated her as the leader to beat.

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Now all she had to do was ski as well as she had been skiing—which she *would*, he had assured her a thousand times—and she would come away with the big crystal globe.

The only place that might have been a sweeter setting for what they all anticipated would be a championship finish, would have been the still-new, understaffed, and minimally developed resort in Montana.

After a decent first season that wouldn't wind down for another month, Rolf was working on getting them certified for qualifying races. Once they had that, he could start submitting Whisky Jack as a potential host for future Cup finals.

For now, they would make do with Ilke winning here in Åre with the Whiskey Jack logo on her ski suit.

"That's not Ilke," Aiden said, craning his neck to the right, watching the next skier come down. Rolf had got them killer seats right at the finish line. He'd bought a seat for Aiden, but Aiden was on Nate's lap, partly to see better, partly to stay warm. His little body was tense with excitement.

“Not yet,” Nate agreed, one eye on the clock. Sometimes these things came down to hundredths of a second and that racer had finished right in the neighborhood of Ilke’s best times.

As the day wore on, the snow tended to soften up, but it wasn’t slowing down these final competitors.

Come on, come on. Ilke was favored to win all her events, but if she won this downhill race, her accumulated points for the season would put her well into the lead overall. She could finish in the top five with the rest of her events and still win the globe. If she came in lower than third, she would have a battle on her hands for the rest of the competition, but was still in good shape.

“Two more,” Rolf said to Aiden, shooting a look at the clock himself. “She skis last.”

“Because she’s the best,” Aiden said.

“That’s right,” Rolf agreed.

Glory grinned. “I expected him to get bored by now.”

So had Nate. Aiden hadn’t watched a live race before; he’d only watched them on TV. Unless it was Ilke, he tended to lose interest pretty quickly, but the noise of the skis on the snow—not unlike a passenger jet flying overhead—and the roar of the crowd, had him locked in and as invested as the rest of them.

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It helped that Rolf had spent some time showing him how to watch the clock and understand the stakes. He explained the trickiest parts of the course, why the skiers had to be careful in different spots, and told Aiden a little about different skiers: where they were from, how they’d been doing all season.

Rolf watched the race unfold with the colorful commentary of a baseball fan and the emotional intensity of a gambling addict at the track.

“Okay,” Rolf said to Aiden as the crowd roared with excitement at the latest finish time. “Ilke has to finish under one, five-one, seventeen.”

Aiden’s fists tapped his own thighs. “She’s got this.”

Fuck yes, she did. Nate mentally telegraphed to her, *You’ve got this, babe*.

ILKE HEARD HER name through the ABBA filling her earbuds. She pulled them out.

Her mouth was dry, her stomach churning, her muscles shivering from nervous excitement and cold. She ignored all of that, instead hanging on to the mental retracing of her three practice runs. She knew her line. She just had to stick to it.

She moved into position at the starting gate.

Conditions would have changed by now, but improvising to those changes was what she had trained for. A slushy pocket here, a frozen bump there. She could handle all of it.

You've got this, *babe*, Ilke heard Nate say in her head.

The starter buzzer gave a *mee-meep*.

She leapt out of the gate and dug in her poles to pick up speed. The first jump loomed and her temptation was to use the power of her thighs to catch a long float in the air. No. There was a turn below that jump. She would overshoot it if she didn't land well before it. There—

She was back on the snow in time to dig in her edges and carve the hard turn, then the next one. Nailed it.

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The sky was intense blue, the air crystal sharp, the sunshine off the snow forcing her pupils to shrink and explode as she passed between glare and into the shadow cast by the trees. She couldn't see them, but frozen ruts carved by her competitors caught at her skis and threatened to bounce her out. She kept her knees soft, absorbing the impact, then shot around the next gate and *this* was the jump where she could catch some air.

She pushed off, tucked and held, felt as if she hung there for an hour. This was going too well. Felt too easy. Was she going too slow? What was that roaring sound?

Skis down, a thump and a bounce of her knees, a tiny correction, dig in her edges to turn right, left, then the final small jump and land clean to cross the finish line.

She dug her heels in and sprayed a huge fishtail of snow around her as she slowed from highway speed to pedestrian in seconds. Only then did she become aware of the burn in her thighs, the shaking in the rest of her, the wild pumping of her heart, the cold air in her lungs.

The crowd was on their feet, screaming, flags waving. She couldn't find Nate and glanced for the clock—

1:49:22.

She'd won.

ILKE SMILED FOR the cameras as she was presented with the seven-kilo crystal trophy. It was emotional and surreal, still hard for her to believe despite her season of top finishes and winning all five of her events here.

Did she feel like Rolf had bought her way onto this podium? Not at all. Nate had a lot to do with her being here and so did the rest of the Whiskey Jack team. Did she feel any less for having allowed that many people to support her as she worked to arrive here? No. She felt blessed to have so many people invested in her. This wasn't *her* win. It belonged to all of them. She was proud to make them proud.

When the presentation finished and the photographers moved away, she went to where Nate and Aiden waited with Rolf and Glory. The look on Nate's face swelled her heart.

"Well done," Rolf said with a one-armed bear hug that made her feel like those toys Aiden had—the ones that popped out their eyes and tongue when they were squeezed. "Do that three more times and throw in some gold in twenty twenty-two."

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"Sure, no problem," she gasped, rolling her eyes as he released her. She returned Glory's hug with one arm.

"Can I hold it?" Aiden asked.

"Let's hold it together," she said and squatted, watching his eyes widen as he realized how heavy it was.

He let her take it back and hugged her neck, keeping hold of her as he asked, "Are you going to be home now?"

"For most of the summer. Until next season." She hugged him in the circle of her arm, finding it as hard to be away from him as it was to be away from his father.

"Good. I miss you." He kissed her cheek, then brightened. "I told Mama you won. She said, 'good job.'"

"Thank you. How's Frankie?"

"I don't know." He shrugged.

She rose and shared a look with Nate. Frankie had told them she was visiting a clinic that specialized in helping same-sex couples become parents. That had been a few weeks ago and they hadn't heard yet if they had conceived.

"Hey, listen," Glory said. "Rolf and I are going to test-drive parenting and steal Aiden for a few hours. You two have some grown-up time. You've earned it."

"Yeah?" Nate lifted a skeptical brow at her, then transferred his query to Rolf.

"Call it a Christmas bonus," Rolf said dryly.

"It's not Christmas 'til after summer," Aiden said.

"We can still look for a toy store and see what they have. You want to?" Glory held out a hand.

Aiden nodded and took her hand.

"We'll meet you back at the hotel for dinner," Glory said. The three disappeared into the crowd.

"What's grown-up time?" Ilke asked Nate.

"I was going to ask you the same thing. Let's take this back to the hotel and see what we can figure out." He took the globe and threw his other arm around her as they started walking to fetch her bag.

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"Thank you for this," she told him, tapping her trophy.

"That's all you, babe."

It wasn't, but it was sweet of him to give her the credit.

"Do you mind that I'm greedy for more of them? Even if Rolf hadn't said that, I would want another three years at least."

"I know. I'm just as hungry for the hardware as you are," he said wryly.

"Yeah? You're not jealous of Wanda and Frankie?" Her heart stuttered as she spoke. She'd been avoiding asking that question, not sure if she could face his answer, but tomorrow would be a year since they had lost their baby. She had managed to keep her sadness on the fringes of her mind, but it weighed heavier as she let it wash over her.

"Jealous is the wrong word." He considered a moment, then said, "I'm thinking: Good for them. It'll be nice for Aiden. Our time will come and when it does, this time, we'll be ready."

He glanced down at her, gaze tender. He knew exactly what day it was.

She wrapped both her arms around his waist and leaned in to him, walking like she was drunk because she was such a mix of giddy and melancholy and so, so grateful to have him.

“I used to worry that I wouldn’t know what my life would look like after I retired from skiing. Now I do.” She smiled up at him. “Happily ever after.”

“Damned straight.” He kissed her temple and kept her moving forward.

The End

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